

. . . The bass, a grey shadow outlined against the blue, advanced towards him seemingly motionless, suspended, like a jet plane as it emerges, still silent, into the quiet circle of morning. The fixed celluloid eye, the scales in relief, the tormented head of a Chinese mask—it was near, very near, within range. The Great Moment. The fin of the harpoon acted as fore sight on the glistening line of the gun, the gaze followed a point to the right of the gills. He was about to fire—it would weigh over ten kilos, he thought—and the Dreaded Thing happened again: a hateful lassitude which obliged the body to disobey, the life draining away at the decisive moment. The useless arrow lay there gleaming, on the sandy bottom. The bass passed slowly, as though he did not exist—he could have touched it—and disappeared into a shadowy zone, into the darkness of the rocks. Now he was pursuing the Great Lost Moment. Through long, dim submarine corridors; shadows like violet seaweed, and frost in all his body. Little by little, as he became accustomed to that lifeless glimmer, he distinguished the drawing-room chairs, the long dark-wood table, the green lampshade, the couch, the coffee stain on the yellow cushion. The bass must have disappeared into some dark corner, behind that chest of drawers or into the next room, or under the bed on which he was



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*now lying. But it no longer mattered, now we had come to it, here was The Scene. It presented itself again, in the same way as it always did: Carla's glance sparkling like early morning splendour at the bottom of the sea, and she so close—even the heartbeat!—close by, waiting with her sea-blue eyes. Was she offended? astonished? incredulous? in any case she was quickly at ease again, seated here on the bed, combing her hair, forever far away, trying to overcome the constraint. He watched her comb her hair, gathered at the nape of her neck into a blonde, swinging pony-tail—luminous as on the beach that New Year's Eve!—he without life and a humiliated smile that covered the wish to die. And the boys, can you imagine their faces? Their laughs? the chatter, if only they knew. He, alone, with the Great Lost Moment, and all their eyes open upon The Scene . . .*

Mississippi raised his ears, electrified, in his bed at the bottom of the canoe. One leap and he began to go hysterical on the other side of the door. 'Just a minute, just a minute! Can't you give me a chance?' The twilight of the drawing-room pierced by a shower of luminous shafts which the sea sent back from the half-shut blinds. The shuffle of the bedroom slippers in the silence of the house. Mississippi's wait behind the door became unbearable, he scratched with his claws, mewed softly, plaintively.

'Can't you give me a chance?'

In his pyjama jacket and shorts Signor De Luca opened the kitchen door. Around his legs the kitten's warm smooth coat, the moisture of its nose.

'Hypocrite, you!'

Two round yellow eyes were following his every gesture: the hand on the white bottle in the larder, the bottle uncorked, the milk flowing into the saucer, now full and set down upon the floor.

'Scared I'll take it away from you? Easy, easy . . .'

As the kitten lapped the milk noisily he leaned over to caress

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it. . . . Caresses unwelcome, eh? No use making a noise like a little motor just to play safe. Well then, the first good-for-nothing's been taken care of. Now the coffee for me. At least this one is satisfied with a drop of milk and brimming over with gratitude, while they always think there's something lacking. They eat, they drink, they sleep, they haven't the faintest idea where it all comes from, they don't even want to know . . . How old would I have been at the time? Seventeen, eighteen, Nini's age more or less. And I'd already made my first deal, ten thousand lire, at that time ten thousand lire were as though you were to say several millions today. Then you could throw them away at the Club on an unlucky evening, but it was money I'd earned, I earned it getting up every morning at six, to go to Grandpa's mill, and I could do what I liked with it, I didn't have to account for it to anybody, not at all like nowadays when at the most I can allow myself a game of canasta with Signora Cotogna and Signor Fricelli, while that scoundrel of a Pippotto Alvinì in two days gambles away all my money, a fine position that puts me in! And they exchanging glances at the table as though there were something to laugh about.

*He did not hear the words that he himself was speaking, but he realised from the expression of those attentive, amused eyes, that he had let himself be drawn into the usual game of public confidences. He was talking, this time, of his history with Flora. An impartial, ironic tone as though he were speaking of someone else called Massimo, not of himself. Great precision as to the details, in the manner of Guidino Cacciapuoti, all chosen on purpose to raise a cloud of conjectures, of hypotheses, suitable for distracting the eye from The Scene. And he found before him that single eye, greedy and obscene, enormous, which was all of their eyes, from which issued little winks of complicity and contempt. 'Talk, keep on talking'—the eye egged him on—'still more, and without shame.' And now, without knowing how, he was talking about*



