

BAD LIGHT

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For V.

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“I could just remember how my father used to say that the reason for
living was to get ready to stay dead a long time.”

W. FAULKNER, *As I Lay Dying*

“We were dead and we could breathe.”

PAUL CELAN, “Memory of France”
Sand from the Urns

“To explain with words from this world that
a ship parted from me with me on board.”

ALEJANDRA PIZARNIK, *Tree of Diana*, 13

I. THE MONSTER

“The monster was made by fear.”

WILLIAM LINDSAY GRESHAM,

Nightmare Alley

(dead behind these eyes)

The two of us had recently moved to Zaragoza, in the space of a few short months, Jacobo first, then me, both newly separated, still bearing the imprint of a wedding band on our fingers, that ring of slightly paler flesh that serves as a sort of badge, announcing one's newly unveiled, somewhat shameful solitude to the world. I guess we were each on the run in our own way. He, intent on starting afresh after his early retirement, and I perhaps somehow following in his footsteps, not so much out of relief at being able to call on his company from time to time as having been seduced, I believe, by the powerful lure that beginnings have always held for me, the blank page, starting over anew, any situation that can in my mind's eye conjure up ships burning in distant bays or homes left behind without prior warning, just like that, without turning the key in the lock, leaving on the table the dirty dishes from the evening meal the night before. People, say, who are released from jail or discharged at last from the hospital after a harrowing detox and who, with a handful of belongings, rent out a

room in some unknown place, far from everything that happened before, placing their toothbrush in a glass on the sink, tossing a couple of changes of clothing into the drawers, and perhaps also a revolver or a photograph of a woman in a picture frame that can barely stand upright, before opening the window to air out the room and let the show commence. Then they see the neon lights on the building across the street and the hustle and bustle of a hostile neighborhood in which they'll gradually have to get their bearings. An official secondment at the right time or the taking up of a new administrative post can offer something along similar lines, the feeling of being alive against all odds and of the blank page still smelling of the printing press, awaiting events and ink. And all this despite the weariness and the old chains they will no doubt still have to drag behind them, shackled to their feet.

When Jacobo told me the details of his move and the opening measures of what appeared to all intents and purposes to be a proper new life, I couldn't help but feel, if we're calling a spade a spade, a twinge of envy, for one tends, if only intermittently, to feel, out of an instinct for survival, that there is time yet to endow our remaining days with some sort of meaning and to build a new tower in the middle of nowhere so as to carry on living—a longing, in short, for a change of scene, for new faces, for the simple possibility of losing my way down streets that lead who knows quite where or grabbing a coffee in bars in which I had never before set foot, a city, when all is said and done, with its mean streets and movie theaters, its record stores, its bookshops, its nights so similar to real nights. Everything as if to scale, like a toy, but real at the

end of the day and waiting around the next corner. In the small town we first called home (for so many years, and how long each and every one of them felt), the lovely Provincia, it's as if the fog of tedium—which of its own accord, as a matter of course, already cloaked the evenings after a certain hour, steeping our bones in the dampness of a life already lived, a festering, repeated sorrow, like a strange morning dew, a sort of backward sweat that penetrated, from the outside in, the pores of every wall and of all that had gone before and was to come, leaving them drenched in emptiness and past and an ancient weariness that condemned you to walk half-slouched, to read listlessly, to endless naps so as not to have to see the pitiful death throes of time beneath the bad light that as soon took possession of the streets as it did the insides of homes and bars—had slowly been thickening.

