

PART I
Soggy Paper

The first image to strike me is of my father running a razor over the palm of his hand. And never looking, because his eyes are glued to the mirror. Just before starting work. As if his attentiveness were merely a gesture, a pose. The words you hear brush past you like a draught from the curtains. You are your hands, and nothing else. You will chat away, but not retain a word, as if what you say and hear scorns things you've never even known. Because a kind of lethargy always lurks behind those beady eyes. Like listening to rainfall. Things you don't need to sweep up. Who speaks, sows, who listens, harvests, he'd say. Hair and stuff you can disperse later. The pile of fluff by the door, like chaff. Because that is your role: to go unnoticed. To turn a deaf ear. And that's what I learned. It came with the territory. That alertness, that show of respect, reacting while ignoring. And knowing when to be silent. Never too long or too little. You'll never regret being silent, my father said. And grandma nodded: You must speak

for the silent. That's how you'll reap from work. But I never heard him say a word. Only that abrupt silence related to things I don't want to pass on, that burn my tongue. I'm sick and tired of hair roots and dumb banter. Because there are still moments when I struggle to breathe. Being like that you feel ill at ease, as if you're always in someone else's house. And I rack my brain, because words don't come easily to my lips, don't find a way out. I've learned to wait for them, as if waiting to be forgiven. Or to receive reprimands that never came.

I might have gone crazy, but I surrendered to the truism that you never really discover who you are. The idea of being a multiple being made me feel unstable; I wandered within myself like in a maze. Suddenly it's a museum, room after room, where you can never be sure you set foot, or you're the convoluted map of a big city metro, where you always felt alien, or the endless passages and pipes of a sewer streaming with waste water and rainwater. And everything amounts to so much you don't know, veins that have hardened, and I've reached the point when I can't tell what fell by the wayside and don't know where it landed, or what eluded me, though it still makes my pulse race. I've always been one to brood, one who had to side-step conflict to feel sane. A resigned man. Who shouldn't look up, and who, if you think about it, was easily dispensable. In the end you imagine everything fitting in the morass of what you avoided doing. You refuse to consider what was latent in what you let slide, as disturbing and unerringly angst-ridden as what you did actually experience. They're simply decisions you didn't take, you finally conclude. You're in a bedroom, in the pitch-black. Just about to leave, away from the bedhead, you stretch out a hand and touch the switch. The light comes on and you're annoyed to be in the middle of a mess. You wanted to turn it off. Things happen you didn't want

to. Simply because it wasn't something you'd decided, and wasn't premeditated, I'm convinced of that, even now. Or that's what I like to think. Sheer carelessness. It was like a lack of anticipation, a hiatus or void. Things that sprang from you, that emerged aimlessly until they assumed the undeniable air of something that never happened, that aren't connected to you, that you can off-load and let sink into oblivion. As if all that nonsense weren't part of me, as if it were only that sliver of flesh left by evanescent, still-born twins, who died in the first weeks of gestation. And you put all your faith in the old people's refrain: you find as you do. Because it was something I'd not done, the dregs of negligence, revealing symptoms of insouciant disregard. Mischief. Because I was a child at the time. What can I tell you, if I myself never really knew whether my senses abandoned me or I allowed them to career off. It must have been the voice of someone else, who resides in me, the remnants of someone who lost his way and said nothing, when it was a secret, that individual who knew nothing about me, that I've grown old and didn't watch him mature, that man who wasn't my life, who came breathlessly, with eyes that never knew the meaning of fear, because they never looked back, and let me speak freely. Let it hang out and declare: this is what I really think. It must be true what people say, that you always speak on behalf of a person whose name you've always preferred not to mention, a silent, furtive onlooker within your innermost self. Like a shadow that has fragmented and is now only this odour you expel when you breathe, that goes everywhere, the stale air that fills your lungs, enters everyone's gullet, clinging to your skin and clothes, embedding itself in the furniture and smooth walls, spreading like a black stain over the curtains, that you can't remove even if you cough. Filthy vapour, seeping gas cloaking our words sunk in the silence of a secret.

