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March 4, 1936

Dear Catherine,

Shortly after crossing the border and completing the tiresome customs formalities, I fell asleep, lulled by the rattle of the train wheels. Until then I had spent a sleepless night, tormented by the weight of the problems, alarms and crises our stormy relationship has created. All I could see through the carriage window was the dark night and my own reflection in the glass: the image of a man haunted by anguish. Dawn did not offer the relief often brought by the arrival of a new day. Clouds still filled the sky, and the pale, weak sun only served to render the scenery and my own internal landscape all the more desolate. In this state, on the verge of tears, I finally fell asleep. When I next opened my eyes, everything had changed. A radiant sun was shining in an endless, deep blue sky dotted with a few small, whiter than white clouds. The train was crossing the barren high plains of Castille. Spain at last!

Oh, Catherine, my beloved Catherine, if only you could see this magnificent spectacle you would understand my state of mind as I write these lines! Because it is not simply a geographical phenomenon or a change of scene, but something more, something sublime. In England and the north of France I have just travelled through, the countryside is green, the fields are fertile, the trees tall; and yet the sky is low, grey and damp, the atmosphere mournful. Here, on the other hand, the land is

arid, the fields are dry and cracked and only seem to produce withered bushes, and yet the sky is boundless, the light heroic. In our country we always go around with our heads down, staring at the ground, feeling crushed; here, where the land offers nothing, people hold their heads high, and gaze at the horizon. It is a land of violence, passion, of grandiose individual gestures. Not like us, constrained by our petty morality and trivial social conventions.

That is how I now see our relationship, dearest Catherine: a sordid act of adultery plagued with deceit, doubts and remorse. Throughout the time it has lasted (two, perhaps three years?) neither of us has enjoyed a single moment of peace or happiness. Enveloped in our drab moral climate, we could not see how limited our relationship was: it seemed to us so inevitable that we were almost compelled to suffer. But the moment of our liberation has arrived, and it is the Spanish sun that has revealed it.

Farewell, my beloved Catherine, I am handing you back your freedom, your tranquillity and the ability to enjoy life, all things your youth, beauty and intelligence mean should rightfully be yours. I myself, alone but comforted by the fond memory of our passionate though ill-starred embraces, will seek to return to the path of peace and wisdom.

Yours ever,

ANTHONY

P.S.: I don't think you should trouble your husband with the confession of our adventure. I know how much it would hurt him to learn of the betrayal of a friendship that dates back to our happy days at Cambridge. Not to mention the sincere love he has for you.

"Inglis?"

The question startled him. Absorbed in writing the letter, he had scarcely noticed there were other people in the compartment. From Calais onwards, his only companion had been a laconic Frenchman with whom he had exchanged a few words when he boarded and when he got off again at Bilbao. The rest of the time the Frenchman had slept like a log, as the Englishman had done once he had left. The new passengers had got on the train at several intermediate stations. Apart from Anthony, the train compartment was now filled with what seemed like the members of some travelling theatre troupe: an elderly country priest, a young, fresh-cheeked peasant girl, and the man who had spoken to him. He was of indeterminate age and social condition, with a shaved head and a bushy republican moustache. The priest had a medium-sized wooden suitcase, the girl a bulky bundle, and the man two voluminous black leather cases.

"I don't speak English, you know," he continued, taking Anthony's silence following his first question as assent. "No Inglis. Yo, Espanis. You Inglis, me Espanis. Spain very different England. Spain sun, bulls, guitars, wine. Everibodi olé. England, no sun, no bulls, no enjoyment. Everibodi kaput."

He paused for a moment to give the Englishman time to assimilate this sociological theory, then went on:

"In England, king. In Spain, no king. Before, king. Alfonso. Now no more king. Finished. Now Republic. President: Niceto Alcalá Zamora. Elections. Prime Minister: was Lerroux, now Azaña. Political parties, so many. All bad. Politicians good-for-nothings. Everibodi bastard."

The Englishman removed his glasses, wiped them with the handkerchief sticking out of the top pocket of his sports jacket, and took advantage of the pause to stare out of the window. There was not a single tree visible on the ochre-coloured plain stretching as far as the eye could see. In the distance he caught sight of a mule being ridden side-saddle by a labourer wearing a blanket and a broad-brimmed hat.

