PHOTO: LUÍS BARRA

João Tordo

(Lisbon, 1975)

After graduating in Philosophy in Lisbon, he studied Journalism and Creative Writing in London and New York.
He currently works as free-lance journalist, translator and scriptwriter for films and television series.
João Tordo won the Young Creator's Prize in 2001 and published his first novel *O Livro dos Homens sem Luz* [The Book of Men in Darkness] in 2004 with general critical acclaim, being hailed as one of the most original and promising Portuguese novelists of his generation.
With *Hotel Memória* [Memory Hotel] in 2006 and especially with his last novel, *As três vidas* [The three lives], João Tordo has consolidated his reputation of extremely gifted novelist and is appointed by the critics as a "shooting star" of Portuguese contemporary fiction.
In 2009 he won the *Saramago Prize* with *As três vidas* [The three lives]. The book has just been published in France by Actes Sud.

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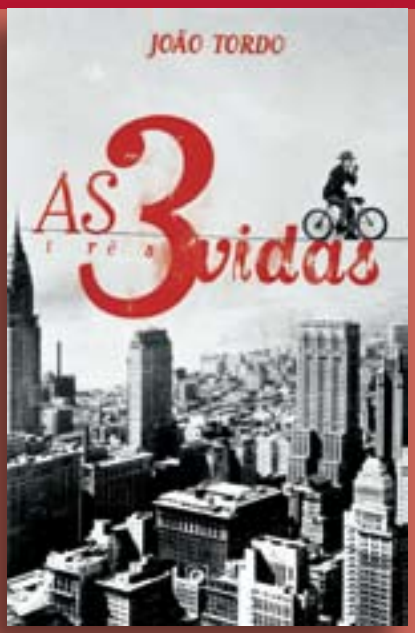
The three lives

João Tordo



As três vidas
[THE THREE LIVES]
Lisbon: Quidnovi, 2008;
pp. 304

Winner of the Portuguese Saramago Prize 2009

What secrets encloses the life of António Augusto Milhouse Pascal, an old gentleman that hides himself from the world in an old country manor, surrounded by three insolent grandchildren, a sullen gardener and a long list of customers, as wealthy and influential as they are dangerous and insane? The narrator of this novel — a young man from a humble family — will try to unravel these mysteries for more than a quarter of a century, unable to guess that the job that was offered to him by that strange character will turn into an obsession that will ultimately consume his life.
With an action that spreads from the Alentejo countryside, to Lisbon and New York during the 80'— the decade of every possible greed —, intertwining the bloody History of the Twentieth Century with the stories of the characters themselves, *The three lives* is, simultaneously, a self-discovery journey, the account of the passion nurtured by the narrator for Camilla, the granddaughter of Milhouse Pascal and the revelation of the secret destiny that lies waiting for her. A destiny that will be – same has her grandfather's – inexorably connected to that of a world that threatens to slip, at any moment, from the tight rope that sustains it.

João Tordo's page turner has the anguished rhythm of an impossible quest. The Portuguese author, born in 1975, has created a poetic thriller in which it is sadness which holds us, even more than suspense and the desire for truth.
Livres-Hebdo

There is, in this novel, all the ability to surprise the reader that we find in the best Saramago when he unravels the canvas in which he draws his novels with unimaginable solutions [...] The reader mustn't absolutely miss this novel, because when reading these pages he can be witnessing the true rebirth of national fiction.
Diário de Notícias

[...] an act of creative courage in which the author knew how to take the chance, like a funambulist walking on a razor-edge. [...] João Tordo possesses a singular universe, a novelist's endurance and plenty of imagination.
Expresso

It's hard, in the few word's length of this column, to write properly about this fabulous novel, that confirms everything the former two novels by the author announced but opens way to a sort of appeasement, a familiarity with evil, a truce with the horror that attained destructive proportions in João Tordo's former work. [...] We are facing a huge novelist, one who redeems us from the horror, like the great masters – Poe, Kafka, Melville and Conrad — did: trough the mysterious power of writing.
Sol

MC Ministério da Cultura
DGLB Direcção-Geral do Livro e das Bibliotecas

THREE LIVES (AS TRÊS VIDAS)

© Translation by Stefan Tobler

A BEGINNING

Even today, whenever the world presents itself as a tiresome and wretched spectacle, I am unable to resist the temptation of remembering the time when, out of necessity, I was forced to learn the difficult art of tightrope-walking. Those years, which I consider to have been exceptional – and, occasionally, marked by dire events –, left me in a state of chronic melancholy into which, although I have attempted to escape it, I inevitably end up falling back. This melancholy, sometimes, slips into despair, but we need not revisit that; it is not the time to let myself be consumed by the past, contrasting my present life with what it was in other times. Suffice it to say that I do not remember a time when my life was particularly happy, but that I am incapable of forgetting each hour that I spent in the company of António Augusto Millhouse Pascal.

Two years ago a news item in the paper mentioned an auction which, among other objects, was to include the documents found in the house of the deceased gardener of this man, for whom I had worked over two decades ago. When I heard, I immediately became apprehensive, and, imagining the consequences, even furious – it is inevitable that the person who obtained the lot would, sooner or later, rummage through the archives that I compiled and maintained during that year in Time Manor and, if they are examined in some detail, the person will end up reaching conclusions which have nothing to do with what actually happened. Moreover, it surprises me that this has not occurred yet; that my former boss' reputation has not been tarnished yet, his name used falsely, to the detriment of the truth.

There is a general ignorance regarding this man. It cannot be said that this state of affairs is surprising, given that, from a certain point onwards his only contact was with influential figures in private spheres. Those who knew him superficially and who recall his name will have a distorted image of him – by dint of having concealed the true nature of his work, he could one day become an object of scorn to those who prefer to damn, rather than display their own incomprehension. Millhouse Pascal, the son of an English mother and French father, was born in Portugal but spent much of his life on the move – he was in Spain during the Civil War, in England in Churchill's time, lived in the United States after the fall of the Nazi regime. He seems to have been everywhere and nowhere, a shadowy figure on the edge of events, and yet, I can assure you, he played a determining role in them. If, in the coming years, fanciful accounts of his activities surface, this is because until now those activities have remained the secret of those who lived on intimate terms with him and who shared with him the dedication of ascetics. All others will call him a *mystic*, *eccentric* and perhaps even a *charlatan*.

I, too, knew nothing about him. My youth, however, allowed me to experience things that today I would refuse to believe, if I only heard tell of them. Admittedly, the price was the rest of my pathetic existence, but I had the opportunity to live in his house and with my own eyes to observe his methods and the extraordinary way in which he succeeded in transfiguring reality and influencing – I could almost say *manipulating* – those who during that time had recourse to his services.