It wasn't always so. The smell of ironed towels and pungent eau de cologne used to perfume the barber's. When I was very young, I loved to sit on the Thonet chair where my father cut children's hair, and from that quasi pulpit I surveyed the nickel-plated Jaso chairs, the seats with footrests, the rattan backs and cream porcelain enamelled arms, or the bevelled mirrors, dressing-tables, brushes and belt for sharpening razors. Not so long ago he'd changed the Cuban mahogany chairs, that came from another barber, Ruixat, who'd closed down after suffering a stroke. People said he'd shaved the Archduke and Sorolla the painter. They landed at the bottom of our yard in my mother's workshop, where she embroidered. Later she was joined by Auntie Antònia, who knitted, and they laughed when my little brother tried to shave grandma, who said don't bother, it's not worth all that lather to clip my four grey hairs. But she let him, and if Missus Farrera came in and found her face covered in lather, she'd lose her rag. You're an idiot, she'd cry, and this boy's a spoilt brat who can do no right. You're more infantile than he is. And grandma kept her eyes down and told her to stop carping. Old age has soured you. Go to the barber's and tell Antoni to cut your hair *à la garçonne*, and maybe your face won't look so crabby. And that missus turned tail and walked out. The workshop was like an ersatz home because it was crammed with scraps of our private life in that house. It was only ensconced there that we felt at home. As well as in the kitchen that was grandma's preserve, the only place that didn't smell of Quina Rum cologne.

Because our house wasn't private at all, it was a mixture of places that were never really private because the business spread into every corner. It was as if you had to bow to that intrusion, as if the presence of aliens extended there, slipped mischievously, indiscreetly inside until it became part of the fabric, like embroi-

dery that forms part of a sheet, and that was part of the tissue of our lives. We never enjoyed the languid peace of a family hearth, a homely atmosphere allowing you to relax and feel protected in a friendly, heartfelt place. Where you go in and feel secure even before opening the door. In a space where an endless truce reigns, because you're not on display, there's nothing intimidating, there's nothing forcing you to put on a façade, where you're apparently shielded in a personal bubble, in a kind of nudity. A home should be that type of innermost haven. Yet ours was a tumult, customers crossing the dining-room to go to the lavatory in the yard, as if the barber-shop occupied the building's entire ground floor, dominated by a mixture of male bonding and the smell of cheap tobacco that emitted vapours like when you lift the lid of a cooking-pot. And even there it encouraged the repression of any emotion that might have appeared too ambiguous, while at the same time sanctioning a subtle sensibility, a male, narcissistic togetherness, that flourished, parading of virility that fostered an affectation that contingent would have derided in females. And it was in that hive of male gregariousness that you had to learn to become a man. In that blend of family and outside aromas, at once homely and histrionic, in that shop-window of the barber's, I learned that private life is always clandestine.

Initially my father didn't want me there; I was too sensitive to linger among those gross, ribald conversations. I was clothing put out to dry among risqué innuendo, grandma muttered, I didn't belong there, she thought it was too coarse and never stepped inside, as if it didn't belong to our home. She always kept an eye out, so that, if at all possible, she could keep me in the kitchen with her, and while she cooked lunch, she'd tell me fairy tales. But I'd find a way to escape, and she couldn't leave the pan where she was cooking those fish croquettes that made a deep

mark on my memory. At the time I was oblivious to their racy conversations, because I didn't understand one jot of what the men said, laughing as if they wanted to bring the house down. Those were outbursts of filth that splattered the air, uttered by men who sometimes squabbled like kittens, the veins in their necks swelling fit to burst. They could rage, though I never saw them fight. They shouted until they were hoarse, and barked like dogs someone had just let off the leash.

PART II
The Goldfish Bowl

He parted the tubular curtains and watched the watermelon trundle by. It rolled slowly and wasn't at all round. Chubby and striped, one of the first crop, a blotch of marbled green. And it wobbled by in absolute silence. Or perhaps I was so stunned by the spectacle I was deaf to the chatter in the shop. It still hadn't struck midday, but the heat was clammy, a weary wind searing your skin. These things catch you unawares, you don't expect to walk into the street and see something like that, so unnerving, so discordant, like a shadow abruptly eclipsing everyday life and presenting you with a raft of outlandish impressions, because you can't credit it, everything was so smooth, indistinct, normal and all of a sudden you are catapulted into an unreal, haphazard world that's like a wild dream. Take care, you assume they've set you a trap, it's a practical joke, they've nothing better to do than roll a watermelon down the high street. The lads