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Carla to a stranger—hypocrite lecteur, mon semblable, mon frère<sup>1</sup>—someone run into in the street: 'That girl there, do you see her?'—and little by little as he talked, something within him became deformed, corrupted, and the slack, indiscreet eye of the other, cropping out of the tangle of a Virgin Forest vaster than the one about which Gaetano theorized, ever nearer, more fluid, more charged with menacing otherness, sucked him back into an entanglement from which it was impossible to extricate himself; impossible to feel different and distinct, to recognize what had remained intact and what had been lost forever,—or what one had never had . . . Again the face of Guidino Cacciapuoti, he too with that winking eye, emblematic. To strike him. But the Dreaded Thing intervened again, slackened the fist, the arm was blocked in its motion, enervated by a creeping paralysis. And Guidino looked at him, pretended not to understand why everybody was laughing, repeated the atrocious thing with a swagger. The rocks of Villa Peirce grew black, loomed like nocturnal mountains—that cry arose—and all this was intolerable, unrecognizable, unacceptable. Had there ever been anything else? Had those days ever existed? And the night of New Year's Eve at Positano, in what night had it foundered?

In the silent kitchen the dirge of the coffee grinder. . . . As usual the trident sideways across the larder. I've said a thousand times that it shouldn't be like that, it's dangerous. And look at those corks with the fishing-lines all tangled up. Nini promised me, but I ask you, does he ever keep a promise! The rods, I said, stand them on end behind the canoe that takes up so much room and is no use except as a bed for Mississippi instead of keeping them tied in bundles crosswise against the wall among the pots and pans so that if you take down a fishing-rod you pull frying-pans along with it. And then that outboard motor was just what we needed, that Nini brought yesterday, God knows where he got hold

<sup>1</sup>An allusion to Baudelaire's dedication of *Les Fleurs du Mal*: 'Toi, hypocrite lecteur, mon semblable, mon frère.'

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of it, the young genius! Let's hope it isn't another swindle like when he brought the tyres, one of those business deals of his, and then the real owner turns up and the one who pays is always me. Pippotto Alvini—don't think about it, better not think about it.

The dirge ceased. Now Signor De Luca poured the boiling water into the coffee maker. Ground coffee mustn't be squashed down, not too full, like this, the tray with the little cup and the sugar-bowl, there.

On the kitchen terrace. What a day! The smell of a fine day, the actual smell. In ten minutes the coffee will have filtered through. . . . Where's Mississippi? Here, on Master's knees, here.

Seated in the wicker armchair enjoying the fine day. Sledge-hammer strokes. They're setting up the bathing cabins. From the beach warehouse they're carrying the posts on their shoulders to the first scaffoldings that advance, quivering, over the sea. They're already black from the sun, that's Luigino balanced on the swaying wooden axles with a post on his shoulder in the still air, it's as blue as the water this morning, at intervals the strokes of the sledge-hammer raised by four muscular arms, bang!

Voices from the other terrace, the drawing-room one, Nini and Assuntina. Did you think you'd be left in peace? Not even at this hour. . . .

'Do as I do. Do you ever see me irritable? Depressed? Nervous?'

He begins first thing in the morning and that woman squawks like a broody hen being plucked alive.

'Last night when you needed it you said you'd give me back ten thousand this morning!'

'You'd like that, wouldn't you? A thousand per cent interest. I could send you to jail.'

'You send me? Give me back my thousand lire, don't make me laugh!'

'No possible.'

'When it comes to paying up you talk American . . .'



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*Carminie doesn't seem to be back yet. The anchor of the fishing smack is still there, you can see as far as the pier of the palace the rope trailing along the sandy bottom. . . . Gone out last night with the fishing lantern and still. . . . What water this morning! Look at that tin can, how it's gleaming in the sand. And that . . . ? Under water things become enchanted. Ah! It's a bicycle tyre, it seemed to be. . . . This morning even if a rock goby moves—like lizards they move, and are the colour of the sand—even that you can see. When the water's like this!*

'How can I put it to you? We took a risk and lost. A gentleman should know how to lose. You'll have to make the best of it.'

'I swear to you by my sainted husand . . . !'

'Sainted! A pederast and everybody knows it.'

'Let the dead rest in peace.'

*What time can it be? Already eight. Totonno, every morning without fail at this hour, like an appointment, in any weather. Never seen anyone row in that attitude, facing the prow, with his legs folded under him as though he were kneeling. Too small for him, that boat. He says there's plenty of room but I'd like to see if he still says so when a storm comes on. A seat on rollers, he handles it like this, all with his arms, with those short oars.*

'Totoooo!—what's the news?'