A little after the auction, a journalist from the *Daily News*, researching a report on unsolved criminal investigations and interested in the secret story of this man, found me through sources that she did not wish to reveal, and approached me in that forward and flattering manner reporters have – a professional deformation that I cannot hold against her. Now that the man is dead, I told her, I see no reason not to tell you everything, and that is what I did. We talked for three hours, and I found myself unravelling the story of the last years of his life, which – I understood then – was indissolubly linked to my life, to his family's, to Camila, to Gustavo, to Nina, to Artur, and to the trip that in 1982 confirmed what I had been suspecting for some time, namely our inaptitude to consider living an everyday life after certain things happened. I do not think that the journalist – who was a young woman, with an apprentice's curiosity – believed most of the things that I told her. She kept asking me if I could furnish some evidence, but as you will discover, it was not possible to preserve any documents from those times – excepting those in unknown hands or places – and I told her that were the story to be published, she would have to take it in good faith. Two years passed, I bought the paper every day, and there was not a single line on the subject.

In the time that passed after the interview I came to realize that I needed to leave an account of my experiences. What was true and what has inevitably been fictionalized, due to the limits of memory, does not matter; in the final analysis, reality itself is an object of fiction. What is most important is to free myself from the ghosts, for as well as the spectres of so many other things, I carry around the spectre of not having had the courage to draw a line under it. Above all, this is reflected in my dreams: in contrast to common belief, it does not seem to me that dreams mirror our desires; for my part, I think that dreams mirror our terrors, our worst fears, the life that we could have had if, at some point or other, we had not been immeasurable cowards.

ARTUR AND THE CONTRACT

Until then I had not lived, had known the life of the poor, marked by necessity. My father had a small construction company and, in Lisbon at the end of the seventies, things were not going his way. Yet even so, he was the only member of our family who worked. I was twenty when he died and, having finished school, was learning English and maths in my spare time and helping him whenever I could, but planning to study engineering. My sister, two years younger, divided her time between school and keeping our mother company. Our mother was a silent and apathetic soul, ground down by a life without any great significance. However, we lived in a large and spacious house and I cannot say that we lacked anything essential.

My father was suddenly taken ill in 1980. It all happened with great speed. On one day he rose, in a good mood, had his breakfast and left for work; on the following day an ambulance came to fetch his debilitated body, to take it to the hospital where he spent the last weeks of his life. At first the doctors thought it was appendicitis, but they soon discovered that the problem was more serious. First, as they explained to me, it was the liver that gave out. Then the illness spread to the other parts of his body, like a group of tiny workers ready to destroy everything in their way, the kidneys, the spleen, the pancreas, and in the end, in the last hours, I think it was my father who gave up. People die because they give up, I thought at the time, and this giving up needs an explanation, a clinical diagnosis that spares the poor souls, whom the others see leaving, from the martyrdom of ignorance, of not knowing why they were here or what fate awaits them.

We did not have much time to mourn his death. After arranging for his funeral and cremation, we quickly realized our situation: the money in the bank would last us six months at the most and, without other income, we were forced to look for another place to live. I was the only one of us in a position to find a job, and saw all the responsibilities fall on my shoulders. My sister offered to leave school and help the family, but I did not allow her to. People without an education are people without direction, and the memory of my father compelled me to keep our boat afloat.

So we moved to a small flat in Campolide, where we soon surrendered to an anonymous life. My mother lost the reference points she had had all her life and, at fifty, without the desire to form bonds of affection with her neighbours, with only my sister for company, became even glummer. While my father had been alive, there had always existed a mute hope, an invisible hand that carried us silently through the days. After he left us, I tried to fill his shoes and failed. In the spring of 1981 – after having tried without success to carry on my father's company, having worked as a controller in a company that the tax authorities were auditing and that was closed down, and working as a tutor of English, earning only just enough to pay the rent and put food on the table – I found I had reached a dead end. At the end of the teaching year I let my students go, and the summer after this was baneful. In the violent heat of the sun I tramped through the city looking for odd jobs, without any success. My mother asked my uncle to loan us some money, he lived in Spain and sent us a cheque in pesetas, and I sat on our living room sofa until the beginning of October, suffering a fearful paralysis that hindered me from contemplating the future.

At the end of September, however, my sister showed me the classifieds of a paper. I later found out that for months she had been searching those pages for a solution to our problems. The ad was in the left-hand column in a minuscule font:

MP Agency. English absolutely essential.
P.O. Box 808, Lisbon.

It was sufficiently intriguing to attract my attention. I did not have many options. At that time my mother spent her entire day in her room, sleeping or just lying on the bed, waiting for nothing, and when she did leave her room, then only to drink a cup of tea and exchange a few words with my sister on trivial matters. I felt I was trapped in a slow procession towards a premature Calvary and, although only to ease my boredom, I wrote a reply to the ad. Three days later I had an appointment for an interview.

I met a man called Artur in an office in the downtown Baixa district. It was the beginning of October and autumn had arrived early this year, an intermittent rain was falling on a grey city, passers-by were walking under their sheltering black umbrellas, their faces hidden or looking at the ground, the dirty rainwater was dripping slowly toward kerbs. I went up to the second floor of a silent building and entered a small room crammed full of files, one window looked out over an inner courtyard and on the desk there was a calculating machine and a pile of papers. A tall man had his back to me.

'Sit down,' he said, turning around.

Artur was of an indeterminate age. Very tall and slender, his hair was grey and his glassy eyes had a slant to them, he dressed like a businessman but talked as country folk do, with a strong drawl. I guessed he was about forty, maybe a little more. He looked at me for some time, seemingly busy with the papers he held in his hands.

'Did you bring proof of your qualifications?'

I handed him two official documents: the school-leaving certificate and the one from the English course I had completed in 1979. He examined them and, still not sitting down, asked me various questions regarding my circumstances. I explained where I lived, told him about my mother and my sister, and lied a little about my recent jobs in an attempt to hide the fact that I found myself in a difficult financial situation.

'There are many things I have to explain about this job, but that can wait for a convenient moment. I do, however, have to make sure that you understand the discreet nature of our activities. We are neither a

public service nor available to all citizens; we offer services of a private and costly nature, and all our clients arrive from abroad. So it is of utmost importance that nothing we do be divulged, either to your family or friends.'

'You need not worry,' I said. Artur handed me a typewritten piece of paper. My salary and hours of work were stipulated on it.