must be larking about, just for a laugh. They're hoping to see the amazement on your face, your eyes bulge out of their sockets. And you look on blankly; above all, you must never seem perturbed, as if the sight of melons or marrows or bunches of plums rolling by and not stopping till they hit the front of the Remirat establishment were quotidian occurrences. It all happened in a flash. Because, almost simultaneously, you hear a frightened Antònia Remuc say what on earth..., and see Maria Carrau, on the ground, in the middle of the street, a bit farther on, opposite the stationery shop, crouching and about to fall over, as Antònia runs towards her, who's not in time to catch her as she capsizes like a boat. In the rush Antònia lost one of the espadrilles she wears with run-down heels. She howls like a madwoman. She doesn't know what to do and asks for help. She looks like she's splashing water on her, wiping her forehead and cheeks. I walk over as I tell my mother to call a doctor or ambulance. We're in time to see the startled looks of people waiting in the shop, the terrified expressions of individuals who can see something horrible has happened. Everyone squeezes into the doorway and if I'd turned around, I'd have seen the gaggle of women coming through the door, and behind them, heads peering between the tubular curtains like panic-stricken mice who've spotted a kestrel circling above. So what's up now, you hear someone stutter, a voice hovering between outright shock and a hollow, suspicious whine, because she's unconvinced and prefers to believe Maria Carrau is putting on a show. It must be Clementina, that woman trusts nobody, and thinks it's only play-acting, you know, heat stroke, what do you expect, this muggy air and sultry breeze will see off a goodly number, I can tell you, if these hot blasts continue, I won't survive the summer. Antònia loosens her blouse and uses one hand to fan her and the other to shade her eyes.

Her pulse has stopped; she's unconscious, no longer breathing. I mean, when I got close, she let out a long, painful wheeze, as if expelling air hurt, followed by a dim, piercing groan and rattle. It wasn't a dense rush of air, more like wind whistling through a narrow conduit; nobody inhabited that body, the skin had died, turned a purplish blue, blackberries came to mind. The whole to-do had lasted under five minutes, and now she lay on the ground. Dead. Eyes open, with the mouth of someone at a loss for words. I'd seen her stagger, I was some way behind, she'd stopped, as if she'd hurt herself. I turned round to say hello to Jaume, the photographer, who was changing his photo display, I continued walking and saw her totter and heel over like a sack of almonds. And the watermelon brushed against her when she was on her knees, and she let it roll. And I was too late, I grabbed her hand, but her elongated body already lay sprawled. As if she'd let herself go, put up no defence, because she didn't hold a hand or arm out, or was trying to lie on her back, but her strength failed her and she was left in full view, on her side, with her legs pulled up.

We could do nothing. She was as dead as dead can be. She froze my blood, said the woman from Prim farm, retaining her composure. She was tall as a hat-stand, her neck stiff, out-of-reach, ethereal, and her skin, pallid; water coursed through her veins, because nothing ever frightened her. Her misty, faint blue eyes looked out as if they had no focus, as if they were still in the open countryside, and she stared at Maria Carrau with the serenity of a woman who can weep no more. She wasn't displaying the contempt of a wealthy family, nor was she stony-hearted, but ten years ago she had found her daughter hanging from a beam in the sheep's barn, and her lips aged and withered and her face had set in a dismal rictus like someone who's just taken a bite of mouldy cake. I've no tears left, she would say, and cork

