

PERE CALDERS

The Desert

Translated from Catalan by Mara Faye Lethem

A PLEASANT MONTH of June was drawing to a close when Enric Espol showed up with a bandaged hand, his fist clenched beneath the gauze. He was clearly changed in many respects, which gave rise to speculation, but no one could possibly imagine the scale of the wallop that had bowed him.

His facial expression had never before garnered even the slightest interest, yet now it took on a victorious air filled with the sadness so characteristic of modern wars.

The day his life changed so drastically had come without any warning. He woke up in his usual bad mood and walked through the apartment, from the bathroom to the dining room and from the dining room to the kitchen, to see if walking around would shake off his sleepiness. His right side hurt and he was slightly short of breath, two complaints he hadn't felt simultaneously before. Their rapid worsening was alarming, and he was soon definitely fully awake. He made his way back to the bedroom, dragging his feet and leaning on the furniture, and then sat on the edge of his bed, prepared for an agonizing end.

Fear overtook his entire body. Slowly, his strength clambered up his nerve branches in an attempt to escape through his mouth. Espol fought back just in the nick of time: in the moment of transference, he managed to grasp something in his hand and close his fist tightly around it, imprisoning his life. The pain in his side stopped and his breathing became normal; Espol ran his left hand over his forehead in relief, because his right was already engaged with its new mission.

Prudence warned him not to venture into too wide a range of possibilities. From the very first moment, he was sure about only one thing: not opening his fist for any reason whatsoever. There in Espol's palm, his life wriggled slightly, like a small fish or a ball of mercury.

In order to avoid a momentary slipup, he adopted the contrivance of wrapping his hand in gauze, and thus partially reassured, he drew up a provisional plan of his first steps. He would go to see the manager at

his job, ask for advice from his family doctor and friends, and gradually inform those people he was closest to.

That was how Espol reappeared. With his face transformed (a dazed confusion never again left him), he walked the streets with an absent gaze. Despite folks having grown used to seeing such things, they sensed that there was something different about his bandage, and would often turn to sneak a look at him.

Today, at midmorning, his manager listens to his story with growing interest. When Espol says he has to quit working because he will never be able to write with that hand again, the manager replies, "I see no need to be hasty. Sometimes these things vanish just as suddenly as they came . . ."

"This isn't going anywhere," answered Espol. "The day I open my fist to pick up a pen, my life will slip away from me."

"We could transfer you to the preparation and connection division of the department of sales subcontracting."

"No."

The manager, who'd been waiting almost five years for an opportunity to get rid of Espol, is now hesitant to let him get away. At first he acts conciliatory, then insinuates a salary raise (without making too firm an offer), and finally ends up completely giving in. They can figure out more vacation time and have it begin straightaway.

"No."

"And how will you make a life for yourself?"

"I've got it right here," he says, showing his right fist. "This is the first time I've been able to locate it, and now I have to find a way to make good use of it."

As he leaves the office, he is followed by his boss's eager voice, asking him not to forget to keep him posted.

An hour later, the family doctor listens to the story coldly. He is tired, tired of so many stories of sick people. He nods, occasionally formulating rote questions such as "Do you cough at night?" and "Have you had diphtheria?" along with others equally tinged with mystery. In the end, he declares his opinion that Espol's suffering from some sort of allergic reaction, prescribes a new diet plan, and then gives him 500,000 IUs of penicillin for good measure. When the visit is almost over, he mentions a Swiss school for the partially handicapped, where they can teach him how to write with his left hand in approximately six months.

Back out on the street, Espol feels wondrously cloaked in a new importance. He walks, as if under a spell, to his fiancée's house and explains everything to her. Her first reaction is a fit of motherly concern; she insists on applying hot cloths to his closed fist, and when he refuses to allow it, she says that his bandage is horrible and that she'll make him a fingerless glove to wear. She gets so excited about the idea that she forgets all about him; calling to her mother and saying, "Listen to this: Enric's life was slipping away from him and he managed to catch it in one hand. Now he has to keep his fist tightly closed at all times so it doesn't escape."

"Oh my!"

