





The last time I saw Miguel Desvern or Deverne was also the last time that his wife, Luisa, saw him, which seemed strange, perhaps unfair, given that she was his wife, while I, on the other hand, was a person he had never met, a woman with whom he had never exchanged so much as a single word. I didn't even know his name, or only when it was too late, only when I saw a photo in the newspaper, showing him after he had been stabbed several times, with his shirt half off, and about to become a dead man, if he wasn't dead already in his own absent consciousness, a consciousness that never returned: his last thought must have been that the person stabbing him was doing so by mistake and for no reason, that is, senselessly, and what's more, not just once, but over and over, unremittingly, with the intention of erasing him from the world and expelling him from the earth without further delay, right there and then. But why do I say 'too late', I wonder, too late for what? I have no idea, to be honest. It's just that when someone dies, we always think it's too late for anything, or indeed everything – certainly too late to go on waiting for him – and we write him off as another casualty. It's the same with those closest to us, although we find their deaths much harder to accept and we mourn them, and their image accompanies us in our mind both when we're out and about and when we're at home, even though for a long time we believe that we will never get accustomed to their absence.

From the start, though, we know – from the moment they die – that we can no longer count on them, not even for the most petty thing, for a trivial phone call or a banal question (‘Did I leave my car keys there?’ ‘What time did the kids get out of school today?’), that we can count on them for nothing. And nothing means nothing. It’s incomprehensible really, because it assumes a certainty, and being certain of anything goes against our nature: the certainty that someone will never come back, never speak again, never take another step – whether to come closer or to move further off – will never look at us or look away. I don’t know how we bear it, or how we recover. I don’t know how it is that we do gradually begin to forget, when time has passed and distanced us from them, for they, of course, have remained quite still.

But I had often seen him and heard him talk and laugh, almost every morning, in fact, over a period of a few years, and quite early in the morning too, although not so very early; indeed, I used to delay slightly getting into work just so as to be able to spend a little time with that couple, and not just with him, you understand, but with them both, it was the sight of them together that calmed and contented me before my working day began. They became almost obligatory. No, that’s the wrong word for something that gives one pleasure and a sense of peace. Perhaps they became a superstition; but, no, that’s not it either: it wasn’t that I believed the day would go badly if I didn’t share breakfast with them, at a distance, that is; it was just that, without my daily sighting of them, I began work feeling rather lower in spirits or less optimistic, as if they provided me with a vision of an orderly or, if you prefer, harmonious world, or perhaps a tiny fragment of the world visible only to a very few, as is the case with any fragment or any life, however public or exposed that life might be. I didn’t like to shut myself away for hours in the office without first hav-

ing seen and observed them, not on the sly, but discreetly, the last thing I would have wanted was to make them feel uncomfortable or to bother them in any way. And it would have been unforgivable and to my own detriment to frighten them off. It comforted me to breathe the same air and to be a part – albeit unnoticed – of their morning landscape, before they went their separate ways, probably until the next meal, which, on many days, would have been supper. The last day on which his wife and I saw him, they could not dine together. Or even have lunch. She waited twenty minutes for him at a restaurant table, puzzled but not overly concerned, until the phone rang and her world ended, and she never waited for him again.

It was clear to me from the very first day that they were married, he being nearly fifty and she slightly younger, not yet forty. The nicest thing about them was seeing how much they enjoyed each other's company. At an hour when almost no one is in the mood for anything, still less for fun and games, they talked non-stop, laughing and joking, as if they had only just met or met for the very first time, and not as if they had left the house together, dropped the kids off at school, having first got washed and dressed at the same time – perhaps in the same bathroom – and woken up in the same bed, nor as if the first thing they'd seen had been the inevitable face of their spouse, and so on and on, day after day, for a fair number of years, because they had children, a boy and a girl, who came with them on a couple of occasions, the girl must have been about eight and the boy about four, and the boy looked incredibly like his father.

The husband dressed with a slightly old-fashioned elegance, although he never seemed in any way ridiculous or anachronistic. I mean that he was always smartly dressed and well coordinated, with made-to-measure shirts, expensive, sober ties, a handkerchief in his top jacket pocket, cufflinks, polished black lace-up shoes – or else suede, although he only wore suede towards the end of spring, when he started wearing lighter-coloured suits – and his hands were carefully manicured. Despite all this, he didn't give the impression of