never sinks. That's why nobody took any notice when they saw her heading towards the square, as if she'd gone nowhere. She's all limp, she'll never be herself again, the seamstress muttered to Magdalene from number Forty, who'd come out of the hairdresser's and rushed over when she heard the racket. First she said nothing, but then she shook her head, staring into space, her hands folded, as if tracking the slow gait of the woman who'd reached the square with the fountain. When she was young, people doffed their caps, she was always dressed to the nines. And look at her now. We turn to dust. However, nobody heard her nasal whine, because everyone was in a state of shock, and you'd have said death drove her words. Every soul was crying out, and nobody knew what to do next. Some said we shouldn't leave her on the ground, who's ever heard of a corpse being abandoned in the street? While others weren't at all sure we could even touch her, because shouldn't we wait for the doctor or the civil guard? They must retrieve the body, said the owner of the kiosk. Don't be so nasty, this isn't a body, it's Maria Carrau, can't you see? You can tell you've seen a film or two, replied Missus Vermella. It's so upsetting, I saw her in the market only ten minutes ago, you heard someone say in the herd huddling in the hair salon doorway, one wearing a bib, another in curlers, and the farthest back in a half-finished perm, lacquer all over her hands. My father had stepped out of our workshop and seemed to sicken at the mere sight of the hullabaloo in the street. The stitchers followed him, their aprons secured around their waists. What's happened? And the words couldn't come quickly enough, three or four suddenly gabbled out the grisly facts. They seemed deft at bypassing what actually happened and you could get no clarity. Followed by a flood of detail about the dead woman: she wasn't wearing the blue cotton dress the seamstress made for her the previous

summer, hers was the semi-mourning attire she'd bought in the big city when her mother-in-law died, and it had rucked up, but Andreu from Xineva's, who is such a sweetie, pulled it down because nobody wanted to leave the flesh of her white legs bare for all to see; his eyes gawped as if it was all too much, it was really peculiar, but she wasn't wearing her wedding ring, though that meant nothing, you're always trying to find a snake in the grass, you, holding your hirsute hands as if you'd just dropped something, because she was of an age, but didn't seem on the point of collapse, she was a sturdy soul, it must have been her heart, though that didn't go in her family, it was on her husband's side, you could say they all suffered from the same frailty, only a month ago they took her brother-in-law into hospital, and her father-in-law was in a fragile state and couldn't get up from his bed anymore. It was as if they paraded the woman by in a series of anecdotes, and she had evaporated in a stream of gossip, to a raucous hue and cry. It was as if we weren't in the middle of the street, let alone with the dead woman, and none of that had ever happened; the flow of present time had screeched to a halt and we came and went in a vacuum that seemed eternal, because at that exact moment we had no urgent tasks, it was unbearable, we could all blather, but we had no time to look for Maria in her kitchen, because we were out in the fresh air, feeling vulnerable and knowing we too could die, a truth that's always with us. And that nobody now existed in Maria's eyes and we were all dead in her pupils that looked at nothing. We called up words to resist, that woman was now a small detail, a trivial life, she might have been a bunch of dried flowers, of sayings and wisecracks, because otherwise it was intolerable. And now she was a case for comment, all those stories initiated her decomposition, all that was to make her rot. As if the body on the ground was the site

of a strange absence that had come about today, unfettering the boundaries between ourselves and the world. And there was no other way: we had to raise our voices and grumble, babble and shoot the breeze. Because it is in the talk and the banter that words fade and disappear, that we discern people's smells and recover the breath of life.

It was my father who decided. We couldn't leave her in the middle of the street. He felt responsible, I mean we knew her, her daughter came to our house to clean and when needed, she stitched in the workshop, mostly when one of the two women who did that had to put together an order or prepare goods to send to Menorca or Barcelona. My father also sent her to the tobacconist to fetch the medium-size boxes we used to make up the packages we despatched and that Tomeu from the agency collected. Everything had to go smoothly, especially now we made over forty pairs of shoes a day. She whitewashed too, but that was later on, towards September. And we all remembered the day when she tumbled off the ladder and was soaked in whitewash from head to toe. She was like a statue, and white as the white of an eye. But everyone at home was upset, whitewash is caustic and you couldn't see her face, it looked as if it had been erased. My mother was afraid she might be seriously injured; it would be a disaster if she'd been blinded. They carried her into the yard, after checking she hadn't broken any bones. She was frightened and kept repeating she couldn't see, that her ribs hurt on one side. My mother used her hands to clean the whitewash from her face, but it was so thick and sticky her fingers could get no purchase. They used the hose to douse her with water, and luckily she was fine, her sore eyes itched, there was nothing serious, but she was bruised all over as if she'd been given a good hiding. Moreover, my father also accompanied her to the doctor's, she