'Verbal guarantees are no use to us. In the past we worked with people who made the same promises and afterwards proved to be unsuited to the role. For this reason we have decided to instigate a residency regime in our *agency*,' he emphasized that word, 'in order to avoid disappointment. You will be able to visit the city, but only occasionally, and after having agreed the visit with me. In addition, you will be given a room, food, and full civil liberties. You will live in a pleasant location two hours from the city, a peaceful and isolated place. Your duties will not exceed those of any secretary. You will deal with the correspondence, organize our files and draw up weekly timetables. English is essential for contact with our clients. You will have access to office supplies and to an extensive library.'

'My family lives here in Lisbon and depends on me,' I declared, suddenly aware of what this job implied. 'I don't know if it would be wise to be away for long periods.'

'We have people in Lisbon who can deal with pressing issues for you. If there were any emergency, of course you could come to the city,' Artur hurried to add.

The man wanted an immediate decision. I looked at the paper held between my fingers. It was higher than I could have imagined – 150,000 escudos per month. I thought for a few seconds, feeling Artur's gaze rest on me. I could not say whether he was scrutinizing me or just looking at me out of curiosity, perhaps because he had nothing else to look at.

I made my mind up in a brief moment. We close our eyes and there it is: we deliver ourselves into the hands of others. I was twenty-one when I signed the contract with that man, who – I later discovered – was the gardener of António Augusto Millhouse Pascal.

TIME MANOR

I said goodbye to my mother and sister one Wednesday evening, and followed my employer's instructions. I was to take the bus from Lisbon to Santiago do Cacém in early evening, arriving at the small town in Alentejo a little before eleven. I was to take little by way of clothing (if it were necessary, clothes could be arranged where I was going), a bare minimum of belongings, and an alarm clock. During the journey, sitting next to the window I watched the slow passage of night and my reflection in the glass, remembering the last minutes in Lisbon: a goodbye, a kiss on my face, the letter paper and envelopes that my sister gave me. Before I left the little office, the gardener had let me know that the MP Agency did not have a telephone, and that all communication was by written correspondence. My sister went that same day to a stationer's and brought back paper and stamped envelopes, to simplify my task of writing to her. Every month I would send her the cheque for my salary, so that she could deposit it in her bank account.

The journey was sluggish. At one point I fell asleep and had uneasy dreams, bordering on nightmares, from which the bumpy ride awoke me. When we arrived at Santiago, it was raining copiously. We passed the town swimming pool, the main square, and when we reached the station I alighted and carried my small suitcase through the flooded streets. I had never been to that town and, in the grey of the sky I could see the rain falling on palm trees and a distant castle. I followed Artur's instructions and headed on the pavements of the steep lanes toward Count Bracial Square. In the centre of the tiny square there was a monument to 1845, some sort of arrow pointing to the heavens, on top of which stood the bewailing cross of Christ. I went up João Barros Street, passed a small radio station; by Castle Way I found the house that the gardener had mentioned – an old mansion that appeared abandoned, and where we were supposed to meet.

It was the strangest place. It was neither a boarding house nor a hostelry, even if the people living there did treat me like a guest. In the hall a man and woman, both about fifty, informed me that Artur had called to say he was not available to meet me that night, and that he would come to collect me in the morning. I was somewhat surprised, but not wishing to offend my hosts, I let them lead me to a dim upstairs room. Its furniture creaked from the humidity. The room was small, had only a sprung bed and a bedside table. Outside in the corridor an abandoned chair leant against the wall half way between two doors, obviously for the ghost who, as it drifted around the silent house at night, might decide to sit there and ponder its wandering existence. The woman brought me up a tomato and egg soup and, after midnight, I fell asleep with the sound of rain.

Before dawn there was a knocking on the door. Two brusque, dry raps, and I jumped out of bed, the dark room was quickly lit by the moon outside that was still high in the sky. Half-asleep I opened the door slowly and saw Artur's pale, unshaven face and his glassy eyes.

'I'll wait for you downstairs,' he said before turning and going back down.

It was a quarter past five in the morning. Tired, and without the facilities to take a shower, I washed my face and went down in yesterday's clothes. The house looked lugubrious and deserted, submerged in the omnipresent night. Artur was sitting bolt upright in the living room armchair, looking straight ahead. As I walked towards him, he rose and we left by the front door.

We walked along the dark road for about ten minutes, in silence, until we reached a car beside a park, a black Citröen 2CV that looked new, as if someone

had just given it a polish. We took the road out of town. In under five minutes we had left Santiago do Cacém behind, and were heading toward the Roman ruins on the only trunk road in those parts. Artur did not say a single word on the journey, except for 'belt up' at the start, a request I obeyed, and – after alternately watching the road and sneaking glances at his face (the skin under his beard was wrinkled, even pock-marked, and he had dark rings under his eyes) – I managed to nod off, rocked by the gentle jolting of the Citröen.

When I woke up we were leaving the main road and turning onto a minor road. It was growing light and the rain had stopped; those typical autumn smells were rising in the air, the sign of a mild day to come. Artur's silent presence had the weight of eternity, he was poker-faced, there was no expressiveness in his gestures and no colour in anything around him. He seemed more of a phantom than a man, and as the car travelled down an earthen road lined with enormous wild trees, which were so tall that they met over the track, blotting out the sky, it occurred to me that I might be making a mistake, here in the middle of nowhere with an unknown man who had offered me a job with unintelligibly vague conditions. I did not have long to mull over this question. Minutes later we reached an iron gate held by two carved stone gateposts. An ornamental sign announced our arrival at Time Manor. Artur stopped the car, got out, opened the heavy gate and, returning to the car, drove us into the estate.

Time Manor was very different to the barren minor road we had been travelling on. Everything seemed so well-tended: the drive lined with leafy trees, the golden ears of corn in the fields all around, even the sky, which had appeared in the cloudless dawn, seemed to have been prepared in advance. It was like entering a paradise, in a time before the present, but not necessarily the past. The drive came out at an open space in front of the building, where a round stone fountain full of rainwater was topped by a dolphin. The manor house was a two-storey affair with an annex, it was perpendicular to the smaller building; they formed an L on the ground. The front door was tall and dark green, lit at night by an ancient lamp. It had four windows on the first floor and four on the ground floor, the upper storey's windows had little rounded balconies. There was also a terrace: from the front here, the palm trees and vegetation climbing up its white walls were visible.

The annex was a kind of second house, less tall and covered with ivy growing from thick tangled roots at ground-level up to the roof. Only the windows were visible (four of them on the upper storey, also with little balconies), and a smaller brown door with a knocker. The rest was just foliage, and more foliage, as if nature had decided to leave the main building in peace and devour that miniature, completely concealing its walls. In the absence of ivy, I would have guessed that it was the housekeepers' house. However, following Artur past the fountain, the front door and the door to the annex, going round the manor house, I discovered the smallest part of the L, a building in dark stone that looked ancient and abandoned, finally a normal Alentejo house, without embellishment, with two windows.

