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**IN THE  
NIGHT  
OF  
TIME**

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**ANTONIO MUÑOZ  
MOLINA**

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*TRANSLATED FROM THE SPANISH BY*  
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# 1

**S**URROUNDED BY the confusion in Pennsylvania Station, Ignacio Abel stopped when he heard someone call his name. I see him first at a distance in the rush-hour crowd, a male figure identical to all the others, as in a photograph of the time, dwarfed by the immense scale of the architecture: light topcoats, raincoats, hats; women's hats, the brims at a slant and small feathers on the sides; the red visored caps of porters and railroad employees; faces blurred in the distance; coats open, the coattails flying backward because of an energetic pace; human currents that intersect but never collide, each man and woman a figure similar to the rest and yet endowed with an identity as undeniable as the unique trajectory each follows to a specific destination—directional arrows, blackboards displaying the names of places and the hours of departure and arrival, metal stairs that resound and tremble beneath a gallop of footsteps, clocks hanging from iron arches or crowning the large vertical calendars that are visible from across the station. It was necessary to know it all precisely: the letters and numbers bright red like the caps of station porters that day in late October 1936. On the illuminated sphere of each of the clocks, hanging like captive globes high above the heads of the crowd, it is ten minutes to four. At that moment Ignacio Abel moves through the lobby of the station, through the great expanse of marble, high iron arches, and dirty glass

vaults filtering a golden light where all the dust floats alongside the clamor of voices and footsteps.

I saw him with increasing clarity, emerging out of nowhere, almost a figment of my imagination, holding his suitcase, tired after dashing up the staircase at the entrance, through the oblique shadows of the marble columns, and into that enormous space where he might not find his way in time. I distinguished him from the others, with whom he almost merges, a dark suit, an identical raincoat, a hat, clothes perhaps too formal for this city and this time of year, European clothes, like the suitcase he carries, solid and expensive, its leather worn after so much traveling, covered by hotel and steamship-company stickers, the remains of chalk marks and customs stamps, a suitcase that weighs a great deal for his hand, aching from gripping the handle so hard. With the precision of a police report and a dream, I discover the actual details. I see them rise in front of me and crystallize at the very moment Ignacio Abel stops in the powerful currents of the crowd and turns, as if he had heard his name: someone must have seen him and shouted his name in order to be heard over the clamor, amplified by the marble walls and iron vaults, the resounding confusion of footsteps, voices, trains, the vibration of the floor, the metallic echoes of the loudspeaker announcements, the shouts of newsboys yelling the afternoon news. I feel through his mind just as I feel through his pockets or the inside of his suitcase. Ignacio Abel looks at the front pages of newspapers expecting and fearing to see a headline in which the word "Spain" appears, the word "war," the word "Madrid." And he looks at the face of every woman of a specific age and height, foolishly hoping that chance will allow him to see his lost lover, Judith Biely. In the lobbies and on the platforms of train stations, in the sheds of port installations, on the sidewalks of Paris and New York, for the past few weeks he has crossed entire forests of unknown faces that continue to multiply in his imagination when sleep begins to weigh down his eyes. Faces and voices, names, phrases in English that he hears at random and that remain hanging in air like streamers. *I told you we were late but you never listen to me and now we're gonna miss that goddam train.* The voice also

seemed to be speaking to him, so hesitant in his practical decisions, so awkward with people, holding his suitcase, in his worn European suit, vaguely funereal, like the suit of his friend Professor Rossman when he first appeared in Madrid. In his overstuffed wallet Ignacio Abel carries a picture of Judith Biely and another of his children, Lita and Miguel, smiling on a Sunday morning a few months earlier — the two broken halves of his life, once incompatible, both lost now. He knows if you look at photographs too many times they no longer invoke a presence. The faces let go of their singularity, just as an article of intimate clothing treasured by a lover soon loses the intensely desirable scent of the one who wore it. In the police-file photos in Madrid the faces of the dead, the murdered, have been so severely disfigured that not even their closest relatives can identify them. What will his children see now if they look through the family albums, so carefully catalogued by their mother, for the face they have not seen for the past three months and don't know if they will see again, the one no longer identical to the face they remember? The father who fled, they will be told, the deserter, the one who chose to go to the other side, to take a train one Sunday afternoon and pretend nothing had happened, that he would return calmly to their summer house the following Saturday (though if he had stayed, it's very likely he'd be dead now). I see him, tall, foreign, thin by comparison with his passport photo, taken only at the beginning of June and yet at another time, before the bloody, deluded summer in Madrid and the beginning of the journey that perhaps will end in a few hours; his movements are hesitant, frightened among all those people who know their exact destinations and advance toward him with an unyielding energy, a powerful determination of husky shoulders, raised chins, flexible knees. He has heard an improbable voice speak his name, but as soon as he turns he knows no one called him, and yet he looks with that same automatic hope, seeing only the irritated faces of people now delayed, enormous men with light eyes and inflamed faces, chewing on cigars. *Don't you have eyes in your head, you moron?* In the hostility of strangers, eyes never play a part. In Madrid right now, looking away from a stare is one of the new strategies for survival.