'Bad fishing! Bad fishing!'

*When has it ever not been. He's rummaging under the prow, still sitting like that. And then, glittering alive in his hand: a bream.—All night rowing, from beyond Pietra Salata, as far as Nisida, with the damp in his bones, for a thing which if he gets three hundred lire for it he's doing well. After all, really, what a life they lead. And then we complain. At sixty the shoulders still straight and strong, and that little rowing stroke, the arms pushed forward, in jerks, leaning on the oars. He says he gets arthritic pains. Arthritis in the joints of the hands, fishermen often get it. A streak of white light on the sea, behind the boat.*

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'First you tell me all kinds of things and then you forget what they were.'

'As if I didn't know that you talk so much just to take my mind off the subject. And what need is there to trouble the dead?'

*Drop by drop the coffee has filtered. A dilatory cock. Shouts himself hoarse from the hillside at this hour, he takes it easy. Carminie's coming in with the fishing-smack. He signals: gone badly. Not much of a life, his either. . . . And you, I'm sorry to inconvenience you but would you mind letting me drink my coffee? And listen how he snores. Soft, warm coat.*

'D'you know that you're a half-wit?'

'So long as you're intelligent—'

*The ting-a-ling. That's silenced them. She's woken up earlier this morning.*

'By her ring I'd say Mamma was a bit nervous,' said Nini.

'Let's cross ourselves.'

Again the three peals of the bell.

*Like a stone, from the projecting cornice of the palace, a tern. Very close indeed, it's passed with that sibilant cry. He's stopped snoring now, alarmed; with his round, wicked, yellow eyes, he follows in the sky that cry that so greatly resembles his name: Mississippi. . . .*

*Well, we'd better go in and shave, it's getting late.*

'I don't know how you manage to believe everything he tells you, don't you see he's pulling your leg? Now you come and complain to me, couldn't you think of all that yesterday morning when he asked you for it? After all the times I've warned you: Assuntina don't lend him a single lira because I don't propose to pay my son's debts, do you understand? You seem born to be cheated by men. If he wears trousers you'll believe him. First your husband, that good-for-nothing. Now this Gennarino. He's eating the last pennies you've laid aside,



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then what's going to happen when you can't work any more? By this time, if you'd listened to me, you'd have over a million in the bank. Please bring me the bedroom slippers under the chair, there, can't you see? But I'm telling you for the last time, with Nini from now on you can handle your own affairs. Neither I nor his father can permit a boy of eighteen to gamble at the Club, actually put the money in his pocket. Then when they're older they finish up like Pippotto Alvinì. All his father's fault. I can tell you that every night, even when there was the alert and bombs were dropping, even then that's where I found my husband, at the Club gambling. And I worrying every night, waiting up for him till two or three, telephoning after the all-clear, and all this because *he* can't do without the Club. I don't know what they find there, nobody there but riff-raff, newly-rich men and kept women. Massimo is right to go to Rome, he's quite right. When I think that this evening I'll be saying goodbye to him at the station . . . What's he doing, is he still asleep?

. . . *New Year's Eve of nineteen forty-nine, at Positano. The years have leapt gaily one by one into the Buca di Bacco<sup>1</sup> and Carla continuing to celebrate midnight, and ordering the lights to be turned out every time a cork hit the ceiling in honour of another year. The boys, they were all there in their gay pullovers, all carried along by her high spirits, by her little game—and happy New Year! Happy New Year! All standing round her and she had them kiss her to welcome each year that was being celebrated. The glasses in fragments with the years, and how many flew away in this manner? Another life-time almost as long as our life, and then we went out on the beach, my love and I. She held my hand, ran, the boys followed us in the dark looking for us among the boats drawn up on the beach. Duck down, duck down or they'll see you!*

<sup>1</sup>'Buca di Bacco,' a restaurant and night-club where *everybody* goes at Positano.

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'Are you alone, Signorina?'

'And you, why are you walking on all fours?'

'Because I love you.'

'What's that to do with it!' *she was laughing, and then her warmth that passed through the cashmere pullover, I felt it upon me, that fragrance-plus-warmth of a little bird, and her laughter softly mumbling words without meaning into my ear. You're tickling me! Where were her lips hiding?*

'What a nice warm little hollow in your neck.'

'I'd rather you gave me a kiss!'

'No, it's too nice like this. Oh God, how marvellous, Massimo, how happy I am!'

'Now let's make love.'

'Have you gone crazy?'