'I'll show you where your room is, then we can have a quick look around the main house,' Artur said, dragging his boots on the damp earth. Artur had parked, almost abandoned, the Citröen at the end of the drive, and I quickly understood why: around the corner there was a silver treasure parked next to a tree, a five-door Bentley saloon, which I later learnt dated from 1963, and which Artur himself had 'imported' at the end of the seventies.

'I went to England myself to fetch it,' he told me when I asked him where the car came from. 'The boss thought he needed an appropriate car and this is the model he wanted. A personal friend of our boss' gave me the keys in a big house south of London, where I had arrived by plane. I drove back, putting the car on the ferry over the Channel. In customs duty alone we paid 300,000 escudos. It's a gas-guzzler, but it's a car suitable for the man who wants to be able to rely on a machine.'

I was put up on the second floor of the smallest house, Artur lived on its ground floor. The decoration was spartan: a small kitchen, a sofa for two people and a minuscule television on a table, and a shed at the back full of gardening tools, watering cans and sprinklers. My room was a stuffy, rectangular compartment with a single bed, a wardrobe, a bedside table and a desk next to the window. From the window you could see a wide, richly green lawn spreading out at the back of the house, reminding me of the lawns of English colonial houses in India, which I had seen in one of my father's books. White tables and chairs dotted the lawn, and at its far edge an enormous tree stretched out its branches in all four directions, furnishing a large area of shade. Ten metres from the tree there was an object I could not make out, something in the form of a cross. We left my suitcase at the door to my room and went back out into the daylight, which although it had promised to be sunny, had now returned to the grey of the early hours.

'The boss lives here,' announced Artur, when we passed the ivy-covered house again. 'We are not to enter unless we have been invited, and I hope that you will obey this rule.'

It was completely silent. It was half past six in the morning and in the distance a cock crowed. A flock of birds flew over the house, hovered a minute, and scattered. We went into the main house. A murky hall went the length of the space – I could see the garden through a small window in the back wall. A flight of stairs led up to the first floor. Walking briskly in front of me, Artur took me round the ground and first floors – two drawing rooms, an enormous kitchen equipped to deal with large numbers of guests, the closed doors of bedrooms. My guide did not say a word, and I inferred that I would have little or nothing to do in that apparently deserted space, as he only showed me where the halls went, possibly so

that I could not get lost. When we went downstairs again, we approached a door that was larger than the others and Artur hesitated for a beat before opening it, after satisfying himself that I was paying attention.

The door opened, revealing an enormous library. In this space the house was not divided into floors. Where the upper storey was on the other side of the door, here there was an open space lined all the way round with bookshelves and a wooden walkway, which could be reached by a staircase. In the centre there was an enormous square table covered from one end to the other with books, open and closed, and with papers and maps. (There must have been at least two thousand volumes in that room, yet never catalogued, as the house was destroyed two decades later.) A pair of long windows filled the library with the dull early morning light; the dust that comes with books was in the air, as was a familiar feeling of calm. In a gap between two bookshelves I noticed a small, very old photograph, placed at eye-level but in such a discreet place that it seemed meant not to be noticed. In it a young couple were posing for the picture, a pretty, slim woman sat next to a moustachioed man who was standing and holding a pocket watch in his right hand, at chest height, as if he was about to put it in his jacket pocket. Time Manor, I thought, as I looked at the photograph, whose caption below read *1905 – Sébastien Pascal and Alma Millhouse*.

'Your office will be here,' Artur pointed under the stairs and opened a little door. Inside there was a tiny windowless room, filled by two filing cabinets, a typewriter on a desk, a ream of white paper and a number of pens.

'Our previous employee left things in an indescribable mess,' admitted Artur, opening the top drawer of one of the cabinets, which screeched stridently, revealing a pile of files crammed full of papers. 'Your first job will be to bring order to this chaos. That will take some days, so be prepared to spend the rest of the week and Saturday and Sunday in here.'

'What is in the files?'

Artur closed the drawer and cleaned his hands on a handkerchief that he fished from the pocket of his worn trousers. 'People. Hundreds and hundreds of people. Our boss' clients, that is. The last employee, as I just said, *sabotaged* our venture with his stupidity and left everything in a muddle, and now the files need to be examined one by one, so they are useful and make sense again. Let me give you an example.' He opened the cabinet's second drawer down, it too was full of papers, and pulled out a file, which he opened at the first page. 'Here we have the personal file of . . . let's see now . . . ah, Mr Florian Schultz. An old friend and client of the boss,' said the gardener, quickly flicking through the twelve typewritten pages in his hands. 'Look, the first thing we need to do is to get rid of this unnecessary clutter of information. Identity, description, preferences, places of origin, likes, dislikes, best times to visit, etc, all this can be resumed on a single, easily managed page that should be available as soon as the file is requested. The information on Schultz is scattered over ten or twelve pages that have been added to the original file over the years; the goal is for this file to contain only the essentials, and for the rest to become part of the historical records,' – Artur slipped the file back into the drawer, closed the drawer and opened the one below it, which was empty – 'which you will put here. Everything clear?'

I nodded, although I still did not understand much. I wanted to ask him what exactly the *boss* – I did not even know his name – did, but somehow there was a silent understanding that this information was irrelevant.

'Then there is the issue of updating our database. There are various contact addresses in each file, many are out of date, as our clients move around frequently. It would take many people like you to find them, we only ask you to reduce the possibilities to a minimum. After that, and this needs to be ready by the end of the week, we have the diary,' – Artur opened one of the desk's drawers and took out a black notebook – 'which at the moment is full until the end of October. Based on the correspondence we receive or send, we need to update it until December, with the weekly annotations which I will explain in a minute. This will be your main task: our correspondence. I myself go to the town every two days to fetch the post, which I will place on your desk. All correspondence is to be written in English, and every letter, I insist on this word: *every*, receives a reply from us. Evidently, there are things that I can help you to deal with, such as the accounts and other bureaucratic matters, but ninety per cent of our post comes from clients or potential clients. This afternoon I will show in detail how it works, after I have seen to the lawn.'

Artur left the little room, and I followed. He closed the door with a heavy key, which he gave to me. We went back into the house's main hall and crossing it reached the garden. Once there I realized that Artur's task was not an easy one, if he had no help (as it appeared). The lawn was considerably larger than I had thought it from my window. It was trimmed to perfection, the sprinklers were strategically placed and the rose beds dotted here and there displayed vividly coloured flowers; the bushes had been clipped carefully and the tree on the far side had been pruned. To maintain the place must require daily work. It was still peculiar that the gardener was also the person who was to instruct me in my new profession. However, Artur seemed to be that rare kind of man who is simultaneously simple and extraordinarily complex, who is precise in the simple application of his mental and motor capacities, yet possessing an unexpected capacity to unfold and fill various roles at different times of the day.