"And I said that we could make him a knit bag for his hand, in some light color, so he won't have to wear that bandage."

Her mother takes a discreet interest in the matter.

"Yes," she chimes in, "like what we made for Viola when she broke her paw."

Mother and daughter step aside to talk among themselves. Espol, abandoned, leaves, and he is followed to the door by their murmured words: "Seed stitch? No. Eyelet stitch. . . This many and decrease, this many and decrease. . ."

Mechanically, treading on invisible sand, Espol heads to his best friend's home. He finds him and explains the remarkable occurrence. And his friend (inexplicably) feels envious, and tries to change the subject. "Don't worry, just think about something else. That's nothing, really. Something *truly* extraordinary happened to me, two years ago this May. One Monday. . ." As he speaks, he thinks of how he would use a situation like that to his advantage, and melancholy gradually muffles his voice.

Then comes a silence, broken by the slightest balmy breeze that shifts the dunes. Espol's friend feigns drowsiness from the tedium, and isn't even really listening to his visitor, who, preparing to leave, says, "It's life itself. Here, look." He extends his fist and lifts it to eye level. "I can hear it right now, like a trapped cricket. If I grip my fingers tightly together, I feel that shortness of breath again."

He leaves, because he needs some fresh air. The city is large, and he walks toward the east; on the way, he sees the shop of a bookseller he knows. The bookseller doesn't have a quick mind, and he has to think long and hard. . . Then he approaches Espol and points to his fist with an index finger.

“Does it hurt?”

“No.”

The man suddenly becomes transfigured. His face lights up, he grabs Espol by the arm and explains, “Of course, now as always, everyone does as they see fit. But, if I were you, I would go up on the roof, take off that bandage and, as soon as the first band of pigeons flew by, I’d open up my fist.”

Back out on the street, Espol’s heart is darkened by his solitude in the midst of so many people. He sees a sign on a bus that reminds him of a familiar address, and he runs to catch it before it gets away. One of his mother’s sisters lives in a house near the Eastside Park. She’s an old woman, who likes living amid marquetry veneer, among furniture inset with mother-of-pearl, and walls covered in red velvet. The lady whiles away her leisure periods making fruits and saints out of wax, then enclosing them in bell glasses atop mahogany pedestals.

Espol greets his aunt by kissing her hand and starts straight in on his story. Initially she is hard-nosed; she advises he stop the nonsense, take off the bandage, and open his hand immediately.

“The mere thought leaves me faint . . .”

“Face up to it! Be a man, that’s all there is to it. What? Do you want to go on like this? Life needs breathing room, if you squeeze it in there so tightly, you’ll snuff yourself out like a short wick and depart with just a whimper.”

And she laughs with a serious expression as she tugs at her mittens.

Take off the bandage, take off the bandage . . . A ray of sun causes a strange reflection in the lady’s eyes, and Espol sees his first mirage. Gradually, he unwraps the gauze, but when his hand is uncovered he is brought back to his senses by the sound of an airplane engine and runs off.

Without the protection of the bandage, his latent fear grows. He clamps his fingers together and, better safe than sorry, sticks his fist in his pocket.

A wind that only he can hear lifts the sand, and Espol protects himself by squinting his eyes. He passes a stand of palm trees on his right, crosses through the park, and is overcome by a torturous thirst. He walks and walks, sinking his feet in as he does, and he can feel the dry skin on his face cracking. In the bare wasteland of his thoughts, small lights come on, here and there, and switch off immediately; he feels nostalgic for the time when he carried his life around instinctively, and the heat bears down on him.

Distant music makes him lift his head, and he sees the silhouette of a line of people and camels approaching. He feels a tug on his suit jacket and, when he turns around, he finds himself looking into the frightened eyes of a small beggar girl. Desperate, Espol kneels down and explains his predicament to her, asking for her advice.

“I” she says, “would put my fist into a pitcher of water and await an everlasting dream.”

An inexplicable refraction surrounds them in shadow, and Espol resumes his course; in his own desolate landscape, a sandstorm makes things and ideas whirl dizzily. The camels approach slowly, and he sits down to watch them pass. The sound of a drum breaks the low fog of sand, and red letters streak across Espol’s pupils: “Donamatti Circus. Three rings, three. Coming soon.”

