

I

THE gunshot resounded at a quarter to six, early morning, in the midst of the silence of the house. All of the villas between the Boulevard of the Martyrs and the Elbasan road were built before the war and are among the very few dwellings in Tirana that are surrounded by gardens. Two hours have passed but the atmosphere remains impregnated by a dense, oppressive odor, not that of gunpowder but of air that is very close. Ismaïl opened the window and inhaled the chill of the morning air, a gray sort of mist that rises above the arc of the hedge and over the mounds of red autumn leaves piled in wicker crates. Two uniformed police remain posted next to the main gate, and an inspector in civilian clothes is looking closely at the mansion and taking pictures from different angles. There were too many windows looking out over that side of the garden: the pair of glass doors behind the balconies of the upper floor, where the elder Z anum, as Ismaïl's father was called throughout Albania, always slept. Or the adjacent room that he used for an office and where he usually shut himself in to work very early. To the right is to be found the room that Ismaïl and his brother Viktor had shared as boys. Then there are four arched windows below: two on the east side to the drawing room and the library, and two on the west side to the former servants' quarters. All those, without counting the lookout window in the tower.

According to the first official report, the death was caused by a cardiac lesion due to the bullet wound. A bullet from a revolver, just one, not two, as was later said here and there. The body had been found in bed clad in beige colored pajamas, the sheets stirred up somewhat, as if wrinkled by a dream that was too restless, or perhaps by the very impossibility of the dream. Nevertheless, curiously, the bloodstain was not extensive. The bullet, bursting from the barrel of the weapon when it was held right up against the skin, pierced the heart and came out through the back at a slightly higher angle; it passed through the mattress as well and then came to rest on the wooden floor. If the version were true that some put forth concerning the existence of two wounds, it would have become necessary to replace the hypothesis of suicide with that of murder, since anyone who kills himself cannot shoot twice.

However, there was something in that dawn that had not existed before, a heavily charged significance in the ambience like that brought on by the kind of dreams you are unable to awaken from.

When Ismaíl heard the gunshot, he didn't get up immediately but remained where he was for some moments, petrified, without even sliding out of bed, compelled by a feeling of weightiness or immobility. During those tenths of a second he experienced a premonition that reached his mind even before his own conscious recognition of the sound.

The black tips of the cypresses began waving back and forth. Ismaíl's perception of reality had gone into slow motion. He saw the sky above the glass as if it were

a plaster dome, but nonetheless his memory remained intact. He had spent a restless night, but he recalled the woman's silence and the wavy mane of her hair tied back with a ribbon. It had been hard for him to loosen the knot at the nape of her neck, but afterwards her whole head of hair was spread out over the sofa cushion. They were in the library, half undressed, curled up together, with the light out. A nocturnal clarity came in through the arched window as if in a church. You would have been able to find your way around the whole room merely from the glow of their skin. He was lying next to the woman, but her eyes remained wary, as if protecting something. Nevertheless, he sought to embrace her wholly with his gaze. With his fingers he brushed her chin and her lips. Then he lowered his head and passed his tongue slowly over each one of her ribs, up to her breast. Taste of salt.

Inch by inch he went over her bristling skin, leaving traces of dampness. He was bent over the woman's body with his wet mouth, blindly searching for the means of entry. But it was she who raised her knees to lead him in and fit herself to his loins while she gazed at him in hypnotic seriousness. The expression on her face changed with the pleasure, her lips became fuller, her features took on a seriousness resembling abandonment, she whimpered with her eyes half closed. Ismail was barely able to hold himself back; he brought her under control with a rhythm more and more violent as if he hated her, although in reality what he hated was the uncertainty. He buried his face in her hair to stifle his groans. When he felt the first impetuous throbbing of the blood in his groin, he thought he was going to faint away.

At the end they stopped moving. They remained that way, gasping, still joined together, neither one wanting to come away from the other, recovering their breath little by little. Then it seemed they both heard something, very slight, like the running of a small animal in the garden. It was only for a moment.

Afterwards, the silence once again. Ismaíl buttoned up his pants and went over to the window. In the lunar gleaming, the trees appeared sprayed with frost. All was calm, blanketed by the silence.

After some minutes he went out to the balcony with his shirt still open and taking a couple of upward leaps climbed to the terrace in front of his room. Although he might not be thinking about her, he knew he would be able to shut his eyes and evoke the slightest of her features, the tiniest detail, a small beauty spot behind the lobe of her left ear, her fingers like starfish with their pink tips, the gentle weight of her wrist when she let her hand rest forgotten on his penis. So many sleepless nights, stretched out in the darkness, staring at the ceiling, impossibly sensing himself on the verge of something, but nothing was happening, not even when he tried to make himself sleep, or when sleep came only as the dawn was breaking. He witnessed the gradual entry of the light through the slits in the Venetian blinds. But he only realized he had managed to fall asleep when the sound of the gunshot wakened him.