He told me to return to the library at eleven. I went to my room, where I opened my case and started to hang up in the wardrobe the clothes that I had brought. Afterwards, I sat at my desk, taking a few moments to watch the sprinklers in the garden that had now been turned on. I placed the envelopes

and letter paper from my sister on the desktop and weighed the idea of writing a first letter, but decided against it: I had little to tell, and it seemed as if I had entered a different world, less than real, which for now escaped any attempt at description.

The bathroom, at the end of the damp corridor, was a porcelain relic – the wash-basin, the toilet, the bidet, the animal-footed bath without a showerhead. I washed my hands and imagined how it would be to have to wash there on freezing winter mornings. I shivered inside. I splashed water on my face, under my eyes there were dark rings from a lack of sleep. I lay down, but could not get a wink of sleep. Something about that place forced me to remain alert, a silence that was too silent, a cloud that was too black in the sky.

THE FILES

I would only meet my boss some days later. I had no idea where he was, whether he was in the ivy-clad house, locked in with seven keys like a dragon in a dungeon, or had simply taken off for a few days, but I had little time to think about it. Thursday and Friday were given over to organizing the files, and as there were around 330 names referenced, the task was slow and confusing. However, I cannot say that I was bored. It was my first glimpse into Millhouse Pascal's fateful business; my direct access to an unknown world that few people would suspect even exists, and which many people would refuse to believe in.

At the start, the files all seemed the same, composed of typewritten notes apparently scattered in each client's file. Of the 330 files I would say that around 200 contained little or no information, and so were easy to catalogue. (Artur later explained that these were the cases that had been presented but to which the boss had yet to give his seal of approval, or which he had simply rejected.) What remained could be divided into an abundance of fragmentary information and the client records my antecedent had created. I began to realize that there was something uncommon in the venture when two details jumped out at me. The first was the current or past occupation of the clients; the second was the clinical history that they all shared.

I never had the chance to calculate numbers. But I can state with some degree of certainty – having gone through the files thousands of times during my stay in the Manor – that around seventy of them held or had held positions of influence in politics or their country's government. They were often ex-functionaries of government agencies like the Stasi or CIA, sometimes going even further back to the NKVD or the Gestapo. In other cases they had been subversive elements in the time before they sought out Millhouse Pascal's services, and had joined Marxist, anarchist or extreme rightwing groups. Organizational names and acronyms like the Stasi and CIA did not appear in the files, they were replaced by more discreet general descriptions, and much of the clients' personal histories were known exclusively to Millhouse Pascal, noted in his own private notebooks. The files served merely as a first point of reference, and they did not go into the most pertinent questions about the past of each client.

In the telling I will not, however, hold back anything that I have managed to find out, then or now, about each one of them. The information I am presenting here is, you see, a combination of what I remember of the files and of my meetings with my boss, as well as my current investigations, which I have undertaken now, twenty-five years later, in order to write this account. It is important to recall that all this happened in 1981, that over the years I gradually came to discover the true nature of these men, and that now that the world is such a different place, I do not see any reason to add to its secrets.

Let me give an example. The already mentioned Florian Schultz was a Stasi agent, he was responsible for building the network of civilian informers in East Germany during the seventies, and he fled in 1980 to Italy, refusing to continue to work for a 'Stalinist Gestapo'. From the end of 1980 to 1982 he was a regular client of Millhouse Pascal's, later committing suicide at 43 years of age, after his name cropped up on lists found in the Stasi offices and which proclaimed his activities under the Communist regime. (Among other atrocities, Schultz exposed political prisoners to radiation, which later caused one in three of these prisoners to contract cancer.)

So on Schultz's file, for example, the opening page states:

> *Schultz, F., b. 1947, East Germany, poss. government or agency, retired It., 4/81.*

Possibly government or agency was the first visible reference to his political past; *It* stood for Italy; and *4/81* for the month of his last visit. The file contained around a dozen notes on the client, some related to his preferences or aversions – Schultz preferred to sleep on the ground floor of the places he stayed, he required the lights to be left on at night in the corridors, he was a vegetarian, and he liked to have a glass of port on his bedside table. Some additional, classified information was held in a second, smaller filing cabinet, which was locked and only for the boss' and Artur's perusal. I later learnt that it was a mobile archive of Millhouse Pascal's private notebooks, which was easy to move around or hide, should the tranquillity of Time Manor be threatened by external forces.

At the time I first came into contact with the files I had no interest in determining the truth of the information they contained, or of investigating in any depth his clients' pasts. I was very young and my main concern was to be a good worker, so that my wage cheque reached my sister's hands every month. There were, nonetheless, things which could not but arouse my curiosity, like the strange file on Carl Finn, an American born in Dakota who had lived in Lisbon

between 1940 and 1946, and whose declared profession was *exporter of artefacts*. After returning to the United States, however, he passed twenty-two years travelling Eastern Europe in the pay of an anonymous company, and then at the end of the seventies opened a restaurant in Cape Cod. I could not imagine what kind of *export business* Finn had in the Soviet Union, until I discovered many years later in an article in an American magazine that he had tortured and assassinated a number of German spies in the Second World War and had been in the pay of the CIA.

As you read these pages you will come to know some of these secrets, the particulars of people, alive and dead, who took part in historical, bloody or criminal events. I ask you, however, to please refrain from judgment – if you cannot, then crucify the messenger. After all, I was the one who worked all that time in a room which was a living document of the panoply of horrors of the twentieth century, carrying out my little task every day, often absent-minded as I organized the files and corresponded with men who had stained their hands with the blood of many others.

It is necessary, however, to say that my boss' business had other aspects, and there was a more humane group among Millhouse Pascal's clientele, though no less shadowy. Of the other sixty clients, one part was made up of philanthropists or managers of welfare and cultural organizations (the case of Samuel Wussupov, for example, a Russian who had emigrated to the United States and who had both an inexplicable connection to Portugal and an enormous collection of art), a small number had a variety of professions (finance, civil engineering, communications, and even a famous chef), and around thirty were what Millhouse Pascal called 'complex cases', made up of artists from various fields. Off the top of my head I remember the case of two New York painters who had become entangled in a prostitution scandal; of a Russian pianist who had escaped the clutches of the Soviet Union, and had acquired a position in an English orchestra, married, had two children, and watched his British wife descend deeper and deeper into madness, until she strangled to death their youngest daughter. The famous Irish writer and journalist Sean Figgis became a regular visitor after his twenty-two year old son joined a radical faction of Sinn Féin in 1976 and exploded a bomb in a café in London's Gloucester Road, killing thirteen civilians. The press speculated on the possible reasons why Paul Figgis, born in Belfast but educated at the respected Trinity College, Dublin, in International Politics, had assumed an extremist position, when his father was a noted liberal. The elder Figgis stopped writing and in 1979 all his novels and essays were withdrawn from the market, at his own request.