being some vain executive or a dyed-in-the-wool rich kid. He seemed more like a man whose upbringing would not allow him to go out in the street dressed in any other way, not at least on a working day; such clothes seemed natural to him, as though his father had taught him that, after a certain age, this was the appropriate way to dress, regardless of any foolish and instantly outmoded fashions, and regardless, too, of the raggedy times in which we live, and that he need not be affected by these in the least. He dressed so traditionally that I never once detected a single eccentric detail; he wasn't interested in trying to look different, although he did stand out a little in the context of the café where I always saw him and even perhaps in the context of our rather scruffy city. This naturalness was matched by his undoubtedly cordial, cheery nature, almost hail-fellow-well-met, you might say (although he addressed the waiters formally as *usted* and treated them with a kindness that never toppled over into cloying familiarity): his frequent outbursts of laughter were somewhat loud, it's true, but never irritatingly so. He laughed easily and with gusto, but he always did so sincerely and sympathetically, never in a flattering, sycophantic manner, but responding to things that genuinely amused him, as many things did, for he was a generous man, ready to see the funny side of the situation and to applaud other people's jokes, at least the verbal variety. Perhaps it was his wife who mainly made him laugh, for there are people who can make us laugh even when they don't intend to, largely because their very presence pleases us, and so it's easy enough to set us off, simply seeing them and being in their company and hearing them is all it takes, even if they're not saying anything very extraordinary or are even deliberately spouting nonsense, which we nevertheless find funny. They seemed to fulfil that role for each other; and although they were clearly married, I never caught one of them putting on an

artificial or studiedly sappy expression, like some couples who have lived together for years and make a point of showing how much in love they still are, as if that somehow increased their value or embellished them. No, it was more as if they were determined to get on together and make a good impression on each other with a view to possible courtship; or as if they had been so drawn to each other before they were married or lived together that, in any circumstance, they would have spontaneously chosen each other – not out of conjugal duty or convenience or habit or even loyalty – as companion or partner, friend, conversationalist or accomplice, in the knowledge that, whatever happened, whatever transpired, whatever there was to tell or to hear, it would always be less interesting or amusing with someone else. Without her in his case, without him in her case. There was a camaraderie between them and, above all, a certainty.



There was something very pleasant about Miguel Desvern or Deverne's face, it exuded a kind of manly warmth, which made him seem very attractive from a distance and led me to imagine that he would be irresistible in person. I doubtless noticed him before I did Luisa, or else it was because of him that I also noticed her, since although I often saw the wife without the husband – he would leave the café first and she nearly always stayed on for a few minutes longer, sometimes alone, smoking a cigarette, sometimes with a few work colleagues or mothers from school or friends, who on some mornings joined them there at the last moment, when he was already just about to leave – I never saw the husband without his wife beside him. I have no image of him alone, he only existed with her (that was one of the reasons why I didn't at first recognize him in the newspaper, because Luisa wasn't there). But I soon became interested in them both, if 'interested' is the right word.

Desvern had short, thick, very dark hair, with, at his temples, just a few grey hairs, which seemed curlier than the rest (if he had let his sideburns grow, they might have sprouted incongruously into kiss-curls). The expression in his eyes was bright, calm and cheerful, and there was a glimmer of ingenuousness or childishness in them whenever he was listening to someone else, the expression of a man who is, generally speaking, amused by life, or who is simply not prepared

to go through life without enjoying its million and one funny sides, even in the midst of difficulties and misfortunes. True, he had probably known very few of these compared with what is most men's common lot, and that would have helped him to preserve those trusting, smiling eyes. They were grey and seemed to look at everything as if everything were a novelty, even the insignificant things they saw repeated every day, that café at the top of Príncipe de Vergara and its waiters, my silent face. He had a cleft chin, which reminded me of a film starring Robert Mitchum or Cary Grant or Kirk Douglas, I can't remember who it was now, and in which an actress places one finger on the actor's dimpled chin and asks how he manages to shave in there. Every morning, it made me feel like getting up from my table, going over to Deverne and asking him the same question and, in turn, gently prodding his chin with my thumb or forefinger. He was always very well shaven, dimple included.

They took far less notice of me, infinitely less, than I did of them. They would order their breakfast at the bar and, once served, take it over to a table by the large window that gave on to the street, while I took a seat at a table towards the back. In spring and summer, we would all sit outside, and the waiters would pass our orders through a window that opened out next to the bar, and this gave rise to various comings and goings and, therefore, to more visual contact, because there was no other form of contact. Both Desvern and Luisa occasionally glanced at me, merely out of curiosity, but never for very long or for any reason other than curiosity. He never looked at me in an insinuating, castigating or arrogant manner, that would have been a disappointment, and she never showed any sign of suspicion, superiority or disdain, which I would have found most upsetting. Because I liked both of them, you see, the two of them together. I didn't regard them with envy, not at all, but with a feeling