'Yes, I have'

*The boys' shouts, their laughter, were drawing nearer. She pressed me with a new vigour. Her voice murmuring, broken, 'Tell me, do you love me, do you truly love me? Do you want me? Why don't you say something?'*

*And I no longer knew her, so changed.*

*That unforeseen kiss, too expert, that ardour in her eyes, and already within me something like a reticence, a presentiment. . . . Her bright hair on my face, luminous in the night, her odour, with that of the sea in it, of the sea that was lapping the cold pebbles, almost up to our feet.*

'Tomorrow come with me to Naples.'

'All right, tomorrow.'

'I've asked. They're staying here for another two days. There's no one in the house. But what's got into you now?'

'Poor Rogerkins. . . . I was thinking of him.'

'Don't call him that. His name is Roger.'

'I wonder what he's doing.'

'Does this seem the right moment to think about him?'

'Last summer I loved him, now he doesn't mean a thing to me. Simply not a thing. That's why I'm thinking about him. If he



*passed in the street I wouldn't even notice him. Did you already love me last summer?*

*'Even before, if you must know—since the day of the bombing.'*

*'We were in the cutter and an aeroplane passed . . .'*

*'Let's get this straight: You and I were never in that cutter. You've imagined it.'*

*'Now you're being disagreeable. . . .'*

'They call themselves Signora This and Signora That, Baroness and Countess. Kept women. It seems to be my fate, turn and turn about, at the Club every evening in such company. By giving him that thousand lire do you think you're doing any good? And the worst of it is that in the morning you make such an uproar that no one can bear it. Why do you answer back when he teases you? With your penetrating voice it's impossible to sleep in this house. I can't do like other people, who at least have a right to their rest. Here no, in the morning you can't sleep because *she* has to collect her money, because whatever he says she has got to answer back. But why do you answer him I'd like to know, especially when you can see that every time he talks to you he enjoys making a fool of you. Give me my glasses, there on the table and find me a pen, a pencil, anything to write down the shopping list. There's never anything here to write with. I'm so nervous today! Are Massimo's things all ready? Did you tell the laundress? . . . I'd like to know what forces him to do it, at the beginning of the summer, on the first fine days, to go to Rome and be a clerk in an office. Couldn't he wait till October? That Gaetano, it's all his fault, with the ideas he's put in his head . . . Now get his coffee ready, I'm going to wake him. Today is Sunday too, every week, what a bore!'

*. . . 'D'you hear them? They're coming.'*

*'Stay in your little hollow. You said you liked it there, didn't you?'*

*'I can't, they're coming!'*

*'Be good, like this.'*

*'I can't. Now I'll chase them away.'*

*'No don't, stay here!'*

*She popped up with that Chinese cotillon mask, now behind a boat, now farther on behind another boat, cuckoo, cuckoo, the boys chased after her laughing along the beach, they knocked her over, they were on top of her, and I continued to lie there, shut inside my moment with her—over there in the dark something like an assault was going on, the laughter extinguished, and the voices, and there remained only the sound of the sea with that cry of hers inside it, the sound of the sea ever louder. . . .*

It entered the room now too. The waves of the Ischia boat. Between sleep and waking Massimo turned round and round inside the sheets while the dream melted away forgotten. First imperceptibly, almost in his mind's ear, and little by little more distinctly, there came to him at regular intervals the strokes of the sledge-hammer. The piles advancing from the beach on to the sea, round the side of the palace, twenty metres from the kitchen terrace. The two men on the cross-pieces, getting back their breath, he seemed to be hearing them, seeing them, and afterwards an oooh! that rose from the depth of the lungs, with the contracted back muscles standing out quivering beneath the skin as the four arms raised the heavy sledge-hammer. It remained poised for an instant over their heads, in the sky, an instant like a rite, then thump! on the pile. The sharp point penetrated the undulating sand at the bottom, every stroke was a stone falling into the blue lake of morning. The circles grew larger, merged with that sighing oooh, announcing every year that summer had come. He could tell by the vibration of those strokes in the air what the weather was like outside, and feel the magnitude of the day hanging over the city, the palace sailing in the sea, the light pressing against the windows and bursting through the slats in the



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shutters. He opened his eyes. On the white walls the golden graph wavered, restlessly, ceaselessly transmitting the message: it's a beautiful day—beautiful day.

'Still in bed at this hour. I can't understand how a boy, on a day like this, instead of being in the sea . . . Assuntina, bring him his coffee. Nini! How many times must I tell you not to walk about the house barefoot. My house is a bathing establishment. The one in shorts, the other in bathing trunks, you still in bed. All doing exactly as they please. . . .'

