

1

We are never very far from those we hate. For this very reason, we shall never be truly close to those we love. An appalling fact, I knew it well enough when I embarked. But some truths deserve our attention; others are best left alone.

We had our first sighting of the island at dawn. It had been thirty-three days since the dolphins fell away sternward and nineteen since the crew's breath first expelled clouds of vapour. The Scottish sailors protected themselves with gloves that reached up to their elbows. Their furs were so heavy that the men resembled walruses. Those frigid latitudes were torture for the Senegalese. The captain allowed them to use potato grease as a protective coating on their cheeks and forehead. The substance would run and trickle into their eyes. It brought tears but they never complained.

"Look, on the horizon. Your island," the captain said to me.

I could not make it out. I saw only that same cold ocean, sealed off by distant clouds. We were quite far south, but neither the silhouettes nor the perils of Antarctic icebergs

had enlivened our crossing. Not a single ice mountain, no trace even of those raw, spectacular and melting giants. Against the privations of the south we struggled, but it denied us its majesty. My fate, then, was to stand on the threshold of a border I would never cross. The captain passed me his binoculars. And now? Do you see it? Yes, I saw it. A sliver of land crushed between the greys of the ocean and sky, encircled by a necklace of white foam. And that was all. I had to wait another hour yet, and then, as we drew nearer, the outlines of the island grew visible to the naked eye.

Here was my future abode: an L-shaped expanse that measured barely a mile from end to end. At the northern extreme stood a solid rock elevation crowned by a lighthouse. The tower was imposing not so much for its size as for the island's reduced dimensions, which gave it, in contrast, the solidity of a megalith. At the bend in the L, on a small rise to the south, was the weather official's cottage. Or rather, mine. The two structures were united by a sort of narrow valley overrun with damp undergrowth. The trees grew like a herd of huddled animals seeking their own kind. Moss protected them, a moss more compact than garden hedge and knee high. It stained the tree trunks like a three-coloured blight – blue, violet and black, an unusual phenomenon.

The island was ringed round with small reefs, scattered here and there. They made it impossible to weigh anchor any closer than one thousand feet from the island's only

beach, which spread out in front of the house. I had no choice but to haul my body and baggage into a dinghy. It had to be taken as an act of kindness that the captain accompanied me onto dry land. Nothing obliged him. But during the journey we had come to one of those understandings that sometimes arise between men of different generations. He grew up near the docks of Hamburg and later moved to Denmark. If there was anything remarkable about him, it was his eyes. The rest of the world fell away when he looked at someone. He scrutinised others with the shrewdness of an entomologist and every situation with the finesse of an expert. Some would have mistaken this for severity. I believe that it was his way of expressing the benevolence he hid in the recesses of his soul. He would never confess this love for his fellow man, but it was evident in all his actions. The captain always treated me with the courtesy of an executioner. If he could do anything for me, he would. After all, who was I? A man closer to youth than maturity, heading toward a tiny island swept by harsh polar winds. I would have to live, in a solitude like exile, for twelve months, far from civilisation, with a job as monotonous as it was insignificant: to log the intensity, direction and frequency of the winds. That was how the international marine accords defined my assignment. Naturally, the pay was good. But no one accepts such a fate for money.

Four dinghies were enough to carry the captain, twenty

sailors and me onto the beach. It would take the men a while to unload a whole year's worth of provisions, not to mention the trunks and personal effects I'd brought with me. Stacks of books. I knew I would have time on my hands and wanted to delve into the reading that had been denied to me in the past.

"Well, let's get going," said the captain when he realised that it would be a slow job.

So he and I trudged along the sand. A steep path led up to the house. The prior tenant had taken pains to put up a railing. Driftwood polished by the ocean, crudely nailed. It was obviously the work of a rational mind. And as incredible as it may seem, that was the first clue that started me thinking about the man I was meant to replace. That individual was an actual person and I was witnessing an effect he had had on the world, gratuitous as it seemed. I thought about him and said out loud, "It's strange the weather official hasn't come out to meet us. You'd think he'd be well pleased that he's being replaced."