I do not wish to bore you with all of the stories. They serve merely to illustrate the world that I encountered when I arrived at Time Manor. There are many lacunae, too many uncertainties relating to the lives of these men for me to condemn them, or to categorically state that they were assassins or saints. As the secretary, I was not privy to the conversations between Millhouse Pascal and his clients. Everything I know about them, as people of flesh and blood, owes itself to an observation of their habits whenever they were there, and to seeing their files innumerable times. Unfortunately for the world (as they would be a psychological dossier of inestimable value in the hands of competent and tolerant authorities), the location of Millhouse Pascal's own files and notebooks, in which he wrote his own impressions of each case, is uncertain.

The information on clients was, in part, provided by them, and was in part 'unearthed' by a man called Pina Santos, Millhouse Pascal's contact in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Pina Santos was a former diplomat with strong connections to the British Foreign Office and especially useful with regards to checking the clinical histories that I have already mentioned. (This man and I maintained a lively exchange of correspondence during my time at the Manor, although I never met him; from his finical and elaborate handwriting I guessed that he must be a man somewhat advanced in years.) I realized that most of the clients had had some kind of psychiatric treatment. It was Pina Santos who confirmed the history of Oleguer Alvarez, an ex-anarchist Galician. During the Spanish Civil War he had been a Republican guerrilla and was one of those who fought the Fascist rearguard action in this region. His response to the extermination camps that had been set up by the extreme right was to put before the firing squad civilians who were suspected of having taken the Francoists' side. After exile in France, he left for Switzerland in 1967, where for a decade he saw a Lausanne psychiatrist specialized in the psychopathologies of war. It was also Pina Santos who investigated Ahmed al-Khalil's background. He (Millhouse Pascal's first client) was a member of Iran's Marxist Party who had supported the Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamic revolution, which overthrew the autocracy of Reza Pahlavi, the Shah imposed by the United Stated. The violent suppression of dissidence that Pahlavi had begun, was quickly taken up by the ayatollahs, who turned on the left (and all liberals) and crushed it. As a consequence al-Khalil found himself in prison, where his fingers were broken, his teeth were pulled out and he was forced to confess to being a Soviet spy. Ahmed managed to flee from Iran, and spent a year recovering in a psychiatric clinic in Brighton, England, the country that gave him asylum. In 1981, the same year in which I arrived at Time Manor, al-Khalil visited Millhouse Pascal, looking for a last way out of his inner torment.

One case followed another, and it is useless to try to document them all. Not least because, at that time, I did not have a real awareness of what I was doing, of how with every letter I wrote in those early days from the little office camouflaged inside the library, to check regular or emergency clients' details, I was revisiting the history of a century which my boss had experienced with a rare intensity.

CAMILA, GUSTAVO AND NINA

The first night I woke with a start several times, hearing sounds I was not used to: the crickets, the rain on the fields, the wind rustling the leaves, and the absence of city noise. I could not get used to the bed, which was too small for me and smelt musty. Each time I awoke I raised my head and looked out of the window, wishing morning would come, but for as far as I could see it was black as tar, the only visible light was a fire flickering in one of the back windows of the ivy-covered house, little demons in the darkness. It could have been an open fire, or many other things. As for Artur, he was a soul who kept ghostly hours. At two or three in the morning there was still movement on the lower floor of our house, where he slept; sometimes he would listen to that unmistakable sound the radio or television emits when the programmes have gone off air in the early hours. I did not dare go down to investigate. Something in the spectral quiet of that place kept me in my bed, under the covers, waiting like a child for the monster to come and uncover my feet.

On Friday morning at seven the gardener brought me the correspondence (Artur knocked at my door punctually at six before doing his rounds in the Citröen). There was not much – I would say that on average we received around forty letters a week, trivial numbers for a *business* – and my first task was to separate clients' letters from paperwork. Artur dealt with the latter, and I left him those letters, as he had instructed me, on the little table inside the main entrance. The clients' letters were my responsibility and it took me some time to accustom myself to the necessary formality of my replies and the restrictions regarding the language and information they contained. Letters from new clients that mentioned the name of Millhouse Pascal (rather than the *MP agency*), or referred directly or indirectly to the intended purpose, were destroyed immediately. Access to the MP agency was restricted to word-of-mouth referral in very restricted circles, and the initial proposal should only contain the name and address of the proposer. I would reply to this with a pro forma non-disclosure agreement that covered names, places and working methods. After this contract had been signed and returned, it was kept in the new client's file and we replied with a short letter, asking for some of the information that I mentioned earlier: references, current and past professions, countries the client had lived in, clinical history, the origin of the problems and previous attempts at resolving them. A copy of this reply was made for Millhouse Pascal and another was sent to Dr Pina Santos, in order for him to investigate the proposer's authenticity. If everything went smoothly, a private exchange of letters between Millhouse Pascal and the client was agreed to, and then I would arrange the dates of a visit with the proposer. In all, I would say that between eight and ten letters were exchanged before the visiting process was put in motion.

As regards old-standing clients, who visited us regularly, their letters only suggested dates, and I arranged their visiting periods as our diary permitted. Some clients stayed only a day, and returned every month; others preferred to stay for five days (the maximum that Millhouse Pascal allowed), this forced me at times to alter previous engagements, according to criteria set down by my boss. Without a telephone it was a difficult and slow process, and sometimes new clients gave up, when they saw their preferences and dates re-arranged. This did not represent a business problem, as on average only two out of every ten new proposers were taken on after the meticulous scrutiny to which they were subject. As we only received one client at a time (another golden rule: the clients were never to meet), in one month there was not room for more than twelve or thirteen bookings. In good months this number rose to fifteen, which completely exhausted my boss' energies.

After a busy Saturday, trying to work out our diary until the end of December, Artur entered the library around three in the afternoon. He was dressed immaculately, as I had seen him the first time in that little office in Lisbon, in a black suit and tie, wearing gloves and a little cap.

'Take the rest of the day off,' he said, pulling off his gloves and slipping them into the back pocket of his striped trousers. 'You have been working hard, and I'm afraid you might make some unpardonable error if you don't rest.'

I put down the pen on the desktop and closed the diary. I was glad, because if truth be told I was very tired.