went to a psychiatrist in Palma, because she suffered from headaches and dizzy spells and had been diagnosed as depressed. I mean we thought of her as one of the family. That was why nobody was surprised when my father took her firmly under the armpits and glanced at Andreu to ask for help. They were going to carry her to our house. But when they lifted her up, the seamstress said her house was nearer and she shouldn't be hemmed in by all those people in the shop. They could leave her in the front-room she used as a changing-room. Ever since her daughter's marriage, she'd kept it empty, apart from a table and couple of chairs, because Maria took the bed and wardrobe with her. She wouldn't be in the way. When Missus Vermella heard her, she was beside herself: what do you mean "be in the way"? Whatever are you thinking! She's a human being, not a bundle of clothes you can stick any old where. You've always been colder than an icicle. You've no feeling. And the other woman was already on the attack and would have given her a mouthful, if Clementina hadn't said she ought to shut up, it wasn't the moment to squabble. It wasn't very sensitive in the presence of the dead. And she began to whisper, looking sorrowful. A pregnant silence descended, as if an angel had flown by and you heard the flutter of wings, and Clementina's voice was gentle as if rather than praying, she was humming a simple tune. But if you watched her mouth, its movements were mechanical and her eyes were staring at the ground, her face resigned and distended as if she too were about to collapse at any second. Nobody could say if it was an Our Father or an Ave Maria. But then, Antònia Remuc, who was next to her, recited to us what she'd heard: May Our Lord await her at the hour of salvation and await us when it is our time. May God comfort her. And some people, said amen, when she finished, though they really didn't know what was going on, or whether

they had to make a response, because they weren't familiar with the prayer. She spoke like a priest, said one of the stitchers, and the other woman elbowed her, because she guessed what she was hinting. Clementina had that way about her. She's the queen of affliction, Roc Breny, the painter, had said one day when he heard her declare that the world was hell's lavatory. The moment Franco had died she seized every opportunity to say she was only waiting for eternal rest, that this was a pigsty. She comes out with bile, she's like a tooth-ache, muttered the seamstress, leaning against the wall. As they listened, my father and Andreu put the dead woman back on the ground. She was a figure at rest. Nails painted red, one hand flat on the ground, the other on her chest, as if someone had laid her out. I'm not sure, I reckon the dead have to do something with their hands, suggest prayers or devotion, a fervent plea to make us forget the dull silence of lifeless bodies. You could have said she was resting, but she was already cold and inert, her eyes still half-open and her mouth as if she really had just breathed her last, with too much conviction even, like an actress, at any second she'd stand up and greet her audience. The dead sometimes seem to pretend, to perform for the living, as if they want grate our emotions from their state as dreary and impassive individuals uninterested, at once aloof and contemptuous. Her limp, lifeless face had slumped down over the thinnest pap, folds of skin layered over her right collar-bone. As if she had begun to pass through the eye, and represented the image of time engulfing everything and sparing nothing. She communicated nothing, because your face blurs when you breathe your last, her eyes, nose and lips no longer comprised a face but the mask of absence, traits of oblivion; all that remained was a gentle grimace, as if the last thing to pass through her mind had been the discomfort she felt, it was so untimely, so awkward

it had to be there and then, in the middle of the street, that you had to upset people, so awful to be a proper nuisance. Her lank, old-fashioned perm, dyed old gold, ashen and faded, didn't want to draw attention to itself, but the weight of her head on the ground had flattened it out, like kneaded dough that swells and fills out along the edges, endowing her with a halo of matte golden pastry. Her forehead was pale and elongated, without that warmth that makes the skin of the living seem like cloth that will stretch and fit tight, you'd have said it wasn't flesh, rather part of a stiff cardboard mask. Hooked on a loose blouse button, a small gold chain with an Egyptian cross lay half buried in the gentle dip between her breasts, almost touching the soft, heavy hand on her white dress dotted with small, red tulips. Suddenly a fly that nobody swats away settles between two of those blooms. A thin, worn wedding ring, a narrow band of gold, dances on her finger. That ring is the only item to retain its sparkle of light, as if that brittle circle of gold is a reminder of things that matter, that time has gradually shrunk and changed into a weedy strip of metal. That smooth, plain pinchbeck on Maria Carrau's ring finger is all that is left of the order and miserly calm of years gone by, while there is now nothing sweet or bitter in her eyes, not even the savage hunger that impels us to long for what we don't have. The black watch strap squeezing her wrist is too small and leaves grooves. The tightened skin and irritation makes her seem alive, as if her body is still struggling with the strap, trying to loosen it. Her blue skirt has a piece of hem that has come away, that hangs loosely over her slightly bent knee. And if you have your wits about you, you can see scars and scratches from the days when as a girl she climbed blackberry bushes, slipped when looking for chanterelles or skidded on her bike, I mean, the sweet scars of palpable life. Farther down was a blue bruise,