He is feeling drowsy as he observes the parade, nodding slightly. A blonde trapeze artist, on horseback, waves her hand gracefully, and Espol, distracted, responds by stretching out his right arm and opening his fist.

An amber-colored wisp escapes and, startled, he tries to grab it, but can’t. He collapses, bit by bit, with the inexpressible anguish of having inadvertently left a gas switch open.

The Streak and the Wish

Translated from Catalan by Mara Faye Lethem

SHORTLY AFTER PASSING Coll d'Àrea, I was struck with a desire to tell the story of my wife and the house, and everything I'd lost because of the mirage. Beside me sat an old man; over kilometers and kilometers, he had maintained an almost hostile silence. His gaze was tranquil, as if the moving landscape couldn't blot out his luminous memories.

I placed my hand on one of his knees and got a shiver. The bus's lurching had allied itself with his bones, and I felt them beneath my palm, dancing to the same rhythm.

"Listen: I want to tell you a story . . . I was going to say it's a true-life story, but I'm afraid you won't believe it, no one has."

The old man turned his head. Who knows if he saw me, because his eyes remained absent, despite the fact that I could see myself reflected in them.

"Why?" he asked. And then added, "I should have died more than five years ago, and I know all the stories. What good could come of it?"

"I don't know. Perhaps some advice . . ." I said.

(That was a lie, and the hypocrisy of it, as always, made me blush. Really, what I wanted was to tell that extraordinary tale, just like I am now.)

The old man, who had his hands crossed over the knob of a knotted wood cane, lifted one, to show—I'm convinced—that he couldn't care less. A traveling salesman sitting in front of us was nervous and fidgety. First he started to pull out his handkerchief, but he changed his mind halfway there, then lit a cigarette, and after extracting two mouthfuls of smoke from it, tossed it out the window.

"Well, fine; I'll tell it to you." I knew they could no longer stop me. "I am a surveyor." No one had ever asked me, in all the times I'd told this story, why I chose that profession, and, truth be told, if someone decided to I wouldn't know what to answer. Perhaps it's that we come into this world to fill empty spots, and we each have to resign ourselves to the one we've been given. There is vocation, of course, but I don't entirely believe in it. If, when it came time to choose, vocation

won out, there would be more firemen and parade soldiers than anyone could ever need.

“I married as soon as I had the opportunity, and, since I didn’t have many worries in those days, I married for love. As everyone knows Providence watches out for young lovers; right after I wed, I was hired by a great landowner. One of his estates included three mountains famous throughout Europe, and some time earlier he had rented a work team to make some elevations, the nature of which I won’t go into here because I’ve noticed that it bores laymen. And it turned out that the landowner and the team supervisor had their differences. The owner, who was a cranky man, didn’t like the other’s temperament, and fired him. Then, a happy chain of coincidences brought me to the millionaire. We came to an agreement and established a deal that meant I had to live in a house located on his property, for as long as the job lasted.

“The house was made of wood and exceptionally well built. Someone with keen taste had taken pains to make it lovely, and it truly was; the whole exterior was painted Indian red, with white door and window frames. The roof. . . I won’t describe the entire building because each of you could form a different impression from my words, and the house produced only one: living there, the days passed like a ribbon of friends. Ambition for the things of this world grew muffled, and, in its place, a steady flame nourished dreams that neither sleepiness nor hunger wiped away.

“The house was located in a small valley that was the bed of a river, the living image of the ideal place to live. The path that led to it was a furrow through picture-perfect fields. Even now I can close my eyes and see it all as if it were laid out on a table before me, with those colors, and the motion the balmy breeze prompted in the tree leaves, and the bits of sky in the river. And even now, when I think about it, I can’t believe that such a thing could happen in a setting like that one.”

(The traveling salesman shrugs and formulates a banal opinion: “I don’t see what’s so strange about it. A drama or a comedy—or a school awards ceremony—can unfold on the same stage.” He was about to enlighten us with some anecdote, but I cut him off by resuming my tale.)