We had met years before, Jacobo and I. For quite some time, we would see one another almost every day, the standard, more or less routine after-work beer, lingering a little longer with each passing evening, sometimes until the early hours. That getting to know one another started out as something ecstatic and life affirming. There were not enough days in the week to see through all the plans we hatched, or hours in the night to list them. Such affinities are above all else a matter of focus, a way of looking at the world; all of a sudden you find someone who not only places the source of light in the exact same spot as you, they also train it in precisely the direction you were looking. Many people decide to take their leave from this world one way or another, but it is not often that two people do so at the same time and through the same door, seeing everything from

then on from a very distant, identical angle. When such a coincidence does arise, it's possible to scorn and admire in unison all that the world around us sets before our eyes, and to laugh at things, above all things held semi-sacred by the rest of humanity, untouchable subjects, delicate matters that cease to be delicate in the wee small hours, as if by magic after a certain time of night, amid the smoke of bars where customers stagger in and out under the weight of their histories, shadows in raincoats who drift across our field of vision and order drinks they down alone while the music devours them, characters in a theater too small to be taken all that seriously. Above all else, Jacobo liked to talk of women, both his more remote girlfriends (too many for my battered memory to retain the circumstances and names of with the precision he would have liked from his conversation partner, so as not to have to go over the same ground again and again) and his more recent extramarital conquests. His chatter could slide into an alarming muddle of dreamy girls and lion-like women, of more or less true exploits and others that amounted to little more than intentions or plans not fully thought through, a veritable verbal maze of flesh and fantasy in which I quickly got lost amidst all the many female names being mentioned, all the letters being sent back and forth, all the panties being hoisted up and yanked down. Never before, not even in movies, had women struck me as being as desirable as when recounted by Jacobo, nor amorous exploits as unsettling as when told in his words. His lips glistened as he recalled bedrooms, and skirts raised in the most precarious of hiding places, bare feet doing their sweet work beneath the most formal dining tables, some tales from way back, other from

four days previously, surrenders and fits of madness, candor and fury, his arms catching the faintings of what seemed like ladies of myth suddenly transformed, as if by dint of a magical kiss, into mere broads, disheveled and stunning, panting and filthy. At first I feared that, as was only fair, he would expect similar confessions on my part, with the same degree of salaciousness and detail, but he soon realized I was far from comfortable discussing these matters, even at such times as those, when glasses are emptied quickly and I know the whole world is sleeping.

In contrast to that sort of never-ending revelry, the flip-side of the brandy and the music, was what had from an early age been his life's obsession: the horror of the German concentration camps and all their offshoots. His father had been a survivor of the Mauthausen camp, and he spent the years that followed his release tirelessly delivering seminars and all manner of speeches on his experience, on the duty to remember, and on his strange sense of guilt at having emerged alive from a hell in which so many had perished in the flames. Much like Primo Levi, he came to understand that public opinion eventually grows weary of a message repeated a thousand times over, he discovered that the world no longer wished to hear that tale of atrocity, especially after the start of the Vietnam War, which, as if it were a new, exuberant fad, rendered all that had to do with the previous barbarity outmoded in a matter of days. The image of horror was now that of napalm setting the jungle alight and no longer that of naked corpses piled up on the snow. Overnight, the World War was old news, as were the walking skeletons, the wheelbarrows full of carcasses with faces, the forced labor, the incinerating rooms, and the gas

chambers. And also like Primo Levi, he ended his days by throwing himself headlong down a stairwell, weary of empty lecture halls, of deaf ears, and of the dreadful echoes of his own silence. The legacy handed down to Jacobo by his father was, above all else, guilt. He found it hard to forgive himself for not having listened more and better when the time came, for having, from a young age, grown bored without bothering to feign interest in the same old stories that tended to lead to the same tear-drenched scene, which struck him as being just as pathetic as it was unbearable. One always grows weary of other people's nightmares and of the late-night screams from the room next door, no matter who those screams come from. You can listen for a while, take their hand in yours, stay up all night, offer a sedative, a glass of water, but if what you truly want is to carry on living, you have no choice but to mount some sort of barricade against all that, to turn a deaf ear, and, one way or another, to distance yourself. To beat a retreat, leaving the one who's screaming on their own. It's like abandoning a wounded man in a ditch at a moment when the enemy is advancing at breakneck speed and it would be foolhardy to stay put and watch him bleed to death. Only after his father's death did Jacobo take any real interest in the story told by that broken man who wept at the movies, even the most lighthearted, screwball comedies, who sank into the couch, who sometimes came to a halt, gaze lost in the distance, the soup spoon hovering midway between the bowl and his lips. Jacobo read everything he could find on the subject, did his best to spread the word, and tried to take possession of that vision of horror. He felt he owed his father the nightmares that followed, the