and varicose veins snaked down her flabby legs, the product of exhausted blood that will never flow back to her heart. Flat, thin black leather shoes reveal the bunions that have enumerated her steps so far, and their soles seem new, hardly used. You look at them and see the bereft quality of goods the dead no longer need to break in, and you certainly know why, because you are going to remove them and give them a good spit and polish.

PART III
Untrammelled

When you open the door and slip inside it feels vaguely like someone's running their hand down your back. You've never worked out why, but you look into the mirror and see that fussy, feline shadow warming up, and you are all they're expecting, and nobody else. As if you and he who came in shared a single manner, are at one, but you have shrunk, become lofty and withdrawn, and a simultaneous, unwary modesty cleaves you to your steps, and you could be anyone, putting on that independent air the pusillanimous conceal by being deferential and subdued. I like acting the attentive man. It's so pleasant to be personable. Being diligent and prompt means you are only the services you offer, and that allows you to be as you will, creates space and when you make a show of every kind of attention, nobody sees beyond your availability, and you wallow in that airiness. It makes you

inaccessible. Like a hotel bedroom. It's available but will never be your home. You don't have to concentrate on anything in particular; you only have to offer your kind disposition. Always at the ready. Never being a nuisance. Self-denial is too unctuous and saccharine, even an eagerness to please exudes a servile desire to comply. It's not that. You aren't that mask, that character, which is all too histrionic; it's so obvious you are seeking gratitude and it's worse when people get the whiff of a wish for recognition. And you expect nothing. That is your most crepuscular, most nocturnal freedom. Every year is the same, and you must work hard to recall what you want to appear: a friendly child. But you only have to walk past, no longer must you pretend or feel that you have to renege on your name, because being personable and obsequious is your way to stay intact. Not touching anywhere. Being hollow. Neither shell nor carcass, but disposable air, an aperture, an empty space where things simmer. Because at the end of the day I would have liked to be a place. She still laughs when she remembers us playing "what if" at school. She'd make a list, and she'd be an animal, a cat or be music, colour or fruit. But I only ever wanted to be a *place*: a hotel.

I still don't really know what my role is here. And that's why I like coming. Simply thinking one is the night porter is always deceptive or illusory. But the fact is one is here only at night. When they opened, two years ago now, I was already here. The press said the hotel was the company's pearl, but it remains an eccentric item. No point pretending. It was Senyor Mateu Conrad Clova's gift to his daughter. So you can do whatever you fancy, without the company interfering. It's your laboratory. I won't stick my nose in, he told her, as if issuing a warning. All in all, it's to let her amuse herself, said the draconian figures on the board of directors. And I'm convinced he also wanted to keep

her away from the group's enterprises because she was an unpredictable nuisance. Nobody denied she was intelligent, but when she re-appeared, after the Masters in Paris with the MIT team, or after one of her recce trips to Japan, Zanzibar or Macau, and summoned the board of management or executive directors to her father's office, everyone shook in their shoes. Until Senyor Clova introduced some order and sent her out to pasture with her curious blend of frenzied curiosity and impertinence that sought to revolutionise the company's impact on the sector. And she'd head to Harvard to follow a course on the image of the city or closet herself away and sulk in the house in Lluçacari behind Anita Brookner's *Hotel du Lac*, that she read whenever she felt downbeat and dejected. The moment we finished Tourism at university, the euphoria that made us inseparable cooled and we went our own ways. I mean it was no longer like secondary school, when we formed an arrogant alliance, sharing audacity and insights that nourished a mutual adoration society as if our *friendship* were the kernel of a conspiracy. However, when her father offered to buy her Can Fugina, that huge edifice on plaça de Sant Jeroni, the proliferation of whimsical projects that had stolen our hearts when we were students came hurtling back, and she insisted on involving me. It was no longer the project of hotheads who collected hotels in the university bar from Scott Fitzgerald's stories and novels or declared in the classes of Isidre Salicall, a gloomy, obtuse professorial presence, ever deferential and submissive before the leaders in the field, that hotels in our day and age were no more than cathedrals of contemporary trivia. He said nothing and smiled at the irreverent outspokenness of Aurèlia Clova and her shadow. Because you were who you are. And when we said that a hotel must create the acceptable nostalgia of a campsite, that it should expose you to things you