God only knows where he came from or where he is going to, thought Anthony, before turning back to the man speaking to him. Anthony frowned sternly to show he was in no mood for conversation.

"I am familiar with the vicissitudes of the situation in Spain," he said coldly in Spanish. "Since I am a foreigner, however, I do not feel I have the right to meddle in your country's internal politics, nor to offer any opinion on the subject."

"Nobody here meddles in anyone else's business," said the talkative fellow passenger, somewhat disappointed at the Englishman's obvious command of his own language. "No, sir, not at all. I only said that to make you aware of the situation. Even if you are only passing through, it's no bad thing to know what to expect, should the case arise. For example, suppose I'm in England for whatever reason, and I take it into my head to insult your king. What would happen? I'd be thrown in the clink. It's only natural. Here it's the same, but the other way round. What I mean to say is that things have changed in the past few years."

Not by the look of it, thought Anthony. He did not say so, however: he simply wanted to put an end to this pointless conversation. He slyly turned his head towards the priest, who although he was pretending not to listen could not conceal a disapproving air. The Englishman's ruse had the desired effect: pointing his thumb in the priest's direction, the garrulous stranger warmed to his theme:

"To look no further, here's a perfect example of what I was telling you. Up to four days ago, people like him decided what was what as they pleased. Today they're on their uppers, and if they cause any trouble, we'll chase them out of town. Isn't that so, Father?"

Folding his hands across his lap, the priest looked the republican up and down.

"He who laughs last laughs longest," he replied with equanimity.

The Englishman left them engaged in a duel of proverbs and paraphrases. Slowly, monotonously, the train crawled across the desolate plain, pouring a thick column of smoke into the clear, pure winter

air of central Spain. As he was dozing off once more, he heard the republican say:

"Look, Father, people don't burn churches and convents just for the sake of it. No-one has ever set fire to an inn, a hospital or a bullring. If everywhere in Spain the common people have decided to burn churches when they are so hard to set alight, there has to be a reason."

Anthony was awakened by a violent jolt. The train had come to a halt at an important station. A guard in a cape, thick scarf and peaked cap came limping down the platform. An unlit brass lantern swung from his gloved hand.

"Venta de Baños! Passengers for Madrid change here! The express leaves in twenty minutes!"

The Englishman lifted his case down from the net, said goodbye to the other passengers and went out into the corridor. His legs felt numb from sitting still for so many hours, but he jumped down onto the platform. A rush of freezing air hit his face. He looked round in vain for the guard: having made his announcement, the man had scuttled back into his office as quickly as possible. The station clock had stopped and was showing some unlikely time. A tattered tricolour flag hung from a pole. The Englishman wondered whether he should shelter in the express, but instead walked along the platform in search of the exit. He paused outside a glass door covered in frost and soot. Above it was a sign announcing: BUFFET. Inside, a pot-bellied stove gave off little heat and created a fuggy atmosphere. The Englishman took off his misted-up glasses once more and wiped them on his tie. The only customer in the buffet was sipping at a glass of white spirits and smoking a cheroot. A bottle of anisette in his hand, the barman was staring at Anthony, who spoke directly to him.

"Good day. I need to despatch a letter. Possibly you have postage stamps in your establishment. Should that not be the case, perhaps you could inform me if there are postal facilities somewhere in the station?"

The barman stared at him open-mouthed.

"I couldn't say."

Without raising his eyes from his glass of anisette, the solitary customer spoke up.

"Don't be so uncouth, dammit! What impression is this gentleman going to have of us?" Then, to the Englishman: "You must forgive him. He didn't understand a word you said. You'll find a post office where you can buy stamps in the station hall. There's a postbox too. But first you must have a little glass of anisette."

"No, thank you."

"Don't say no, I'm buying. To judge by your appearance, you need a pick-me-up."

"I didn't think it would be so cold. When I saw the sun . . ."

"This isn't Málaga. It's Venta de Baños, in the province of Palencia. When it's cold, you know it. You're a stranger in these parts, by the look of it."