As often happened with the captain, I spoke, only to bite my tongue a second afterward. His thoughts raced ahead of mine. The house was in front of us. A conical roof, with slate shingles and red brick walls. The building lacked both grace and harmony. In the Alps, it would have been a mountain refuge, a retreat in the woods or a customs booth.

The captain inspected the scene, without moving, like someone sniffing out danger. I had given the initiative over

to him. An early morning wind moved the branches of the four trees that marked the corners of the house. They looked like Canadian oaks. The air wasn't freezing, but it was uncomfortable. An eerie sense of desolation pervaded everything, but its nature was hard to grasp. The problem wasn't so much what was there as what was missing. Where was the weather official? Was he off completing some task of his station? Or simply going for a walk around the island? Gradually, I began to notice ominous signs. The windows were small rectangles of thick glass. The wooden shutters hung open, banging. It jarred me. Around the walls of the house, you could still make out the remains of an abandoned garden. Its borders were traced by half-buried stones. But most of the plants were crushed, as though they had been trampled on by a herd of elephants.

The captain made one of his characteristic gestures: chin up, as if the collar of his blue overcoat were just slightly asphyxiating. Then he pushed the door, which opened with the creak of a profaned Egyptian tomb. If doors could talk, that screech said, Enter at your own risk. Thus, we entered.

The sight was straight out of the diary of an African explorer. It was as if a column of tropical ants had overrun the space, devouring all life. The basic furnishings were essentially intact. More than destruction; abandonment. The space was one open room. The bed, fireplace and the stacked firewood were all in place. The table had fallen over.

The mercury barometer was in one piece. The kitchen utensils were gone – I don't know why, but this detail struck me as an inscrutable mystery. My predecessor's personal effects and equipment were nowhere to be seen. But the neglect seemed to me more the product of some strange madness than that of a natural catastrophe. The scene was grim, but overall the house was still habitable. We could hear the murmur of the waves distinctly.

“Where should we leave the senior official of air and wind's belongings?” asked Sow, one of the Senegalese, as he came in. The sailors had been able to lug the baggage up from the beach.

“Here, anywhere, somewhere inside, it's all the same,” I said roughly, in order to cover up the shock the unexpected voice had given me.

The captain took out his disgust about the situation on the sailor. “Come on, Sow; get the boys to clean up this mess.”

While the men went to work unloading the trunks and putting things in order, the captain suggested we go to the lighthouse.

“Maybe we'll find your predecessor,” he said when the sailors could no longer hear us.

As far as the captain knew, the lighthouse was also inhabited. He couldn't remember exactly who it was, the Dutch or the French, but it belonged to somebody. After all, the lighthouse keeper was the weather official's neighbour. It

seemed logical and fitting that they would at least have struck up a passing friendship. We talked of finding the weather official, but we couldn't account for the house's condition. No matter what, it was time to go to the lighthouse.

I still recall the uneasiness I felt on that short walk. The forest was unlike any we had seen before. A path beaten down by men's footsteps led us on an almost direct route to the lighthouse. It deviated only where the treacherous moss hid pockets of mud and black ooze. The ocean, just behind the trees, grazed us with its soft cadence. The worst of it was, precisely, the silence. Or rather, the noiselessness. The melodies associated with forest wildlife were absent. We heard no birds or chirping insects. Many large tree trunks had grown twisted by the wind's force. From the boat, the forest had looked extremely thick. Distance is often misleading when it comes to density, whether it is human or vegetable. Not this time. The trees grew so close together that it was often difficult to tell whether two sprang from the same root or whether they were separate. A series of narrow streams broke up our path. One broad step was enough to ford them.