She threw open the window and the whole beautiful day burst on the instant into the room, an exaggeration of light.

'How's the water, Nini?'

'Marvellous.'

'Just like the peasants in my village, always harping on the weather,' shrilled Assuntina, and laughed.

'And you, always talking out of turn.'

'What have I said, Signora?'

'Nothing, but you say a thing, they answer you, you say something else, and there's never an end to it, chattering the whole day long, with all there is to be done. Tell me rather: has the Signore gone out?'

'Didn't you see him going a few minutes ago?'

'Then who'll give me the money for the boat?'

'He slips out every morning, not a word, not so much as goodbye, I'd like to know what sort of manners those are. For fear someone will ask him for something. When he's left his three thousand lire on the bedside table he thinks he's done goodness knows what. The rest is your affair—'

'And then at the Club he throws it about.'

'Look here, Nini, you're being too clever, and I haven't got the five hundred lire.'

'Then I'll borrow it from the concierge.'

'And I'll tell him for the last time that I'm not responsible for your debts.'

'He may still be at the bus stop.'

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'Assuntina, run up and tell him that Signorino Nini wants five hundred lire for the boat. May I know why you're making such a face?'

'I'm the one he'll take it out on. He gets cross if you run after him in the street and grab him by the sleeve and ask him for money.'

'Who told you to grab him by the sleeve? Just see how right I am. She knows everything. She knows my husband gets cross, and I don't, she knows he doesn't like to be grabbed by the sleeve, and I don't . . . Go on, go on, here we stand talking and you won't find him at the bus stop any more.'

'Then, Massimo, I'll wait for you down below.'

'No, today I'm not coming.'

'How, not coming?'

'No, I'm not coming, I'm not coming.'

. . . *With my arms crossed behind my head, looking at the golden message vibrating on the walls, thinking of my walk this evening through the respectable squalor of unknown streets, in a city with no Vesuvius and no summers, where the palaces are not sucked under the sea, the lurking eye of the Virgin Forest does not threaten you in your integrity and Nature or a beautiful day does not triumph over History—with time regulated by the watch and the pay envelope. From here you can see every gleam of hope and intelligence that appears on the face of the earth, gleams that from Naples are so hard to see. Gaetano's letter, still there on the bedside table. Answer him that I too am finally going away, far from that sea as blest as an Eldorado crowded with fishes—but he's never known it, doesn't even know how to swim—, and far from those days. They'll continue to sparkle with meshes of sunlight quivering on the bottom. And her glance, like early morning splendour at the bottom of the sea, on whom will it rest? Tomorrow and then another year those days will continue to sparkle for themselves alone, as though I were still here and as when I shall be dead—now and a thousand years from now,*



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*indifferent and undifferentiated—they will still be sparkling, forever separated from me, irretrievable as Carla's glance. 'Why are you still there, what's holding you back?' Gaetano wrote. And how could I tell him the absurd thing, how am I to tell him: 'to find again a single one of those days intact as it used to be, to find it by chance, one morning, going out with the fishing boat and the gun.' Up to last summer, the final summer, persistently replying day-by-day to the message, to the hammer blows from the sea, and knowing that she does not see me, that together the moon and the sun move in the sky at noon, that the sea is without adventure, that time passes and rises with the water on the walls of the palace, and that one day, in thousands and thousands of years the same as this one, today is a beautiful day, a ray will say on the wall.—No, today I'm not coming. Message unreceived. Massimo does not reply. . . .*

## II

*. . . Who ever used to trouble his head about such things? They were never even noticed. Now it's even got a name: Bradyseism, they call it. And because of this bradyseism the palace is slowly, slowly sinking into the Gulf of Naples. You might put it this way: of the government of Don Ramiro Guzman, Duke of Medina Las Torres and Viceroy of Naples—in 1644, I believe—there remains only the palace still called Palazzo Medina, built by him on the Posillipan riviera, now for the most part crumbling, almost uninhabitable and ready to collapse. And this is called History. Now bradyseism steps in: under the ironical eye of the sun, des-piser of all human forethought, Nature (most sweet here but none the less ferocious), enemy of History, begins her patient work, availing herself, for the purpose, of a technique known by this name of bradyseism, part of the long-term plan which anticipates the total annihilation of men and things, and of whatever is produced by human reason, that is to say, of History. And in the particular case of this palace. . . .*

Massimo was looking up at it from below as he passed in the boat, on an ordinary day of a not far distant summer, yet already different from all other summers.

*. . . This façade, more exposed to the sea, is a trifle out of true;*