sleepless nights, the fears, the shadowy executioners roaming all night long through rooms and hallways. I'd even say that in some strange way he grew to love that inherited suffering that, amid horror in spades, gave him back something of a father's tenderness, a certain scent of home, the perfume of the old, bearable, just punishments. There are those who hoard, as if their lives depended on it, the pocket watch of a loved one, a portrait, an old fountain pen, or a lock of hair by way of a memento; Jacobo, meanwhile, had that fear. And he tended to it in his own way, he nourished it with photographs and memories and books. At first, when he spoke to me of the matter, I would feel somewhat uneasy and lower my gaze without knowing how to react, much like when as a child you have to offer your condolences to a classmate who's buried his mother two days previously. You're never sure whether it is best to meet the tragedy with silence or words, whether to embrace the person, offer them your sandwich, or simply leave them be. Jacobo, however, as if he had taken the lesson to heart, took pains not to endow the matter with any particular gravitas in our conversations. He preferred to dwell on more or less general questions that interested him, such as how humans react when pushed to a breaking point, survival, endurance, the power of a grudge. And it was astonishing how easily we skipped from that subject to others in our conversations; without realizing it, we'd again be discussing the idle gossip of the world around us, music and women, the trips we'd make one day, and all of the cards yet to be played.

All things considered, I think that in the end we never managed to be good for one another. Without wishing

to, we dragged each other down into our respective pits, each drawn by the other's darkness and the force of his eddies. We never truly knew how to help one another with what really mattered, instead we behaved like that pair of men drowning in the sea who, as they go under, cling so fiercely to their saviors, with arms and fingernails, that they end up dragging them down with them to the depths. Without saying a word, as if by instinct, we stopped seeing one another with such frequency, and tedium once again descended. This is how things stood in the months leading up to my departure from home, and so things remained thereafter, in the days of the apartment rented out in great haste, the brutal solitude, the lowered blinds, and the doors locked night and day, as if all those precautions served any purpose and shadows couldn't pass through walls and pores.

(life back then)

And that, more or less, was what life back then was like, before the move. Frozen, deserted streets, a newly rented apartment with someone else's furniture, silence, hours spent beneath the naked bulb on the living room ceiling, the pointlessness that seemed to have come to rest on things, slowly, much as a layer of dust forms without our noticing, taking possession of them, cloaking everything in a sort of grimy, drab gauze. That's what the days of my life were like back then. The evenings at home, stunned. I sometimes sit down at the table to eat, without the slightest hunger. I am my own mother; I am, at one and the same time, the downcast young boy and the voice that tells him to try and cheer up, to pull himself together already, to look after himself, to swallow, even if he doesn't feel like it, a few spoonfuls of rice, one more, you'll feel better, you'll see, I'll feel better, I'll see. I remember the fear I once was, made flesh, a bundle of nerves, and how I sensed my own presence much as one might perceive a tremor, the juddering of a worn-out heart that seemed to be shifting

position constantly inside its chest, without ever finding the right spot. I see myself seated in the armchair next to the glass door that looks onto the balcony, wearing a coat buttoned up to my neck. I'm not sure if I can't move or don't want to. It's hard to say; I don't move, that's all. I give a start at the slightest noise from the street or the stairway, the buzzing of the intercom whenever it's pressed over and over again by the mailman or the junk mail distributors. And I remember the dread at the thought of losing my mind, of being unable to return, and also the odd snatch of the disjointed ramblings running through my thoughts, shot through with static and barking and stinging music and hazy questions—who took me away, and where to, I cannot sense myself here, in this voice that's apt to start talking alone in the middle of the evening, uttering the names of people long gone, or in the hand that, almost without realizing it, scribbles these marks in delirious ink (words in the universal and equally baffling language of the shakes) that cannot be deciphered later, nor can I spot myself in these wretched lines that seek me out, that enquire nervously on the pages of a notebook after my wellbeing, my whereabouts, what I could possibly be up to at this hour, and where in God's world and down what roads. And while I know that I am both the escaped prisoner running nonstop on wounded feet and the search party, armed to the teeth, that's hunting me down and setting the pack of hounds on my trail, I do not recognize as my own the footsteps looking for me in damp hotels, and ports, down solitary streets, in unmade beds, in secluded bars (of the sort you only ever visit once, of the sort never to be found again, as if, on your departure, they sank into a fog that is not of this world). Nor do I see