“. . . It’s interesting to note how often the most perfect happiness precedes bad moments. My wife was delighted by the house and the location, and she settled into a domestic life that met all her desires.

My love for her only grew.

“I never describe the first few months we spent there, because stimulating others’ envy is doubly wrong; in doing so one fosters a reprehensible emotion while deriving satisfaction from the telling.

“A time came when my work took me far from our home. I would leave early in the morning, on horseback, and travel across the fifteen kilometers between our house and the team’s encampment. And, despite the fact that I wouldn’t be able to return before nightfall, I was buoyed by a reserve of well-being that stemmed from my family life, and was my constant companion. Also, and this is something many have experienced, after a longer day, my desire to once more see my home, and all it meant to me, gave me a joy I’d never before known.

“It was still daylight when I left work, and my horse, driven by some murky instinct, must have felt the need to underscore my euphoria. He took off at a trot that seemed to be in deliberate collaboration with my impatience.

“Nature in general, and mountainscapes in particular, fill me with a mix of lyricism and agrarian aspirations, and when surrounded by very lovely images, I start to get ideas about major land distribution. I made my way, alternately entertaining those roving thoughts and flooding my eyes with the spectrum of greens. They varied with the seasons, offering subtle changes to an expert eye. I always stopped about halfway home, to contemplate the sunset. Then I would spur on my horse, past each of the landmarks on my route: the three pine trees, the boundary cross, the roadworkers’ hut, the remains of the farmhouse, the spring, and all the silent heralds of my returns.

“From a distance I saw the windows of the house lit up and the reddish glow emerging from the chimney. As I got closer I could make out my wife’s silhouette in the doorframe; she was signaling with a lantern and lifted her arm to welcome me.

“And that was how it was every day. Do you see? You have to understand just how ordinary that period of my life was in order to grasp the legitimacy of my complaint and the harshness with which I was treated by those higher powers. There was no way my senses could have been tricked because, by profession, I’m skilled at measuring land, and I knew the length of the road, and all its curves and irregularities. I could sketch it from memory. So what possible explanation is there, then, for the extraordinary thing that happened to me there? But I’ll let you judge that for yourselves . . .

“It happened after a particularly hectic day. We had made some triangulations that required covering a lot of ground; the following day was a holiday, and the little towns in those valleys celebrated it as the biggest of the year. The men in my work squad had asked if they could go, and I told them they couldn’t leave the encampment and all of our tools and instruments. But they’d come up with a plan: two of the workers had offered to stay behind and keep watch, and seeing as the celebration was indeed quite far-reaching, I couldn’t really say no.

“I myself was seduced by the idea of some leisure time, and then, to reconcile the concept of my authority as the boss with what I truly wanted, I told them that if we managed to finish a certain task that day I would agree to their request.

“We worked with the illusion of the reward and were able to do what we’d set out to. I looked over the tents while the workers and foremen rode off, and after giving a few last instructions to the watchmen, I set off on a trip I will remember as long as I live.

“I’d never before so strongly felt that joy I tried to describe to you earlier. It was later than I usually came home, and various circumstances contributed to the intensity of my desire to arrive. The day prior, my wife had complained for the first time about spending so much time alone; I was picturing her uneasy, leaning on the doorframe and looking out often to catch a glimpse of me. I enjoyed imagining the words we would say to each other, her reproach for my lateness, and how I would calm her anger with the news of the festivities.

“I don’t know whether I was pushing the horse to go faster, perhaps without fully realizing it, or whether it was merely the animal’s ability to understand me, but he began to gallop. That was the only logical, easily explained part of any of the things that happened: after a short while on the path, passing a turn that skirted a very deep gully, part of the bank caved in and the horse lost his balance. I barely had time to cling to something, I couldn’t say if it was a plant or a branch, and regain the path by retreating. The horse went over the cliff, and I had no doubt about what had befallen the animal: I knew the area quite well, I knew there was no way it could have survived the fall. Despite everything, I often chide myself for not having gone down to the rushing stream to look for the horse, in order to put an end, if necessary, to his suffering.