The barman poured a glass of anisette, which the Englishman downed. Having had no breakfast, the alcohol burnt his throat and set his stomach on fire, but he soon felt a pleasant warmth spreading through his entire body.

"I'm English," he said in reply to the other man's question. "And I'll have to hurry if I don't want to miss the Madrid express. If it's no trouble, I'll leave my case here while I buy a stamp. It'll be quicker that way."

Depositing the glass on the counter, he went out by a side door that led straight into the station hall. He walked round it several times without spotting the post office, until a porter pointed out a closed window. He knocked on it and after a short while it opened and the head of a bald, stunned-looking man appeared. When the Englishman explained what he wanted, the clerk closed his eyes and his lips started to move as if he were muttering a prayer. He bent down, then popped up again and placed a huge book on the counter. He leafed through the

pages with great determination, disappeared, and came back with a small pair of scales. The Englishman handed him the letter, which he carefully weighed. Afterwards he consulted his book again, and calculated the cost of the stamp. The Englishman paid and rushed back to the buffet. The barman was staring at the ceiling, a dirty dishcloth in one hand. When the Englishman asked how much he owed, he replied that the other man had paid for him, as agreed. The suitcase was still on the floor. The Englishman picked it up, thanked the barman and ran out onto the platform. The Madrid express was already pulling out, amid clouds of steam and puffs of smoke. Sprinting, he just managed to jump aboard the last carriage.

After walking through several carriages in a vain search for an empty compartment, he decided to stay out in the corridor, despite the cold draught blowing through it. He was still hot from running, and the relief at having posted his letter had made the effort worthwhile. The die was cast. To hell with women! he thought.

He wanted to be on his own to enjoy his new-found freedom and contemplate the landscape, but a short while later he saw the man from the bar lurching down the corridor towards him. Anthony caught his eye, and the man came and stood next to him. He was around fifty years old, short, hollow-cheeked, and his face was lined with wrinkles. There were bags under his eyes, which had a wary look about them.

"Did you manage to post your letter?"

"Yes, but by the time I got back to the buffet you had already left. I didn't have the chance to thank you for your kindness. Are you travelling second class?"

"I travel how I like. I'm a policeman. No, don't look at me like that: it's thanks to me nobody stole your case. You can't be so trusting in Spain. Will you be staying in Madrid, or are you carrying on?"

"No, it's Madrid I'm going to."

"May I ask the reason for your visit? Just a personal question,

nothing official. You don't have to reply if you don't wish to."

"It's not a problem. I'm an art expert, and more specifically an expert in Spanish art. I don't buy or sell. I write articles, teach classes, and collaborate with a few galleries. I come to Madrid whenever I can, with or without a reason. The Museo del Prado is my second home, or perhaps I should say my first: I have never been as happy anywhere else."

"My, that sounds like a nice job. I would never have thought it," said the policeman. "And if it's not indiscreet of me, does it bring in enough to live off?"

"Not really," admitted the Englishman. "I also have a small private income."

"Some people are born lucky," said the policeman, almost to himself. Then he added: "Well, if you come to Spain so often and speak the language so well, you must have many friends here, no?"

"Not real friends, no. I've never stayed in Madrid for any length of time, and as you know, we English are rather reserved."

"Then my questions must seem like an intrusion. Don't take it badly, it's simply professional curiosity. I observe people and try to deduce their line of work, whether or not they are married and, if I can, what their intentions are. My job is prevention, not repression. I'm part of the state security services, and these are turbulent times. Of course, I'm not talking about you: to be interested in someone does not mean I'm suspicious of them. But even the most ordinary-looking face can hide an anarchist, a spy in the service of a foreign power, a white slaver. How is one to distinguish them from honest folk? Nobody carries a sign round their neck saying what they are. Yet everyone is hiding some mystery or other. You yourself, to look no further: why such a hurry to post a letter you could have sent from Madrid at your leisure in a few hours' time? No, don't say a word: I'm sure there's a quite simple explanation for everything. I was just giving an example. That, in a nutshell, is my mission: to discover the true face beneath the mask."

"It's cold out here," the Englishman said after a pause, "and I'm not as warmly dressed as I should be. If you don't mind, I'm going to look for a compartment with a bit of heat in it."