The lighthouse tower appeared suddenly, rising behind the tallest trees. The path ended at the edge of the forest. We could see the pedestal of raw stone on which the structure had been built. It was enveloped by the ocean on three sides. The waves must have pounded violently against the rock when the sea was rough. But whoever the architect

was, he had done a thorough job. A rounded and compact surface to withstand the ocean's violence, five well-placed windows, a narrow balcony with a rusty railing, a pointed light tower. The purpose of the balcony was completely incomprehensible. Sticks and crossed posts, often with their points sharpened. Was it scaffolding for repair work? We had neither the leisure nor the strength to wonder.

“Hello! Anybody there? Hello!” called the captain, striking the steel door with the palm of his hand. There was no answer, but that impulse was enough to discover that the door wasn't locked. It was extremely solid. The iron was inches thick and reinforced by dozens of lead rivets. It was so bulky that it took the two of us to shove it open. The lighting inside was uncanny. The sun that filtered through created cathedral-like effects. An incipient coating of lime scattered its whiteness across the concave walls. The stairs rose in a spiral that clung to the rock. As far as we could see, that lower space was used as a storage room, with a large quantity of staples and reserves.

The captain muttered something under his breath that I couldn't make out. He began to climb the stairs with determination. The ninety-six steps ended on a wooden platform that served as a floor to the space above. A push up to the trapdoor and we were inside.

In fact, it was a perfectly ordered and snug dwelling. An elbow-shaped stove was located in the centre of the

almost circular space. A wall with a door broke up the room's roundness. The kitchen was most likely to be found back there. More stairs led to another floor that surely held the lighthouse's lamp. These things seemed all in order. What didn't make sense was the disposition of the objects.

Everything had been oddly arranged on the floor, all along the walls. Objects that would normally be placed on tables or shelves were aligned on the ground. And every crate had something to weigh it down, whether it had a top or not. For example: a shoe box, and over the shoes, a coal iron. An oil drum: a foot-and-a-half tall cylinder filled with dirty clothes. A scrap of wood on top compressed the pieces of clothing. Both the iron and the piece of wood were insufficient covers. In any case, they did nothing to hide the stench, if that was their intended effect. It was as though the owner had worried that the contents would escape like birds if freed from the laws of gravity and had reinforced these small containers with heavy counterweights.

Finally, the bed. It was an old thing, with a headboard of thin iron bars. And, covered in three thick blankets, there was a man.

We had obviously surprised him. His eyes were wide open when we came in. But he didn't move. The blankets went up to his nose and covered him like a bear's skin. He looked defenceless, forlorn and ferocious at the same time. Under the bed, there was a chamber pot filled to the rim with urine.

“Good day, maritime signal technician. We’re replacing your neighbour, the weather official,” the captain said without mincing words and pointing in the direction of the house. “Do you know where he is?”

The captain’s words reminded me that we were a mile away from the landing beach. I suddenly felt that that distance was longer than the entire route between Europe and the island. I also remembered that the captain would be leaving, and soon.

A hand covered in black hair moved idly in the bed. But it gave up halfway through.

The captain was exasperated by the man’s stillness. “Don’t you understand me? You don’t understand my language? Do you speak French? Dutch?”

But the man just kept gazing at him fixedly. He didn’t even bother to pull the blankets away from his face.

“For God’s sake!” the captain bellowed, waving his fist. “I have an important voyage to complete. And I’m in transit! I agreed to go off course by request of the International Maritime Federation in order to drop this man here and pick up his predecessor. Is that clear? But the current weather official isn’t here. He isn’t here. Can you please tell me where he is?”

The lighthouse keeper’s eyes roved from the captain to me.

Flushing, the captain persisted. “I am a captain and it

is in my power to bring you to justice if you deny me crucial information concerning the safety of goods and crew. I repeat for the last time, where is the designated weather official for this island?"

There was an awkward silence. We had just about given up trying to communicate with this character when he threw us off guard with the accent of an Austrian artilleryman.