of relief that in the real world there could exist what I believed to be a perfect couple. Indeed, they seemed even more perfect in that Luisa's sartorial appearance was in complete contrast to that of Deverne, as regards style and choice of clothes. At the side of such a smartly turned-out man, one would have expected to see a woman who shared the same characteristics: classically elegant, although not perhaps predictably so, but wearing a skirt and high heels most of the time, with clothes by Céline, for example, and earrings and bracelets that were striking, but always in good taste. In fact, she alternated between a rather sporty look and one that I'm not sure whether to describe as casual or indifferent, certainly nothing elaborate anyway. She was as tall as him, olive-skinned, with shoulder-length, dark, almost black hair, and very little make-up. When she wore trousers – usually jeans – she accompanied them with a conventional jacket and boots or flat shoes; when she wore a skirt, her shoes were low-heeled and plain, very like the shoes many women wore in the 1950s, and in summer, she put on skimpy sandals that revealed delicate feet, small for a woman of her height. I never saw her wearing any jewellery and, as for handbags, she only ever used the sort you sling over your shoulder. She was clearly as pleasant and cheerful as he was, although her laugh wasn't quite as loud; but she laughed just as easily and possibly even more warmly than he did, revealing splendid teeth that gave her a somewhat childlike look, or perhaps it was simply the way her cheeks grew rounder when she smiled – she had doubtless laughed in exactly the same unguarded way ever since she was four years old. It was as if they had got into the habit of taking a break together before going off to their respective jobs, once the morning bustle was over – inevitable in families with small children – a moment to themselves, so as not to have to part in the middle of all that rush without sharing a little animated conversation. I used

to wonder what they talked about or told each other – how could they possibly have so much to say, given that they went to bed and got up together and would presumably keep each other informed of their thoughts and activities – I only ever caught fragments of their conversation, or just the odd word or two. On one occasion, I heard him call her ‘princess’.

You could say that I wished them all the best in the world, as if they were characters in a novel or a film for whom one is rooting right from the start, knowing that something bad is going to happen to them, that at some point, things will go horribly wrong, otherwise there would be no novel or film. In real life, though, there was no reason why that should be the case, and I expected to continue seeing them every morning exactly as they were, without ever sensing between them a unilateral or mutual coolness, or that they had nothing to say and were impatient to be rid of each other, a look of reciprocal irritation or indifference on their faces. They were the brief, modest spectacle that lifted my mood before I went to work at the publishing house to wrestle with my megalomaniac boss and his horrible authors. If Luisa and Desvern did not appear for a few days, I would miss them and face my day’s work with a heavier heart. In a way, without realizing it or intending to, I felt indebted to them, they helped me get through the day and allowed me to fantasize about their life, which I imagined to be unblemished, so much so that I was glad not to be able to confirm this view or find out more, and thus risk breaking the temporary spell (my own life was full of blemishes, and the truth is that I didn’t give the couple another thought until the following morning, while I sat on the bus cursing because I’d had to get up so early, which is something I loathe). I would have liked to give them something similar in exchange, but how could I? They didn’t need me or, perhaps, anyone: I was almost invisible, erased by their

contentment. A couple of times when he left, having first, as usual, kissed Luisa on the lips – she never remained seated for that kiss, but stood up to reciprocate it – he would give me a slight nod, almost a bow, having first looked up and half-raised one hand to say goodbye to the waiters, as if I were just another waiter, a female one. His observant wife made a similar gesture when I left – always after him and before her – on the same two occasions when her husband had been courteous enough to do so. But when I tried to return that gesture with my own even slighter nod, both he and she had looked away and didn't even see me. They were so quick, or so prudent.

During the time when I used to see them, I didn't know who they were or what they did, although they were clearly people with money. Not immensely rich, perhaps, but comfortably off. I mean that if they had belonged in the former category, they would not have taken their children to school themselves, as I was sure they did before enjoying that brief pause in the café; perhaps their kids went to a local school such as Colegio Estilo, which was very close, although there are several others in the area, in refurbished houses, or *hotelitos* as they used to be called, in the swish El Viso district; indeed, I myself went to an infants' school in Calle Oquendo, not far from there; nor would they have had breakfast almost daily in that local café or gone off to their respective jobs at about nine o'clock, he slightly before and she slightly after, as the waiters confirmed to me when I asked about them, as did a work colleague with whom I discussed the macabre event later on, and who, despite knowing no more about them than I did, had managed to glean a few facts; I suppose people who like to gossip and think the worst always have ways of finding out whatever they want, especially if it's something negative or there's some tragedy involved, even if it has nothing to do with them.