“But at the time the setback filled me with uncontrollable rage, and the focus of my worry was elsewhere. On a normal day, I would have gone back to the encampment in search of a new mount, but I knew

that there were none and that getting someone to bring one would be almost as much work as just walking home. Driven mad by a frustration and no one clear to blame for it, I set off on foot.

“It’s strange how a change, as small as it may be, sometimes shows us the flip side of things that are familiar. The land I was on, the low stone borders and the trees, in the same dusky half-light I’d seen them beneath so many times, now seemed different. And I don’t want to give you the impression that what happened can be explained by some special state of mind; I had a very clear notion of where I was, of the distance I’d traveled, of how much farther there was to go, and, above all, with a precision that I’d acquired from my work, the relationship between my walking pace, the passing minutes, and each meter remaining before reaching my home.

“All of sudden I realized that my right wrist was hurting and that it was affecting my headway. I saw that the accident hadn’t left me unscathed, and I could only think that I hadn’t realized it until then because of my excited state.

“I couldn’t explain my discomfort. It’s hard to understand now, sitting here as we are, in good company and broad daylight. There have been moments when, telling this story, someone would say it wasn’t anything worth getting worked up about, that after all it would be reasonable for me to feel mostly satisfaction at having dodged the same fate as my horse. But I asked them—and I ask now: Have you ever found yourself halfway along your route, with night about to fall dark around you and the silence of the large forests awaiting, obsessed with the idea that your beloved would be suffering an anguish you couldn’t forestall by letting her know that you were fine? And add to that physical pain that kept me from moving at my desired speed, and a vague premonition that was trying to put me on the alert.

“It grew dark and I continued, trying to pick up my pace as I went, counting the hours it would take me to cover the familiar phases of my journey: the three pine trees, the boundary cross, the roadworkers’ hut. . . . A moment came when I obstinately fixed my gaze on the darkness of the sky, so the identification of the shadows on either side of the road would help remind me of the distance and the time.

“And with my eyes high and focused out above the horizon, it was then that I saw the streak of light. It was just a flash: the surprise of the streak, the immediate realization that it was a falling star, and superstitious nostalgia forced me to formulate my wish to find my house and

my wife waiting for me right around the next bend.

“Most everyone does the same thing when they see a falling star, just as a game. A vague, reverent impulse made me close my eyes to lend potency to my request. Then, just as a game, I decided to pretend to believe that I would really find what I’d asked for around the curve, and then take the next curve with the same faith, and so on, shortening the phases even while multiplying them, and in that way perhaps distract myself from my anxiety.

“That is what I was thinking. But in the appointed place I saw the lit rectangles of the windows, the red glow of the chimney, and, outlined in the doorway, the profile I loved so dearly.

“Some sort of stupor kept me from marveling at the sight for too long. With the flashlight I made the same wave as always, and she lifted her arm in the usual gesture. As I approached, I remember asking: ‘What are you doing here, you and the house?’

“I didn’t dare to cross the threshold; my wife gave me a hug imbued with a more protective air than ever before, as if she understood any and every thing that could befall me. She asked if I’d worked a lot that day, and when I replied that I had, she told me to relax, that all I had to do now was rest.

“In an attempt to quickly clarify that highly exceptional situation, I told her the truth: that the place we stood was at least eight kilometers away from our house and that I had wished it closer when I saw a falling star.

“‘Our house is here,’ she answered serenely, ‘where you and I and our home are.’ To disabuse her I pointed to the west, where the slightest hint of light outlined the profile of a mountain. ‘Have you ever seen the Coll d’Area from the doorway of our home?’”

“She glanced over and said that the next morning, in the light of day, we would have more evidence to discuss it. Then she asked after the horse and, when I told her about the unfortunate incident, she ran her hand over my head. ‘Were you hurt?’ ‘It’s not what you think.’ That a blow to the head had affected my mind was too easy of an explanation.

“I was hesitant to enter the house, gradually overcome by a completely reasonable uneasiness. ‘Look, the table is set,’ she said, ‘I made one of your favorite meals. Can you smell it?’