'When am I going to meet the boss?' I asked him, standing up to push the filing cabinet's drawers shut.

'In principle, tomorrow, since we resume normal activities on Monday, after the little hitch with our old collaborator, who you have replaced.'

'All right,' I replied. I was getting ready to leave the office when Artur grasped me by the arm.

'You can go for a wander round the estate, if you wish, but I have to warn you that I've just come from Lisbon. I went there to pick up the boss' grandchildren. They usually spend the weekend here, sometimes in the garden, sometimes traipsing from one local mansion to another.'

'Grandchildren? How many?'

'Three. But don't be taken in by them. Between you and me, they are spoilt and insolent. If I were you, I wouldn't talk to them too much, particularly not Camila, she's a hothead.'

'All right, I'll take your advice,' I replied, curious.

When I left the main house I saw them far off on the other side of the lawn, on which this afternoon the sun was burning down, making droplets shine on the grass Artur had watered. A boy and a girl were sitting at one of the tables. Next to the enormous tree whose shade covered the last third of the garden, the thin figure of a girl appeared to be suspended in the air – from where I was, dressed as she was in white, she looked like a dangling angel, a winged creature

who was not yet comfortable with her wings and could not rise more than a metre above the ground. I slowly approached that unusual image, without paying the others any attention. It was only when I came closer that I saw the tightrope, tied around the tree trunk and held at the other end by a wooden stand in the shape of a cross that was planted in the ground. I entered the tree's shade and stood watching the girl's shape, her white shirt and skirt, her arms stretched out with her hands turned down, the taut rope wedged in between her naked feet's big toes and second toes. She was struggling to balance and it seemed she was not able to go either backwards or forwards, the rope sagged under the weight of her body. She must have suddenly noticed my presence because in one quick movement she looked back and lost her balance, falling onto the lawn. She got up quickly, arranged her light brown hair and looked at me with enormous, ferocious, green eyes. She held out her hand in a forced gesture.

'Camila Millhouse Pascal,' she said.

I held out my hand and greeted her, feeling her fragile fingers between my own. Camila had freckles and a finely formed mouth; her skin was as pale as that of someone who lived in Northern Europe. She pronounced *Millhouse* with a British accent.

'As you can see, I was practising the art of the great Blondin,' she continued, looking for her flat shoes on the lawn.

'Who?'

'The great Blondin. Or Jean-François Gravelet, the first man to cross Niagara Falls on a tightrope. Just imagine, three hundred and thirty five metres wide and fifty high. Have you been there?'

'Where?'

'To the Falls. In Canada.'

'I've never been further than Spain.'

'Never mind,' said Camila, putting on her shoes. 'Me neither. You work for my grandfather, don't you?'

'I do,' I replied. I told her my name. Then I pointed at the rope. 'What's the furthest you've done?'

'On the rope?'

'Yes.'

'I still can't do more than ten metres. On a good day. Normally I get stuck half way. It's a question of habit, our feet are accustomed to the ground. Take Blondin, he started to train as an acrobat at the age of five, an age when bad habits can still be corrected. I do gymnastics at school, but I'm starting to think that gymnastics are a bad influence. It builds up muscles in my arms and legs when I should be gaining lightness here' – Camila pointed to her stomach – 'where balance comes from.'

'And what is the trick to staying up there? There is a trick, isn't there?'

'Magicians never reveal their tricks,' she replied, smiling. Her teeth were white and very small. 'Come and meet my brother and sister.'

We walked over the lawn towards the tables. It was as if Camila had not yet come down from the tightrope, she kept her legs slightly bent as she walked, as if she lived suspended on a thread and her feet could not get used to the ground. At the table nearest to us a boy was sitting, perhaps a little younger than me, and a girl who could not have been more than ten. They were playing chess. She seemed to be concentrating intensely.

'This stupid fool is my brother Gustavo,' said Camila, pointing to the completely blond boy, who was also wearing white, and looking at the chess board. Gustavo turned his head to observe us, his eyes were aggressively blue, and he raised the middle finger of his left hand towards Camila in an obscene gesture.

'He's one year older than me, so he thinks he's above me. He won't pay attention to you, or talk to you.'

Gustavo reached out his arm and, after trying to push away Camila, who stepped back, offered me his hand in greeting.

'Welcome to Time Manor, where time stopped a long time ago.'

'Thank you. It doesn't seem all that bad to me.'

'Give it time,' joked Gustavo, turning to the board again. 'Tell me how you feel after a few months, after my grandfather is done with you. For now, meet Nina, a young chess prodigy and the most promising of my sisters.'

Nina got up from her chair quickly, her brown locks flew around a face very like Camila's, with big and watchful eyes. She held out a tiny but firm hand.

'Very pleased to meet you, sir,' she said in a childish voice that made the formal introduction even more ridiculous. Then she sat down again and, as if she had had an epiphany, moved a knight forward, taking one of Gustavo's pawns.

'Come on, I'll show you how to do it,' said Camila.

She took me to the tree and again took off her shoes, supporting herself with her free hand on the tightrope.

'All three of us are at the same English school in Cascais,' she explained, when I asked why I had only seen them that day. 'We come home at the weekend.'

'And your parents?'

Camila looked away for a moment. Her face seemed to flush, as she got ready to climb onto the tightrope, using a little stool next to the stand.

'My mother and father live in the United States, which is where I was born. They are acrobats. My talent comes from them, I think.' Camila got up on the stool and, with an unexpected jump, found her balance on the rope, adjusting her outstretched arms. 'But I haven't seen them for a long time. Gustavo, Nina and I live with our grandfather, but one day I hope to go and see my mother and father, when I finish school and go to New York. That's where they are.'

The rope gave a little under Camila's weight. She was about a metre off the ground. It was not a remarkable deed, but I did not think I could imitate it.

'Look at my feet,' she said, pointing to them. 'The centre of my body's weight rests on my feet. When I am on the ground, the base of this centre is wide laterally, but very narrow from front to back. For a tightrope walker, whose feet have to be in a line,' – this time Camila did not grip the rope between the big and second toe of each foot, but balanced on the soles of her feet – 'the body has to balance from side to side, since there's practically no lateral support. You see?'

Camila wobbled the rope under her feet as if she were surfing. I came closer, worried she might fall, but the lack of balance was only an illusion seen by whoever was on the ground.

'In any case, the secret lies in the ankle,' she explained, advancing one step, and then another. Then she jumped from the rope and landed skilfully on the lawn. 'Now you.'

At first I refused, afraid that Artur would see me talking to Camila in the garden. Then I looked at where the Citröen had been parked and, not seeing it, presumed that the gardener was in town, busy with one of the things he had to do. Camila was pure enthusiasm, did not give up until I took off my shoes and in my socks climbed onto the stool beside the rope. She laughed mercilessly.