You better not seem afraid or you'll automatically become suspect. The voice actually heard or only imagined in a kind of acoustical mirage has produced in him the response of a man about to fall asleep who thinks he has tripped on a step and either wakes startled or sinks back into sleep. But he knows he has heard his name with absolute clarity, not shouted by someone who wants to attract his attention in the noisy crowd but softly, almost a murmur, Ignacio, Ignacio Abel, a familiar voice he can't identify but is on the verge of recognizing. He doesn't even know whether it's the voice of a man or a woman, the voice of someone dead or alive. On the other side of his locked door in Madrid, he heard a voice repeating his name in a hoarse, pleading tone. There he stood in silence, holding his breath, not moving in the dark, not opening the door.

In recent months you can no longer be sure about certain things, can't know whether a friend, seen a few days or only hours ago, is still alive. Once death and life had clearer, more precise boundaries. You send letters and postcards and don't know whether they'll reach their destination, and if they do, whether the one who should have received them is alive or still at that address. You dial the telephone and there's no answer, or the voice at the other end belongs to a stranger. You pick up the receiver to speak with someone or get information and the line is dead. You turn on the faucet and water may not come out. The customary, automatic actions are canceled by uncertainty. Ordinary streets in Madrid abruptly end in a barricade or a trench or a heap of rubble left by an exploded bomb. On the sidewalk, turning a corner, you can see in the first light of day a rigid body pushed against a building that served as a blank wall for a firing squad the night before, the half-closed eyes, the yellowed face, the upper lip contracted into a smile that reveals teeth, the top of the head blown off by a shot fired from a few inches away. The phone rings in the middle of the night and you're afraid to pick up the receiver. You hear the elevator motor or the doorbell in your sleep and can't tell whether it's a real threat or only a nightmare. So far from Madrid yet Ignacio Abel still thinks of those fearful nights and months of insomnia, fearful nights in the pres-

ent tense. Distance doesn't cancel the verbal tense of fear. In the hotel room where he has spent four nights, the deafening noise of enemy planes woke him; he opened his eyes and it was the rattle of an elevated train. The voices continue to reach him: who has called his name just now, as I saw him standing motionless in his open raincoat, holding his suitcase, wearing the anxious expression of someone who looks at clocks and signs afraid he'll miss a train; what absent voice imposed itself above the uproar of real life, calling him, Ignacio, Ignacio Abel, urging him to run faster or to stop and turn around and go back?

Now I see him much more clearly, isolated in that instant of immobility, encircled by sudden gestures, hostile looks, the rush of the crowd, tired after working in offices, hurrying to catch trains, driven by obligations and trapped by the spider webs of relationships he lacks, like a vagrant or a lunatic, though in his pocket he carries a valid passport and in his hands the train ticket and his suitcase, the battered yet still distinguished suitcase I can almost see as if through Ignacio Abel's weary, avid eyes. I see the hand clutching the leather handle, feel the excessive tension of his grip, the pain in his joints from repeating this action for over two weeks, when the same figure of a tall, middle-aged man, now lost in the crowd, walked alone at night along a street in Madrid where the streetlights were out or broken or painted blue and the only light filtered through the closed shutters of a few windows. The same figure, cut out of the photograph of Pennsylvania Station and inserted in a Madrid street, Calle Alfonso XII perhaps (the name was changed and for a time it was called Niceto Alcalá-Zamora; now it has been changed again and is called Reforma Agraria), or walking past Retiro Park fifteen or twenty days earlier on his way to the train station, staying close to the walls, his suitcase banging against the corners as he tries to disappear into the shadows. In the silence of a curfew, an approaching car can mean only danger, even if all your documents are in order. He would have to know the exact departure date, but he hasn't kept count of the number of days he's been traveling, and time moves away very quickly in the past. A city in the dark, besieged by fear, shaken by the