“Of course I could see and smell it! But there was no way I could distract myself with a lovely dinner and then just head off to bed to

resume my ruminations the next day. Because, if the reality of my life was there, what was that powerful fiction eight kilometers farther on? And the other way round: If the truth and proper course of things resided there, what did this mirage represent?

“I said that I couldn’t rest until I had covered the entire route, miracles aside, and that I had to continue, no time to waste. She wanted to come with me, and I refused: ‘You stay here, keep an eye on “this” and wait for me. I’ll be back with news, whatever it is.’ She began to cry and held out a pin with a cameo I’d given her. ‘Here,’ she said, ‘take this token of my love; keep it with you at all times as a reminder that I’m waiting for you.’

(For some reason, the traveler asked for details about the pin. I showed it to him and he took a quick look. ‘I don’t understand,’ he said, ‘if what you wished for was to find your house there, why didn’t you just accept it, with satisfaction and joy?’

I told him that we’ve all, at some point or another, wished for the ability to fly but that if we flapped our arms and managed to get a few meters off the ground, our next wish would be to be back on terra firma as soon as possible.)

“An inexplicable frenzy guided my feet. Every so often I would turn my head and see the lights of the house growing smaller in the distance, until a small hill snuffed them out completely. At that moment, I slowed my pace; my good sense awoken, I began to reflect and to believe it possible, after all, that some special physical state could have altered my mind in that way. Still walking, I ran a hand through my hair, across my forehead, and all over my head, searching for an undiscovered injury that could have muddied my thoughts. I harbored the scant hope that the disclosure would have an effect similar to what had happened with my wrist: suddenly finding a painful spot could make the scales fall from my eyes.

“But no one’s destiny can be altered with a mere mind game, and mine had taken an irreparable turn. Just as I was more convinced of the idea of a temporary malady caused by the accident, the shaft of light before me sketched the base of the boundary cross. I lifted the flashlight, tracing the stone outline with its beam and, to be sure my eyes weren’t tricking me, I ran my hands over it so insistently that my palms were stinging for some time afterward.

“It was important to establish the truth of its presence, because the cross was located at the highest point and almost halfway along my

usual route. Turning, I should be able to see the windows of the house I had left behind. But I needed true courage to confirm that which I knew so well, and it took me some minutes to summon it up. And I was right, I hadn't been tricked by my senses: the points of light were there, marking the house at a spot below me where there had been only grass and dirt that morning, as ever.

"I was overcome by exhaustion. I sat down beneath the cross, to see if I could order my uneasy thoughts; I wanted to go back home, but which way should I head: east or west on the path? I wanted to continue on, but that would bring my soul no rest, no matter what I found at the end of the journey I took home each day. If the house was there, I'd want to return whence I'd just come, and if it wasn't, that would suppose something had broken irreparably, because my family life was made up of wife, house, and landscape, and the alteration of just one of those elements would destroy the balance that had me so smitten. I imagined myself tracing and retracing that same path forever, finding who knows what at either end and unable to put a value on what I found. I felt incapable of taking on such a struggle, so I went to the city with the hope that some friend or acquaintance would give me advice. But no one has been able to, and every once in a while I'm compelled to come here, thinking I can manage to resolve it all, but the doubts return and I end up again resorting to the pursuit of others' opinions. What do you think I should do?"

The traveling salesman said that it was difficult: a cousin of his had been through something different but also thorny, and his family, after gathering to discuss it, had sent him to America.

And the old man, who had remained mute during the entire story, looked at me and said:

"You young folks live in some sort of shallow dish and everything's fine because you drown in there. What you find extraordinary has happened thousands and thousands of times, and everyone faced with it adopts the solution best suited to his temperament, just as in everything else. A poet would accept what he'd asked for and received from the star, and the house in the middle of the path would have been his house, and all others forgotten. And a scientific man, for example, no matter what appeared as he walked, would find his home there where he knows it must be, at the end of the correct number of kilometers. And from those reflections, you can come up with countless examples and take your pick . . ."

The bus came to its final stop. As I said goodbye, I couldn't hold back my effusiveness: I hugged the old man and thanked him for his words.