don't know about yourself, he rambled on about excellence of service and defended a model of hostelry as soft as putty, that must always adapt to demand. A horde of lackeys trying to dupe via fraudulent offerings of familiar routines, Aurèlia lambasted him. At *your* service. She hit him with everything she carried in her belly: so lucky to have so much sun and beach, because with such servile, sycophantic attitudes, like blindly obedient skivvies and schoolboys, only giving them what they want, we have achieved nothing at all, only arse-licking, bowing and scraping. Employees that don't speak, in hock to the regime and the devil. Sure, full wallets. And a desert island. A place ready for anything, a backwater that could be anywhere in the world. And she dumbfounded him when she affirmed that a hotel is a contradiction. Shooting your mouth off was easy when you were the boss's daughter. But now we had a real project, and talk didn't suffice, we had to construct that impossible house we'd only erected till then in the endless chatter of two lunatics who liked to deride all-comers.

We have carte blanche, she told me. We must transform this hotel into a splendiferous paradox for our epoch of ruins. It must be like us: an anomaly. It was foolhardy and I told her what she already knew: I only like hotels in novels. After we finished our degrees, while she roamed the world, I had various jobs here and there, always at night: in summer, in bars and in winter, watchman on a site or at a hotel that had closed at the end of the season. I felt at ease in empty buildings or those hollow shells. And had time to read. It was over ten years since I'd half-given up on my thesis on hotel spaces in fiction. She knew it wasn't about pursuing the traces left by writers, musicians, politicians or people in the limelight, that I wasn't interested in their relics, Rimbaud's disastrous life in the Hotel Univers in Aden or

making a guide to the hotels Hemingway had passed through. That was their nonsense, not mine. What attracted me was the different ways you could explain hotels as a literary space, capturing their meanings and representations. A written space. Multiple, diverse, fictive hostelries. Always provisional and precarious, hospitality on the road, a theatre of the exceptional, home and not home. Familiar and foreign at the same time. A way to be fashioned by the equivocal, always shifting between public and private, between comedy and tragedy. An improvised abode, a scenario of secrets, of libertinage, a breeding ground for fraud, mystery and terror, paradise and solitude. Refuge and exile, paradoxical privacy, anonymity, microcosm of the servile. Spasmodic and simmering. And I told her that, nevertheless, I didn't think any advantage could be derived from any of that. I wasn't the right person to advance her projects. However she insisted: you can do whatever you want. And she suggested ideas that came from the time when she and I were an anomaly, green-horns that of a night shared the exhausting bodies of waiters who worked in her father's hotels, and loved each other.

After days and days of conversing the matter came to a head and each of us accepted well-defined roles. I could do night work, I'd rehabilitate that old project of creating a hotel library and would have to outline ideas for something similar to business and marketing directors. The lobby was also mine, and she'd look after everything else. It was strange, because I'd do the night-porter's job and at the same time be her closest advisor. As usual, I would be her shadow. Namely, a subaltern, like an usher or municipal councillor, with all the allure of a low-level bureaucrat. Always available, with no existence of my own, going through life without making a stir. Though not really. Floating questions in the air. Replying without replying. And our relation-

ship was what it always had been: balm and skin-rejecting salves. Words were another pomade. One absorbs the skins of things and people and it must reach deep inside before it explodes like a depth charge, and nothing is what it seems. Everything shatters and is like fragmented flesh. That was what scared me. Because this hotel erased *the hotel* that was always elusive and could never be captured, contradicted it, scorned it, denied it, exalted it and here we were, hosts of hosts, guests of those who came to our home. Things you could no longer appropriate. And sure, that was fortunate. We had to learn to stay somewhere that was no longer a place, only a set of off-beat routines. We'd talked about it a lot, but I felt we weren't in control of the moves we should be making, as if the time we spent in a house that was no longer ours and it was hard to breathe in a place that was only atmosphere. Or a placid desert.