Now, an official car was maneuvering in front of the mansion, crunching the gravel on the gently curved driveway. Ismaíl remained motionless, leaning on the edge of the windowsill, breathing in an absentminded

way, as if nothing of what had happened had anything to do with him. He was overcome by the feeling of having been immersed in the lives of others, in intrigues that went back more than twenty years. He glanced at the sky, which was looking rather dark toward the east, and concluded that in a minute it would be raining.

II

THE Radjick family villa had the look of a country home in the Tyrol, especially because of the little patch of tiled roof with its exotic silhouette—conical or hexagonal—rising up and topping off a windowed upper section crowning the central tower that loomed above the trees like a lighthouse. In the distance, Tirana and its lights. The Rotunda, which was how everyone called the room in the tower, was one of those spaces that is maintained on the margins of daily life, perhaps because of the inconvenience of the narrow spiral stairway that gave access to it, or maybe it was the fact that electrical wiring had never been installed that high—or who knows if for some other reason. In nearly all the older houses there is some spot like that.

Ismail was used to spending a great deal of time there, until the darkness would crowd in on him through the window, and then he'd have to light a small lantern with chrome fluting that projected a ring of light around the wall and accentuated still more the character of an "enchanted circle" that the whole enclosure suggested. A crack flowed down from the ceiling diagonally, and near the window it broke off in a net of small tributaries. Its outline recalled the outline of the Black Drin river whose course ran all around Albania, coming out of the lake of Ohrid. In the same way that any river contains the dense rustling of history, that crack too, perhaps,

concealed the echoes of other voices older than its own. On the floor by the gray baseboard, Ismaíl once discovered a dry, crumpled-up twist of linen that may have served someone as a match.

As with every attic, numerous unserviceable pieces of junk lay about discarded: garden tools, old furniture... Beneath the window was a pair of large chests in whose interiors were stored various pieces of fabric now in disuse: heavy Ukranian blankets, old petticoats, a curious fan of sandalwood speckled with mother-of-pearl inlays, kerchiefs of silken prints from Macedonia that Z anum, the boys' father, had inherited from his mother and later on had given his wife, and even the blue crepe shawl worn by the latter on the day of her death.

The rest of the different areas of the villa were also impregnated with a certain legacy crusted-over in the nooks and crannies of the rooms, recollections that clung like ivy on the façade, gradually spreading there just as moss does on walls lined with dampness by the rustling of the very slow winters.

In houses where people touched by the strongest of passions have lived, the air remains profoundly altered. The walls, the doors, the stair rails, the trunks, everything is charged with an imprecise aura whose contents no one can explain.

When Helena came to the villa for the first time, she was immediately aware of the breath of the past. What most held her attention was the portrait of the woman that dominated the principal wall of the library, whose youthfulness did not seem mortal and whose Spanish name had not been pronounced again in that house.

Even Ismaïl used only the personal pronoun “*she*” to refer to his mother. During the first days, Helena spent hours looking at the features of the singular visage that intrigued her so. It was an unusual face without being actually beautiful. The curvature of the eyelids lent her gaze a softened, dreamy expression. Helena reached such a point in her contemplation of the portrait that sometimes it seemed she was actually able to enter into the thoughts of that unknown person, as if in some way the image had the power to cut molecular pathways through the interior of her mind, and then she would end up feeling a real anxiety. But afterward she would try to calm down, telling herself this was all due to her easily impressionable nature, to the many stories from the *Kanun* she had been told as a little girl. The painting appeared to be unfinished and showed a very young woman on a balcony, with empurpled lips and cheekbones lightly bluish and hair crumpled into disorder by the hand on which her head was leaning, book in hand and smiling a little, settled into her reading, into her solitude, like a goddess in an invisible kingdom.

When his mother died, Ismaïl was scarcely five, and at that age one’s memories are hardly more than vague brushstrokes, as fleeting as the breeze that out of the blue turns the pages of a book or raises the ruffles of a dress with its flowers of green, maybe yellow, or blue...although maybe they were not flowers but small leaves, tiny ones. The material allowed her shoulders to be seen and ended in a flounce that came a little below the knee. It was certainly not an Albanian dress. Ismaïl had seen his mother decked out like this once on the

beach at Dürres at the end of summer, with her bare feet in the water and the breeze rippling the hem of the dress. At least he seemed to remember this, although, as is well-known, children oftentimes construct their memories on the basis of how they imagine things, or else from what someone has told them afterward. They outline the scene in the memory as if it were drawn on a blank sheet of paper, and maybe what Ismaïl recalled was actually the childish sketch done some time afterward with colored pencils, after his mother was dead: the sun with its orange-colored rays placed up in one corner, and a sea without boats. She was looking off into space, very serious, as if she were anxious to reach the shore on the other side, and she maintained that gaze all the way back to Tirana, the entire distance heavy with the failing air of September that puffed up the straw in the cowsheds, muddied the goats' fur, and put acrid clouds of smoke from burning stubble on the roads where the peasant women dressed in black were walking, bent over from the weight of their metal milk cans. Finally unable to see the ocean any longer after a bend in the road, she had simply leaned her head on the back of the seat, hands in lap, and began to weep quietly, slowly. Tears.

