

SEVENTEEN

The gentleman wearing a raincoat, and who every morning takes the number 36 bus—an always overcrowded bus—on which he attentively studies, absent-mindedly, a German grammar book, has in the course of his life been in love three times.

The first time, by now several years ago, he happened to see on the sidewalk the loose page of a magazine dedicated to sexual games, of which he knew nothing; by chance that page, in itself, was in no way lascivious, but showed the naked and nonetheless decorous body of a woman who worked for that publication. The gentleman—who on that occasion too was wearing a raincoat, but surely a darker one—picked up that sheet of paper, and when he turned it over his eyes were met by an extremely shameless image. He examined it indifferently, and returned to his contemplation of the woman both naked and serene. He instantly fell in love with her, even though not unaware of how silly it was to fall in love with an entirely substanceless photograph. The woman's name was in the caption, but he never made an attempt to get in touch with her. Rather, for several weeks he had the problem of separating the two sides of the sheet of paper, of comprehending that the shameless photograph and the woman he loved were at odds with one another, and, indeed, that, making their appearance on the opposite sides of a

single sheet of paper, they could have no relationship at all. He never fell out of love with that woman, the emblem of incorruptible chastity, but one year later he permitted himself to fall in love again, with a woman he had met but with whom he had never spoken. It wasn't timidity: he wanted no response from her. Compared to the photograph, she was unpredictable, inconstant, and noisy. It was quite exceptional. He loved her form: not her corporeality, but the fact that, behind her, she had no other photograph from which he had to distinguish her. It was a highly beautiful love, and it brought him back to the religion of his fathers. He also began to visit the cemetery with great bunches of flowers, and to laugh out loud in front of his parents' tomb. The third time was simpler; he saw a woman at a bus stop. This woman was not only alive, but was also capable of making her way onto a means of transportation. That was the point where everything began: the lowest and the necessary point. In the grips of a desperate happiness, he addressed her, declared his love and obtained an astonished but courteous refusal. He thanked her, and went away, his happiness intact. His life had been extremely rich: and that had been the time at which he had started his rides on the number 36 bus, and his study of that same old German grammar book which he holds at this moment in his hand.

EIGHTEEN

*T*hat gentleman who has purchased a used raincoat and a floppy hat, who smokes nervously and paces up and down in a squalid hotel room for which he was asked to pay in advance, decided, ten years ago, that once grown up he would be a killer. Now he is grown, and no new fact, no love, no healthful early-morning breakfasts, no church hymns have in any way altered his decision, which had been no childish whim, but a clear and judicious choice. Now, a killer needs very few things, but they are special things. He has to have a weapon that's both prestigious and elusive, plus a perfect aim, a client, and a person to kill. The client, in turn, has to have hatred and self-interest, and a large amount of money. The difficult thing is to assemble these conditions simultaneously. Since the gentleman's temperament oscillates between the fatalistic and the superstitious, he is convinced that a real killer cannot help but find himself in the situation demanded; but he thinks as well, it being a complex and highly improbable situation, that it can come about not because the killer is competent and the aim exact, or because there somewhere exists a great hate or a terrible interest, and money for the killing, but only if something in the skies, in the stars, perhaps God Himself, if He exists, intervenes to summon together those scattered events which are often so distant from one another as not to be able to coalesce.

He wants to be worthy of a choice to which he does not hesitate to attribute the character of a destiny. So, having chosen a suit of clothes that might be a tunic, he has decided to perfect his aim. He is a novice, but has the vocation of an ascetic. He has immediately noted an error which all aspiring killers commit; they practice with fake targets. Fake targets do not test the killer's asceticism. This principle, in itself incontestable, has led the killer to several conclusions: he has made it clear to himself that he must learn perfect aim in perfectly ascetic conditions. He must not hit; he must kill. Not animals, which desire to be killed. Human beings? But to kill a human being without being given money is fatuous exhibitionism. A single solution remains, truly ascetic. He must practice his aim on himself. He has set up his weapon in a corner of the room, and has tied a string to its trigger. The killer meditates. He will now take aim at himself. And then? If he misses, he will live, but will be disqualified as a killer. If he acquires his mark, someone will be killed: the killer. He hesitates at length. But we know that his professional conscience will finally prevail.

NINETEEN

The existence of the heavenly body which we speak of here is improbable, or at minimum hypothetical; all the same, it has been sighted and described by habitués and inhabitants of space—tenants of comets, fallen celestials, miniature occupants of asteroids, prospectors of cosmic dust—not only in entirely similar ways, but with words regarded, in their respective languages, as distinguished and obsolescent. The celestial body has the form of a vast city square, its sides of approximately equal length. The pavement shows a number of peculiarities. It is mainly naked earth, with no trace of life: all the same, it comes to be called “denuded,” since mixed with that clay there appear to be fragments of buildings, of a “No Stopping” sign, and even a fluttering, restless, fretful scrap of newspaper with a thunderous headline in an unintelligible language. It was witnessed by the “double” of a binary smuggler. The smuggler is said to have traversed a part of the celestial square, thus making another discovery which might have proved fatal to him, were it not for his singular duplex nature. The pavement, even though apparently solid and continuous, at times in fact abates into a foil so thin as to part beneath the footstep of a ghost; and below it gapes a smooth, empty shaft that opens down into the void. In a corner of the square, one finds what some insist is the imprint of a water pipe, perhaps for a faucet.

Gaps in the edges of the square allow one to think that other streets ran or will run into it. A comb has been found, along with a fingernail file of exiguous proportions. A dispirited pharmacist has declared himself, under oath, to have glimpsed a number of shadows, and to have heard low voices. In space, at the coffee shops, in the high class brothels for celibate gentlemen, discussions are held as to whether the heavenly body has fled from an odious city, or is the center of a city which still remains unbuilt; the voices and shadows would already have arrived, being more fleet of foot, in advance of the inhabitants, whose constitution is in any case corporeal. In reality, attentively observed, the celestial square shows contradictory characteristics; while appearing to be ruled by a pained but obstinate expectation, an impertinent self-assurance, it emanates at the very same time an odor of desolation, which might derive from bitter but unforgettable memories, or from a hidden expectation of catastrophe, perhaps of dispersal into space through the smooth tunnels by way of which the void presses so far forward as to graze the square's very floor.