'When you've taken your first step on the tightrope, I'll give you a poster of my hero,' said Camila.

'Who's your hero?' I asked from the stool, feeling the rope's tension in my right foot.

'Philippe Petit, the best artiste and acrobat of our time. He walked a tightrope between the twin towers of the World Trade Center, in New York, eight times, from one end to the other, one morning in 1974. He was four hundred metres above the ground and holding a twenty-five kilo pole in his hands. And he did it without authorization from the city. A conman and a virtuoso.'

'A devilish combination,' I added, unable to place my second foot on the rope.

'Stretch your arms out,' said Camila.

'How do you know so much about these guys? Aren't you a bit young to be thinking about such grand stuff?'

'If you'd lived your whole life with my grandfather, nothing would seem too grand. You'll understand at your own cost. Stretch your arms out.'

I stretched out my arms and, in a blind impulse, I freed my right foot from the stool and placed it on the tightrope. I must have stayed on it for a thousandth of a second – a terrifying thousandth – before falling, grandly, onto the lawn. I imagined what a fall of four hundred metres would be, nothing except for empty space below you, every bone of your impotent body anticipating death. I got up and dusted myself off, looking around to ensure that Artur had not seen me; then I put my shoes on. Camila shook her head, disappointed with my effort, and walked off towards her siblings.

'Camila,' I called. 'What did you mean by *at your own cost*?'

She smiled, removing her hair from her face. 'Be careful with my grandfather. He's a fascist. And fascists are much more dangerous and seductive than communists, or than any other people, because they know from the start what they are capable of.'

ALL THE MYSTERIES

My third life starts today, and I enter it trying to accept what will remain behind. If I were a different and more imaginative man, perhaps I could believe – and make you believe – that the mysteries that appear in this story will, one day, find their response; I am convinced, however, that many things stay concealed eternally, and I have learnt over time to live with this resignation. Of course, sometimes it is impossible to avoid the enigmas that torment me and I find myself talking to myself, whispering at the walls, asking myself about the invisible faces that flashed across my life like lightning, wanting to know, needing to know. And, while hoping to heal my wounds with the absurd logic of this world that, with every hour that passes, seems more and more distant from me, mocking the spirits that dare to challenge it, I understand the futility of the attempt.

This afternoon I said goodbye to Patricia with a kiss on her cheek and hugged my daughters. Rita, my youngest, threw her arms around my neck and asked if I was mad with her, which made me sad and happy at the same time, as if in some way my little girl could guess that something was coming to an end. I stroked her hair and assured her that I was not mad with her, that I never had been, wishing I could explain to her that in just a little more time her father would again be, not the man he had been, but at least: someone.

My sister chose the restaurant. If you wanted to satisfy people's natural wish for a closing apotheosis, you could fictionalize what really happened and, for example, say that I had not seen my sister for seventeen years, since that day in 1990 when she had given me the cheques from my boss. Even if it were a white lie, which would not change the fundamental premises of this narrative one bit, it would still be a lie; if we seek the truth, we should not make little concessions, sooner or later they will end up turning into egoistic monsters asking incessantly for more.

The truth is that after Rita's birth we started to see each other once a year, or about that. We sometimes met in the street – my family and her family, the children looking distrustfully at each other, the adults with strained smiles – and the awkwardness of that situation was nothing in comparison to the agonizing hours, always around Christmas time, that we would spend together in some restaurant. My mother struggling to keep up a conversation with my sister's husband, our daughters picking on my nephew, a boy I knew almost nothing about; as for me, I passed the dinners in silence, looking in embarrassment at my plate or glass of wine, replying in monosyllables to the questions that they asked me, until everything seemed so desperate and senseless that we ended up asking for the bill before the desserts, and hurriedly saying our goodbyes, both par-

ties leaving in opposite directions without missing the other family or expecting to see it again.

However, this evening things were to be different. I asked my sister to come on her own, without her husband and without my nephew, who from today I will try to get to know. On the telephone she asked me what had happened, why this meeting was so urgent, if there was a problem, if my daughters were healthy. In her worried voice I managed to discover the affection of all those years ago, when we were a family and I had not yet thrown myself into the depths, and I assured her that it was nothing to do with them; that it was about us, that it could not be put off, and was the end of a long story.

I walked there, crossing the city without noticing the streets or people. Step by step I was preparing the talk that would be my shame and my salvation. There are so many things that I do not know where to start, fearing that if I hesitate, if I get the name of a place wrong, or a date, or a face, then everything will come crashing down with a roar. I look in the big window that faces the rainy road and my reflection is transformed inside the restaurant, where the faint light of the little lamps on the tables gives the diners' faces the appearance of calm. I scan the room and quickly see my sister. There she is, prettier than ever, and I can see by the way that she is twisting the serviette between her hands that she too is nervous.

I won't hurry things. I won't pretend, lie or say sorry. To say sorry for all the things that I have done would be like a man who, having thrown himself from a cliff, starts to ask how long it will take to reach the bottom. I give her a kiss on the cheek, drink a glass of wine, ask about her child. And if there is time – and there has to be time – I will, at first reluctantly, then calmly, and then bowled over by the fable that my own life became, talk to her about the death of our father, of a gardener who contracted me, of an estate that no longer exists, of a 1905 photograph, of Camila, Gustavo and Nina, of the Kalahari desert, and of a tightrope on which no one can remain, of Millhouse Pascal, of bloody wars, of spies, communists and fascists, of books flying around rooms, of Tito Puerta and Sean Figgis, of a hunchback lost in the night, of ghosts by the light of day, of an unusual journey, of a musty hotel, of an illness and a miracle, of love and delusion, of my abandonment, of returning to Lisbon, of a sad reunion in a café, of years of silence and libraries, of Patricia, of Beatrice, of Rita, of an auction, of a death and a loss, of a chest, of a letter, of standing in front of a restaurant like someone standing in front of the rest of his life, wondering if he should go in. Then I will tell her that, like so many others, I too failed, because I still do not understand all the mysteries – maybe none of them – and that I too do not know the reason for things. And if, even like this, she were still not to understand, I will explain that all this happened in another life, a less tiresome and wretched one, a life in which I looked down the throat of a chasm and let myself fall without asking how long it would be before I reached the bottom, falling, falling, falling, hovering in the void like an acrobat without any gravity, putting off out of cowardice the moment of contact with the ground; and if at the end of this fable my sister were to ask me when it is all to end, when all the mysteries, big and little, resolved and unresolved, of life and death, will come to an end, I will reply that they end when they end, no sooner or later, now, here, without delay, precisely in this moment.

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