One morning towards the end of June, neither of them appeared at the café, not that there was anything unusual about that, for it did occasionally happen, and I assumed that they must have gone away

somewhere or were too busy to share that brief pause in the day which they both clearly enjoyed so much. Then I was away for most of a week, dispatched by my boss to some stupid book fair abroad, mainly to press the flesh on his behalf and generally play the fool. When I returned, they still did not appear, not once, and that worried me, more for my own sake than for theirs, because I was suddenly deprived of my morning fillip. ‘How easy it is for a person simply to vanish into thin air,’ I thought. ‘Someone only has to move jobs or house and you’ll never know anything more about them, never see them again. All it takes is a change in work schedule. How fragile they are, these connections with people one knows only by sight.’ This made me wonder if, after spending so long endowing them with such joyful significance, I shouldn’t perhaps have tried to exchange a few words with them, not with the intention of bothering them or spoiling their moment of togetherness nor, of course, with the idea of establishing some kind of social relationship outside of the café, that wasn’t what I wanted at all; but merely to show them how much I liked and appreciated them, so as to be able to say hello to them from that point on, and to feel obliged to say goodbye to them if, one day, I were to leave the publishing house and thus cease to frequent that particular area, and to make them feel slightly obliged to do the same if they were the ones to move on or to change their habits, just as a local shopkeeper would forewarn us if he were going to close or sell his business, just as we would warn everyone if we were about to move house. To, at least, be aware that we are about to cease to see people we’ve grown accustomed to seeing every day, even if only at a distance or in some purely utilitarian way, barely noticing their face. Yes, that’s what one usually does.

So, in the end, I asked the waiters. They told me that, as far as they knew, the couple had already gone on holiday. This sounded to me

more like supposition than fact. It was still a little early to go away, but there are people who prefer not to spend July in Madrid, when the heat is at its worst, or perhaps Luisa and Deverne could allow themselves the luxury of spending the whole two months on vacation, they certainly looked wealthy enough and free enough too (perhaps they were self-employed). While I regretted having to wait until September for my little morning stimulant, I was reassured to know that they would be back and hadn't disappeared from the face of my earth for ever.

During that time, I remember happening upon a newspaper headline about a Madrid businessman who had been stabbed to death, and recall that I rapidly turned the page without reading the whole item, precisely because of the accompanying photo, which showed a man lying on the ground in the middle of the street, in the street itself, without a jacket or tie or shirt, or with his shirt unbuttoned and the tails hanging out, while the ambulance men were trying to revive or save him, and with a pool of blood all around, his white shirt drenched and stained, or so I thought from that one quick glance. Given the angle from which the photo had been taken, you couldn't see the man's face clearly and, besides, I didn't stop to look properly, I hate the current mania in the press for not sparing the reader or viewer even the most gruesome of images, as if the verbal description were not enough – or perhaps the ones who want those images are the readers and viewers, who must, by and large, be disturbed individuals; why else insist on being shown something you already know or have been told about – and with not the slightest consideration for the person who has been so cruelly mistreated and who can no longer defend or protect himself from the kind of prying gaze to which he would never willingly have submitted when fully conscious, just as he would not have appeared before perfect strangers or indeed



acquaintances in dressing gown and pyjamas, considering himself, quite rightly, to be unpresentable. Photographing a dead or dying man, especially one who has died a violent death, seems to me an abuse showing a gross lack of respect for someone who has just become a victim or a corpse – if he can still be seen, that means he’s not quite dead or does not belong entirely in the past, in which case, he should be left to die properly and to make his exit from time with no unwanted witnesses and no audience – and I’m not prepared to be a part of this new custom being imposed on us, I don’t want to look at what they urge or almost oblige us to look at, and to add my curious, horrified eyes to the hundreds of thousands of others whose minds will be thinking as they watch, with a kind of repressed fascination and, no doubt, relief: ‘The person I can see before me isn’t me, it’s someone else. It’s not me because I can see his face and it’s not mine. I can read his name in the papers and it’s not mine either, it’s not the same, not my name. It happened to someone else, but whatever could he have done, what kind of trouble must he have been in, what debts must he have incurred, what terrible damage must he have caused for someone to want to stab him to death like that? I never get involved in anything and I don’t make enemies either, I keep myself to myself. Or rather I do get involved and I do cause my own kind of damage, but no one has yet caught me. Fortunately, the dead man they’re showing us here is someone else and not me, so I’m safer than I was yesterday, yesterday I escaped. This poor devil, on the other hand, didn’t.’ At no point did it occur to me to associate the item of news, which I merely skim-read, with the pleasant, cheerful man whom I watched every day having his breakfast, and who, quite unawares, along with his wife, had the infinite kindness to raise my spirits.