It's curious how blurred are the facial features of those who have gone absent, or how their places are taken by the images of a single day or a snapshot, even by a painting that always had something peculiar about it. It may also happen that after a long period of time a ray of light appears in our minds, insignificant details tucked away in a neglected corner of our memory, words, a scrap of

conversation heard before the mind is able to find some meaning in it, and only much later do we manage to recall it fully, able to interpret its true significance. No doubt this was what was happening to Ismaíl with regard to everything related to his mother. Helena's presence in a house that had been lived in only by men for so many years probably contributed to unleashing the mechanisms of memory. When he would see her seated in the library, on the very sofa where *she* had usually sat, her hair down about her shoulders and legs crossed next to the pedestal table with the reddish lampshade; catching a glimpse of her leaning above a bed turning back the sheet; watching her opening the balcony door to air out the room that would suddenly become flooded with a warm, pink light—which was also the color of those almost forgotten mornings when his mother used to come into the bedroom to waken him and his brother...all were gestures that came from a world now past but that now broke into Ismaíl's sphere as unrestrainedly as the eagerness with which a branch that has appeared dead bursts into live flames when fed by a congestive increase of sap. "You were like a pearl of water in the heart of the thistle," he wrote in one of his poems.

The thistles grew at the end of the garden, against the wall and the grating, next to a cluster of weeds. The first time that Ismaíl saw Helena, he felt in his own hands the spasmodic pricks of thousands of needles that had reddened her skin up to the wrist with a violent rash; she had carelessly brushed against the weeds while trying to open the outer iron gate. He had just returned to Tirana after eight months of military duty, and when

he arrived at the villa with his military knapsack slung over his shoulder, she herself opened the door.

It was not the surprise of encountering a woman in the house, because his brother Viktor had already written to let him know of his wedding with a girl from the north. Ismail recalled perfectly the letter in which Viktor lamented that the army wouldn't give him a pass to attend the ceremony and told him how the mansion had been decorated for the occasion, with wreaths of tissue paper on the tables set up in the open part of the garden. He also wrote about his bride, how she was dressed in the mountain style with a simple crown of flowers and a white, embroidered waistcoat worn over a tunic, in one of whose pockets was kept the "dowry bullet" that tradition prescribed. So went the letter Ismail received at the barracks high on the plateau. He was sincerely sorry not to have been able to be with his brother for the occasion, and that night, on guard duty, he imagined nostalgically all the details of the wedding party; the tiny colored lights over the dance floor, the music rising above the voices and laughter, the smell of the *gulasch*, the rabbit casserole, the cakes made with sesame seed and condensed milk, the quince preserves... Nevertheless, there was something more in the letter, one sentence, something referring to the girl... Although maybe what bothered him was simply that a phrase had been expressed in too vulgar a way. And therefore he forgot it, not wishing to grant it so much importance.

No, it was something else that happened to him when he met Helena for the first time on the threshold, standing on tiptoe, shoeless but wearing thick, lavender-col-

ored socks and a much too large bathrobe on which her locks of wet hair were dripping like small paintbrushes. What Ismaíl experienced could be defined as a deep uneasiness, that particular type of discomfort one feels when situations that have remained stable over a long period of time abruptly become altered by the addition of someone unfamiliar. At first Ismaíl could not know exactly what that alteration consisted of, nor did he even think about it in any conscious way, but beneath his timidity and this sense of unrest that was taking possession of him, he perceived it intuitively. With all courtesy, he tried to hide his embarrassment in front of her. Nevertheless the discomfort remained.

“You must be Ismaíl,” said Helena, smiling naturally before embracing him. Her teeth were small and luminous, with the two front ones separated by an almost imperceptible slot. She immediately led him down the hallway toward the room adjoining the library, the one he had shared with Viktor throughout his childhood. “We didn’t expect you until later,” she excused herself when she saw the door was still secured by a lock. “But wait just a moment, I’ll bring the key.”

During the few moments before his sister-in-law returned, Ismaíl had time to recall the Albanian superstition of keeping the rooms of the dead locked forever.