I rented a horse and, on the outskirts of town, at the crossroads, I stopped for a moment in front of the guidepost to read the sign that read "Vall d'Area" as I softly stroked the cameo pin. I was about to lash the horse on when all the questions came back to torment me. Because, was I more of a poet or more of a surveyor? Or what other thing could I be, deep down, that would ensure I made the right choice?

Conscience Pays a House Call

Translated from Catalan by Mara Faye Lethem

A RAY OF KINDHEARTEDNESS enters through a thin crack, illuminating the spirit of Depa Carel·li, murderer.

He awakens with a stretch of his arms, like so very many normal people. Almost in passing, he pushes aside a small scruple and thinks only that he might be paid another of those visits that he's starting to know well.

Through the window of his attic, he looks out over the landscape of roofs at the dawning day. The lethargic unfurling of faint smoke from each chimney, the vacillating wave of bedsheets gently rocked by the soft sunrise breeze, and the curious charm emitted from the outline of a distant mountain stir up poetry in him. Some version of poetry, of course. He extends a finger and pushes the button that stops the alarm.

Then, the first silence of the day brings him back to his musings of the previous evening. Will he use a rope today, or a firearm, or a cutting edge? The job is simple, but the long tradition of bladed weapons brings a favorable smile to his face; he gets up, opens the drawer of a wobbly desk, and pulls out a handful of daggers and knives. Contemplating one of them gives him a slight shiver, the kind sometimes provoked by tender memories of one's youth. An inscription dulls the blade's gleam from top to bottom: "To Depa, so he remembers, each and every time, the love of his Coloma. 11-10-04."

"Coloma, Coloma!" He closes his eyes, evoking the romance and its ending, the seven years locked away in Santa Lèdia and his escape through the sand dunes. He only keeps the tool for sentimental reasons, because a big nick has taken out part of the "l", the second "o", and the "a" of his former beloved's name. A rust stain near the grip always makes him wonder whether it's a relic of her blood.

But what he needs on this occasion is the paper knife made of Toledo gold, skillfully sharpened. He grabs it and flourishes it with an experienced wave. Yet when his arm is behind him, prepared to wield the weight of his body to give his blow the necessary momentum,

he is frozen by a familiar sensation: it's as if thousands of sable-hair brushes were covering his back with metaphysical tickles. "It must be him!" He turns and, indeed, comes face to face with the angel.

He calls him "the angel" due to his hybrid nature, but he recognizes that no supernatural story would classify him as such.

The figure shakes its head and one finger punitively, and, in a genderless voice, says:

"Don't do it, Carel·li. There's still time to desist."

He looks at the angel almost without surprise. The same sort of full-length white robe, made of a fabric of gleaming dots that reminds him of the representation of snow used in Christmas display windows, and blond hair in a Roman-style cut, with the characteristic noble bearing. He looks him up and down: pink cheeks, long eyelashes, and, hanging from his right arm, the now familiar red leather briefcase. Like every other time, despite finding the thought stupid, he comes up with a French description that seems the most apt: a *démodé* angel. Exactly.

Some time ago, thinking it over, he came to the conclusion that the angel was a Protestant gambit. The Catholic way of doing it would be to dress the apparition in a black habit and surely with a Franciscan hairdo. He couldn't explain exactly what that hairdo would look like, but had blind faith in his presumption. Oh! And not only did he sense a Protestant origin, but also North American inspiration. Every time the angel showed up, he had the feeling that, at any minute, he would open up his briefcase and pull out a ribbon with the following words printed on it: "Listen to the voice of your conscience and obtain fruitful lessons for the fiscal year 1947–1948."

He could find no possible explanation for why he, so bonded to the shores of the Mediterranean, should have to deal with an angel who seemed to be advertising something from overseas. On the other hand, he was all too familiar with the contents of the red leather briefcase: it didn't hold any ribbons printed with messages.

Actually, the briefcase held the future consequences of his planned actions. And since his actions were bad, every time they earned the attention of that character who was so objective, physically speaking, the results were also bad. So Depa fears the briefcase and because of that, has great respect for the angel. To such an extent that he, who usually ignores hierarchy and speaks to everyone in the same casual tone, addresses the angel with a formal distance.