sound of battle, the engines of planes that approach but are still no more than an echo of distant misfortune. He looks at one of the clocks hanging from the iron arches and calculates that for several hours it has been night in Madrid, as the minute hand advances with an identical spasm in all the illuminated spheres, jumping from eight to seven, a stroke of time like an urgent heartbeat, the step one takes into the void on falling asleep: seven minutes to four; the train he's supposed to catch leaves at four and he has no idea where to go, which of the paths intersecting in the crowd like currents on the ocean's surface is the one that will carry him to his destination. As in a lucid dream, now that he has turned I can see his face, close, just as he saw it this morning after wiping the steam from the mirror at which he was going to shave in the hotel room where he spent four nights and to which he knows he'll never return. Now the doors close forever behind him, and his presence disappears without a trace. He walks along the hotel corridor, turns a corner, and it's as if he'd never been there. I saw him shave this morning at the mirror over the sink in the room he knew he was finally about to leave, thanks to the telegram he'd received a few hours earlier, the one lying open on the night table, next to his wallet and his reading glasses and the letter handed to him yesterday afternoon, the one he almost tore up after he read it. *Dear Ignacio, I hope this letter finds you well your children and I are fine and safe thank God, no small thing these days though it seems you haven't worried too much about finding out how we are.* The telegram contains a brief apology for the days of waiting, as well as information regarding the train and its departure time and the name of the station where he'll be picked up. The letter was written and mailed almost three months ago and reached him at this hotel in New York owing to a series of accidents he cannot quite explain, as if the very density of the rancor its words exhale (rancor or something else that for the moment he prefers not to name, or doesn't know how to) guided it in its dogged search for him. Nothing is how it once was, and there's no reason to think that after the upheaval things will go back to the way they were. A letter sent to Madrid from a village in the Sierra is lost en route and it takes not two days but three months



to arrive after passing through Red Cross headquarters in Paris and an office of the Spanish postal service where someone stamped the envelope several times: *Unknown at this address*.

Ignacio Abel has been away from his home in Madrid for so short a time and already he's a stranger. I see the envelope in the light of the lamp on the night table in the gloomy room where the noise of an elevated train sounded regularly. Once again Ignacio Abel packed the suitcase lying open on the bed, and shaved more carefully than in recent days now that he knew people were expecting him, that at six this evening someone would be on a platform trying to make out his face among the passengers getting off at the station with the strange Germanic name printed now on his ticket: Rhineberg. He'll get off the train and someone will be waiting for him. He'll hear his name and a part of his suspended existence will be reimposed on him. It matters a great deal to him not to cave in, not to let himself go, to fight with small acts of resistance the entropy of solitary travel, to tend to every detail as one does when constructing a building but forgoes in the sketch of its model. He must shave every morning, though the shaving soap is running out and the razor is losing its edge and the badger brush its hairs, one by one. He must do what he can to keep his shirt collar from looking soiled. But he has only three shirts and they're wearing out from so much washing. The cuffs and collars are fraying, the creases in his trousers are becoming threadbare, his shoelaces are unraveling. He was fastening his shirt this morning and discovered that one of the buttons had fallen off, and even if he could find it, he wouldn't know how to sew it back on. I see Ignacio Abel as if I were seeing myself, with his maniacal attention to detail, his incessant desire to understand everything, his fear of missing something of consequence, his anguish over the passage of time, its crushing slowness when it becomes waiting. He feels his face after shaving, rubbing it with a little lotion from the almost empty bottle he brought from Madrid, and I feel the touch of my fingers on my face. On a journey things wear out or are lost and there's no time to replace them, or you don't know how or how many days are left before you reach your destination, how much longer you'll have to

make your increasingly meager funds last, the bills in your wallet, the coins in your pockets, the trifles kept for no reason and eventually lost: subway tokens or telephone slugs, a train ticket, an unused stamp, the ticket stub from a movie house where he waited out of the rain and watched a film not understanding a word of what was said. I want to enumerate these things just as he does on many nights when he returns to his room and methodically empties his pockets onto the night table as he used to empty them on the desk in his study in Madrid, his office at University City; I want to search Ignacio Abel's pockets, the lining of his jacket, the inner band of his hat, with the touch of his fingers; listen to the clink in his raincoat pocket of the keys to his house in Madrid; know each object and each paper left on the night table and dresser in the hotel room, the ones he has kept as he hurried out to Pennsylvania Station and the ones left behind that will be tossed into the trash by the cleaning woman who makes the bed and opens the window to let in the October air that smells of soot and the river, laundry steam and cooking grease: transient things that contain a fact, an indelible moment, the name of a movie house, the receipt for a fast meal in a cafeteria, a calendar page that has a precise date on the front and on the back a hurriedly scrawled telephone number. In his study, in a drawer he always locked, he kept Judith Biely's letters and photographs along with any small object that had something to do with her or had belonged to her—a box of matches, a lipstick, a coaster from the Palace Hotel nightclub with the circle made by Judith's glass. People's souls are not in photographs but in the small things they touched, in the ones that bore the warmth of their hands. With the help of his reading glasses he searched for her through the columns of tiny names in the Manhattan phone book and was moved when he recognized it among the names of so many strangers, as if he had seen a familiar face in the middle of a crowd or heard her voice. Close variants complicated the search: Bily, Bialy, Bielely. In one of the wooden phone booths that lined the back of the hotel lobby he asked for the number listed next to the name Biely and listened to the ring, his heart racing, afraid he would hang up the moment someone answered. But the operator told him there was no