myself in the anguish calling out to me because it's getting late and I'm nowhere to be seen, shouting a name that's mine, or at least it once was. It calls the name out louder and louder, with a voice increasingly hoarse, until it is little more than a straight-out moan, roaming the passageways of the labyrinth, the banks of the swamp, the forests of the night—the wailing of a monster that remembers me.

The telephone rings sometimes, not too often. Some calls I leave unanswered, I'm simply incapable of responding. Talking strikes me as a task as impossible as it is meaningless. Sometimes I do pick up the handset, silently praying it's nothing, a wrong number, and that no one is really looking for me or wants anything of me. I'm afraid of what the voice, whoever it may be, might summon up from the other end of the line, of the people it might name and of the memories all those words might unearth. I'm afraid of being made to cry. There are no friendly voices now. They do not exist, nor can I conceive of them. There is no such thing right now. In one way or another, they all link directly to the world, to the anxious, insufferable drone the world has become on the other side of the window. I peer out every now and again. There is usually nothing more than a frozen void through which a car passes once in a while. The shades of gray change depending on the time of day. The worst of them coincides with the hour when all activity appears to have died down and yet it's not altogether late. The stores are still open, lights can be seen in some windows, and silhouettes cast by people starting to lay the table, the clatter of dishes and cutlery; on the sidewalk across the street, a young boy is making

his way home from some after-school class, a book bag on his back. Out there, where all that can now be seen is this gloomy, wind-battered watercolor, is where my life was until recently, a life from which I have stumbled like an elderly man on an ice-covered path. I've landed on the skull and crossbones, I don't remember how many turns I have to skip before I can rejoin the game.

I get snagged on words. There are those that take root somewhere in the brain and, despite my best efforts, refuse to budge. I think of the word *home* while the radio relays news of the Siberian cold front that swept through the country overnight, while I tossed and turned in bed, in search of a position in which sleep would come—mountain passes closed, school classes canceled in some northern cities due to snow, warnings not to use the car save in cases of dire need. I ponder that expression, *dire need*, and I'm on the verge of tears again. Home is a child in pajamas racing down a hallway, his bedtime long since passed, and also the voice from the kitchen telling him not to go around barefoot or he'll catch a cold, to drink up his milk, and to get into bed already. A bed with four little corners, a picture book on the bedside table. Dire need. Fear all of a sudden of the tenderness such an image conjures up. Panic, in truth, for I know that even in all its foolish simplicity, when tenderness strikes, it takes no prisoners; I don't know what the hell kind of strings get tugged at with the mere sight of an abandoned toy in the corner, a colored pencil that turns up out of the blue where you least expect it, a sticker album card with some soccer player on it that emerges, covered in fluff, when sweeping under the bed. I don't know what incendiary buttons all this pushes. Dire

need—a soft cheek when the time comes to say goodnight, the raspberry toothpaste scent that enveloped that kiss now gone, never to return. On my afternoon stroll, at the new releases table, I paused to leaf through an album showcasing much of the work of the photographer Lewis Hine. Lying in wait on one of its pages, opened at random, was an image I was unable at that moment to endure (this often happens to me, I look at many things I should not): a young boy, a roving newspaper vendor in the years of America's Great Depression, has fallen asleep, utterly spent, on the stoop of a building. He's sitting on one of the steps, his head resting on a pile of unsold newspapers he's placed a few stairs up as a pillow. There is nothing more dramatic in the photo than a young boy overcome by tiredness and hiding from his employer's eyes in an attempt to replenish some of the strength he's used up hawking papers in those neighborhoods of cracked sidewalks, at bus stops, and out in front of office blocks. The photo reveals no injuries or any trace of tears or torture. None of that was necessary for me to know for certain, at that moment, as I contemplated that snapshot, that if, by some twist of fate, that boy had been one of my own children, I would be unable to spend a single moment of my remaining days doing anything other than hurling rocks through windows, setting off bombs left, right, and center, assassinating chancellors, burning down palaces, until I was gunned down by a well-aimed shot from a crack sniper crouching behind the open door of a patrol car. The upshot of this bewildering mess of memories and ideas that act as if they had a life of their own and come to land on my brain like crows is that the things for which I'd lay down my life are things I no