“Please sit, sir,” he says, pointing to a rocking chair.

The figure sits down and, as he does, his white tunic crunches like hoarfrost when stepped on. He places the briefcase on his knees, so it is clearly visible, and starts to rock back and forth slowly with his finger extended, while taking up the thread of a tirade that Depa already knows by heart:

“This isn’t good, Depa. You see where this life you’ve been leading has gotten you. You are getting on in years and you’re poor. Oh, and you won’t make it to old age. Evil always comes back to its source, like parades, jokes, and that well-known Australian weapon. By some miracle you’ve escaped it up until now, and only partially, because you are amassing all the elements that will end up destroying you.”

The mention of his poverty bothers him more than the warning of danger. He instinctively pulls up the bedspread to cover the torn mattress with bits of fluff escaping. In a desperate attempt to show his prosperity, he offers the angel something to drink.

He already knows that guest won’t eat or drink anything, and he quickly regrets his foolishness. The angel, naturally, shakes his head again and his Roman hairstyle flutters like the fringe on a fine silk damask.

The respect his visitor inspires in him does not rule out, in any case, a certain haughtiness that forces Depa to challenge him. From his junk room he pulls out a pedal-operated grindstone and begins to sharpen the Toledo gold knife. True vocation holds a powerful sway, and furthermore, he’s never been a coward. He decided to kill the old woman and he will, despite the wisdom of the angel’s words.

When the steel comes into contact with the stone, it brings forth a whistle that lodges in even the most hidden corners of the attic. For a moment, when he lifts the tool to test the cutting edge with his thumb, Depa Carel·li hears something that makes his chest tighten. The sound’s source is so obvious that he brings his ear without hesitation to the angel’s briefcase and from it hears an unmistakable tick-tock.

It was years ago, on Illa Negra, when the prison director, in a true abuse of power, forced the accomplices of a famous murderer to witness his execution. Among them was the young Carel·li, eyes wide at seeing the termination of his friend—tied to a chair and with a metal collar around his neck—who looked at those in attendance with a terrible gaze. In the room there was a large pendulum clock, and when

Depa covered his face with his hands, in grief, the rhythmic pulse of its workings filled his soul. He'd remembered that ticking vividly ever since, so he can identify it easily, and he goes pale. But who would turn back now, after such a long career? He finishes preparing his chosen instrument, gestures to the angel, and goes out onto the street.

An early morning fog darkens the sun, which clumsily circles the earth like a large glaucous pupil.

Carel·li turns two corners and comes out onto a wide avenue. He walks the length of a ministry's fence and runs the handle of his paper knife across the iron bars, producing a sound filled with the first flush of youth. He stops to wait for a bus, and before one arrives, he has time to sweet-talk some girls with the gallantry of a refined old hobo.

The bus drops him in a distinguished and silent neighborhood. Confidently, he searches out a small door in a corner of a stone wall and opens it deftly; he crosses a yard, making sure the gravel doesn't crunch beneath his feet, and slips through a wooden lattice covering his entire body with the greenness of the ivy. He leaps over the railing of the first balcony before the weight of the years forces him to stop and catch his breath. He opens another door, pulls aside some curtains, and finds the old woman in her bed, wearing a large bonnet with lace that half conceals her closed eyes. Standing beside her, so white he's almost fluorescent, the angel waits to rebuke him.

"Don't kill her, Carel·li. There's no need. You can rob her without touching her. Look how deeply she's sleeping."

As he says that, he passes the red leather briefcase in front of his face. But every man must obey his nature, and this one has made up his mind. Pushing the angel gently, he says:

"Move aside, we could splatter you."

The community established between him and the victim by that use of the plural gives him a feeling of completeness, of harmonious achievement of a higher objective. He plunges the tool in adroitly and muffles her death rattle with the pillow. That's it. Then he indulges in a prudent looting and leaves the same way he came in.

Once again out on the street, he turns to tell the angel:

"Don't bother, I can draw the useless conclusions all on my own."

He says that and he heads off, singing under his breath, with great sadness.