"I regret that I cannot answer that question."

The captain changed his tone.

"Well, that's better. Why didn't you answer me? Are you in contact with the weather official? When was the last time you saw him?"

Once again, the lighthouse keeper shut himself up in silence.

"Get up!" the captain ordered brusquely.

The man obeyed, taking his time. He threw off the covers, and pulled out his feet. He was quite solidly built. His movements were those of an uprooted tree learning to walk. The lighthouse keeper remained on the bed looking down at the ground. Naked. He wasn't ashamed to expose himself. But the captain averted his gaze, offended by a rank odour to which the lighthouse keeper seemed oblivious. The man's chest was covered in a mat of hair that twined up his shoulders like wild vines. The tangle took on a junglelike density below his navel. His member was enormous, but

flaccid. It unsettled me that even this organ was covered with hair up to the foreskin. What are you looking down there for? I said to myself, and wrenched my eyes up to meet the man's face. His beard was as wild as a patriarch's. He was one of those men whose hairline begins barely an inch and a half above his eyebrows, and thickly at that. The lighthouse keeper sat on the mattress with his hands resting on his knees, arms resting side by side. His eyes and nose were squashed in the middle of his face, leaving plenty of room for a pair of wide, square cheekbones. The interrogation seemed to leave him unfazed. I could no longer tell if it was out of discipline or lethargy. But as I watched him, I noticed a tick that gave away the tension underneath: his lips opened and closed like a bat's, showing a set of widely spaced teeth. The captain stooped down until his face was an inch away from the other's ear.

“Have you gone mad? Are you aware of the implications? This is a breach of international regulations. What is your name?”

The man looked at the captain.

“Whose?”

“Yours! I'm talking to you! What is your given name?”

“Gruner. Gruner.”

The captain said, pronouncing every syllable, “For the last time, Maritime Signal Technician Gruner, I beg of you, where is the weather official?”

Without meeting the captain's eyes, the man said after a hesitation, "It's impossible for me to answer that question."

"He's mad, he's obviously gone mad." The captain gave up, pacing like a caged animal. Then, as if Gruner weren't there, the captain began to rifle through his things with the air of a police inspector. I went into the neighbouring room and saw a book on the floor. It was also held down by a stone. I thumbed through it.

In an attempt to start him talking, I said, "I'm also familiar with Dr Frazer's writing, although I have no set opinions about it. I'm not sure whether *The Golden Bough* is a brilliant piece of scholarship or a magnificent diversion."

"That book isn't mine and I haven't read it."

It was a strange sort of logic. He said it as though there was some kind of connection between owning and reading a book. In any case, nothing more was said. Without even taking his hands off his knees, he gave me a dejected look.

"Oh, leave him be," the captain broke in, having failed to discover anything of interest. "This one hasn't even read his codebook. He puts me on edge."

All we could do was to go back to the weather official's house. But halfway there, while still in the forest, the captain grabbed my sleeve, stopping me short.

"The nearest landmass is Bouvet Island, claimed by the Norwegians, six hundred leagues southwest of here." And after a long and considered pause, "Are you certain you

want to stay? I don't like it. This is just a chunk of rock, lost in the middle of the least trafficked ocean on the planet, at the same latitude as the deserts of Patagonia. I could convince any administrative commission that this site doesn't fulfill the most basic requirements. No one would hold it against you. You have my word."

Should I turn back? I think it was the absurdity of the question that made up my mind. I hadn't travelled halfway around the world only to turn around when I got there.

"The weather official's cottage is in good condition, I have a year's worth of provisions and nothing to stop me from fulfilling my duties. For the rest, my predecessor was most likely the victim of some stupid and fatal accident. Maybe suicide, who knows. But I don't think that this man Gruner is responsible. In my opinion, he is a danger only to himself. The solitude has got to him, and he must fear that we shall blame him for his colleague's disappearance. That would explain his behaviour."