longer have. I've either lost them or I've lost myself, but either way, I reach out and touch nothing but thin air.

The radio says that the blizzard now battering my windowpanes swept through Moscow some twenty hours ago. It arrived at my door after turning the domes of the Kremlin white and sweeping through nighttime Europe, steam rising from millions of boilers working at full blast while men and women sleep. It's mighty cold in this part of the planet. Save under this heap of blankets, where I lie motionless in a fetal position, all is night and frost, icicles hanging from eaves, water turning to ice in the pipes, whole litters frozen solid in their dens. Out there, everything hisses, everything roars.

It is all but impossible to keep the anguish at bay when it comes with a convoy of memories en masse, jumbled together, like a slew of arrows unleashed at once without taking proper aim, to see which one might pierce some flesh off in the distance, which one might tear through a nerve, which one might burst open an eye. In my dreams I am hunted by hounds and torches, my first name, my last name, called out endlessly, while I crouch shivering in the bushes, trying to keep my breathing in check, to keep stock still, to keep from coughing. I often wake up in the middle of the night, not always able to recall what I was dreaming when I sit bolt upright. I then have to get out of bed, switch on a lamp or two, rinse my face. My heart still racing. It only knows how to work toward one goal, the poor thing, and in its determination to pull in the direction of my survival, regardless of whether that's reasonable or otherwise, it allies itself with the storms. It pumps blood nonstop, unable to do anything else, sending it to the farthest vessels,

to the tips of my fingers and toes, to my trembling brain, and this is tantamount to fueling the endless flow of images through my mind, words and ghosts, memories roaming in packs, the faces of those I miss the most, some of whom have already left this world for good and others I wish had done so a long time ago, eyes that once looked on me with love. There are momentary truces every now and then, but there is nothing so fragile and slippery as that deceptive calm. Occasional buffers against the disquiet sometimes occur to me, hideouts that, no sooner have I tried them out, prove utterly ineffectual. In search of refuge, my natural proclivities lead me back to the books that in times gone by, in previous slumps, in now half-forgotten debacles, succeeded in restoring me to the land of the living. But my concentration span is now all but nonexistent. I have no use, therefore, for full-length stories in which to immerse myself, since they all spit me out whether I like it or not, but rather, if anything, an atmosphere, a mood, some piece of prose that's halfway fit to live in, any context-free passage that might fleetingly conjure the illusion that I'm shaking off the sorrow into which my feet sink as I try to walk and managing, at least in part, to wrench free of myself. I seek in words an old familiarity, a homely air, so to speak, a warmth that, though it ultimately always proves ephemeral and elusive, achieves the momentary illusion of a temporary ceasefire in the midst of the never-ending battle my nerves are waging against themselves. Holding the remote, I look for channels showing classic movies or, at least, movies released in Spain no later than the seventies, just to hear the voiceover artists of the time. The sound is one I find particularly heartwarming. No matter what

words come out of those lips that never appeared on screen and must now be dead, they take me back to my grandmother's living room, to the stale chocolate and the can of condensed milk, to the cookies snatched without permission from an aluminum tin in the pantry, the drowsiness after Sunday dinner with the specter of Monday already lurking on the other side of a few hours of restless sleep, a green, imitation-leather couch coming apart at the seams, and the shootouts in black-and-white taking me gloriously out of the world, the sweet talk, the skyscrapers, the blondes, the car chases.