As I said this, I was surprised by how plausible it all sounded. I had only left out my feeling of foreboding. The captain gazed at me with the eyes of a cobra. His body swayed slightly, weight shifting from one foot to the other, his hands beneath the jacket.

"Don't worry about me," I insisted.

"Some disillusionment has brought you here, I'm sure of it," he stated with conviction.

After deliberating, I said, "Who knows."

"No," he answered, "it's obvious. You've come here out of spite." He spread his arms wide like a magician proving his innocence, or a gambler folding his hand. His gesture said: There's nothing more I can do for you.

We had come down to the beach. The twenty sailors longed for the order to return to the ship. For no apparent reason, they were restless with impatience. The Senegalese, Sow, gave me a reassuring slap on the back. The black man was completely bald and had a bright white beard.

He winked and said, "Pay no attention to the boys. They're young sailors, new recruits from the Scottish Highlands. A cactus in the Yucatán understands the mysteries and lore of the sea better than them. They're not even white; they're red. And everybody knows that Scots are superstitious, prey to tavern gossip. Eat well, work hard, and keep looking in the mirror to remember what you look like. Talk to yourself so you don't lose the habit of speech, and keep your mind busy with simple tasks. What is one year of our lives worth compared to the patience of the Good Lord?"

Then they got into the dinghies and grabbed the oars. The sailors looked at me with a mixture of compassion and confusion. They gazed like children seeing an ostrich for the first time, or like peaceful citizens facing a cartload of wounded returning from war. The ship sailed away, with the sluggishness

of a wheelbarrow. I kept my eyes on it until it was just a dot on the horizon. I felt a sense of irreparable loss in the instant that that dot was blotted out, a kind of steel ring pressing in on my skull. I couldn't tell whether it arose from a longing for civilisation, a prisoner's panic, or simply fear.

I lingered awhile longer on the beach. As for the inlet, it was a precise half-moon shape. Volcanic rocks jutted out on the left and right; jagged stones, covered in sharp edges, perforated like cheese. The sand was the texture of incense ash, grey and compressed. Small round holes gave away the hiding places of crustaceans. The rocks made the waves break half dead on the shore; a thin film of white foam traced the boundary between earth and sky. The undertow had driven dozens of cleanly polished tree trunks onto the coastline. Some were the roots of old trees that had been chopped down. The tides had formed them with an artist's precision, leaving sculptures of a rare and contorted beauty. The sky was tinged a gloomy shade of tarnished silver, with the even darker tones of a rusty suit of armour. The sun was no more than an orange suspended halfway up, small and continuously covered by clouds that grudgingly filtered the light. A sun that, because of its latitude, would never reach its zenith. My description isn't trustworthy. It is what I saw. But the landscape we see beyond our eyes tends to be a reflection of what we hide, within us.

2

There are times when we must bargain for our future with the past. You sit on a lonely rock and try to negotiate between the devastating failures that came before and utter darkness that is on its way. In that sense, I trusted that the passage of time, contemplation and distance would work miracles. Nothing less would have brought me to that island.

I spent the rest of that unreal morning unpacking, classifying and putting my belongings in order with the mind-set of a laical monk. What was my life on the island to be but that of a fact-collecting hermit? Most of the books fitted on the shelves that I inherited from my colleague, but those planks told me nothing new about him. Next were the flour sacks, tins, salted meat, the capsules of ether for unexpected pain and thousands of vitamin C tablets, indispensable against scurvy. The instruments of measurement – thermometers, two mercury barometers, three diachronic modulators and the very complete first aid kit – were all, fortunately, intact. I will have to draw from the resources of science in order to

describe the curiosities that I found in trunk 22-E, where the letters and petitions were kept.

Taking advantage of my stay in such an inhospitable place, Russian researchers from Kiev University had asked me to conduct a biological experiment. For reasons that I never fully understood, the island's geographic placement was ideal for the proliferation of small rodents. They proposed that I breed a species of long-haired dwarf rabbits from Siberia, especially suited to the climate. If the project was a success, passing ships would find a supply of fresh meat. They had left me two heavily illustrated books on the subject that gave instructions on how to care for the woolly rabbits. But I didn't have a single cage or rabbit, long-haired or otherwise. I remembered, however, the little laugh of the ship's cook each time the captain and I congratulated him on those stews that were listed on the menu as "Russian rabbit in Kiev sauce".

The Geographical Society of Berlin had sent fifteen jars filled with formaldehyde. According to the instructions they entrusted me with, if I would be so kind, fill them with "interesting autochthonous insects, providing that they are classified as *Hydrometridae Halobates* or *Chironomidae Pontomyia*, which are not averse to water". With typical German efficiency, the notebook had been protected in waterproof silk. In case my skills as a polyglot weren't sufficient, the instructions were translated into eight languages

including Finnish and Turkish. It informed me in severe Gothic lettering that the jars of formaldehyde were the property of the Republic of Germany and that “partial damage or total breakage of one or more jars” would lead to a corresponding administrative sanction. To my great relief, a last-minute addendum informed me that my status as scientific researcher absolved me from those sanctions. What lenience! Unfortunately, it didn’t mention what the *Hydrometridae Halobates* or the *Chironomidae Pontomyia* looked like, whether they were butterflies or beetles, or who might care about them and why.

A company from Lyon, associated with a merchant shipping outfit, requested my services in the field of mineralogy. Their petition came with a small instrument for research analysis and its instruction manual. In the event that I discovered deposits of gold at least 60 per cent pure, and only under those circumstances, they would be obliged if I would inform them “with the maximum speed and urgency”. Of course, if I found a gold mine, it goes without saying that my first reaction would be to go running over to some offices in Lyon so they could lay claim to it. Finally, expressing himself in an ornate hand, a Catholic missionary asked that I fill in “with the care and patience of a saint” some questionnaires with which to quiz the local indigenous people. “Don’t be discouraged if the Bantu chiefs of the island are very shy,” he advised. “Preach by example

and kneel as you recite the rosary. That will inspire them to follow the path of faith.” The missionary was no doubt deeply misinformed as to my destination, where it would be difficult to find a Bantu kingdom, let alone a republic. Just when only two crates were left unopened, that unexpected envelope appeared: the letter.

I’d like to say that I ripped it up without reading it. I couldn’t. Days later, I would go over what happened next. And why? Because that blasted letter angered me so much that I forgot all about the two sealed crates. I didn’t examine their contents, and soon after, that almost got me killed.

The letter was from one of my old cohorts. It was militancy that had brought me to the island in the first place. Or should I say the falling-out with a cause. The world had never seen such a noble and selfless struggle. That is, until we were victorious. From that moment on, my comrades set to turning the tide of persecution. That was all. The only difference between the new government and our enemies was the colours in the flag. It just went to show that humanity was caught up in a series of invisible gears, destined to turn forever on themselves. One could argue that it was not I who had abandoned the cause, but the cause that had abandoned me. That was why I had chosen to flee from the world of men.

What infuriated me most was that the letter said absolutely nothing. Without being impertinent, its authors

had made quite sure that no shred of truth should appear in those lines. They gave me nothing to reproach them for, not realising that this was the most hateful stance of all. Far worse was the insistent and subtle way that they asked for my silence. All they were concerned about was that I might continue on with the same work as I had in the past, but for the enemy. They kept up the same sham about how much they regretted my desertion, even offering to take me back should I decide to return home. They truly believed that my bitterness was born out of personal ambition. More than a letter, it was a catalogue of pettiness. Yes, I insulted them by placing over a thousand leagues between us. But I was no fool. In the midst of my fury, I did not curse those people, just the sentiments that still chained me to the past. I was a recluse not on the island, but in my memory.