"Of course, of course. I won't detain you any longer. I myself am heading for the restaurant car for a drink and a chat with the staff there. I often travel on this line and know them well. A waiter is a great source of information, especially in a country like ours where everyone shouts. Have a good journey and a pleasant stay in Madrid. We are unlikely to meet again, but I'll leave you my card, just in case. Lieutenant-Colonel Gumersindo Marranón, at your service. If you need anything, just ask for me at National Security Headquarters."

"Anthony Whitelands," said the Englishman, stuffing the card into his jacket pocket, "also at your service."

2

Despite feeling tired from the long journey, Anthony Whitelands only manages a fitful sleep, and is woken several times by noises that sound like distant gunfire. He has booked into a modest but comfortable hotel he knows from previous visits. It has a small, not very welcoming foyer, and the receptionist seems to take pride in being rude to the guests, but it is warm and his room is large, with a high ceiling, a sizeable wardrobe, a comfortable bed with clean sheets and a pine table with a chair and a bright reading lamp. The wooden-shuttered rectangular window gives out onto the quiet, secluded Plaza del Angel, and above the rooftops there is a view of the dome of San Sebastián church.

All the same, the atmosphere in the city is not a welcoming one. The bitter cold means that the noisy Madrid nights have given way to the mournful howl of the implacable mountain wind, which sweeps dry leaves and waste paper across the glistening hoar frost. Many buildings are covered with torn, dirty election posters and proclamations from all sides of the political spectrum, invariably calling for strikes, insurrection or confrontation. Not only is Anthony aware of the situation, but it is precisely because it is so serious that he has travelled to Madrid. Even so, coming face to face with the reality arouses a mixture of concern and dismay. At times he regrets having accepted the assignment; at others he is sorry he sent the letter putting an end to his relationship with Catherine: though it caused him much heartache, it had also been the only bright spot in his life.

He dresses slowly and with a faint heart, occasionally checking his appearance in the wardrobe mirror. It is not a flattering sight. His

clothes are crumpled from the journey, and although he has brushed his jacket thoroughly, he has been unable to remove all traces of soot. Dressed like this, and with his pallid face and weary bearing, he hardly seems in a fit state to visit the people he intends to call on, or be likely to create a good impression.

Leaving the hotel, he walks a few yards and comes out into Plaza Santa Ana. The sky is brightening: the wind has driven away the clouds and it is a clear, bright and icy winter morning. The first customers are entering the bars and taverns. Anthony joins them, going into a café with rich smells of coffee and warm bread. While he waits for a waiter to serve him, he leafs through a newspaper. The headlines and frequent exclamation marks give him a poor overall impression of events. Throughout Spain there have been clashes between rival political groups, with the sad outcome of several dead and many injured. There are also strikes in several sectors. The priest in a town in Castellón province has been driven out by the mayor, and a dance organised inside the church. In Betanzos, a figure of Christ has had its head and feet lopped off. The customers in the bar are commenting on all this with extravagant gestures and emphatic pronouncements as they draw deeply on their cigarettes.

Accustomed to a substantial English breakfast, Anthony finds that the bowl of strong coffee and greasy *churros* neither go down well nor help clear his mind or lift his spirits. He consults his watch, because the hexagonal wall clock seems to be as broken as the one in the station at Venta de Baños. He has more than enough time to keep his appointment, but the noise and smoke are too much for him, and so he pays and goes out into the square.

A brisk walk finds him outside the doors of the Museo del Prado, which has just opened. He shows the woman attendant the document accrediting him as a professor and researcher, and after some consultation and hesitation, he is allowed in free of charge. At this time of year and due to the violent, uncertain situation in Madrid, there are

few visitors to the gallery: it is almost deserted. The rooms are ice cold.

Indifferent to everything except the re-encounter with his beloved gallery, Anthony pauses only briefly in front of "Il Furore", the bronze statue of Charles V by Leone Leoni. Wearing a suit of Roman armour, the emperor is brandishing a lance, while at his feet, defeated and in chains, lies the representation of savage violence, its nose squashed against the backside of the victor, who represents order and the will to impose it on the rest of the world at divine command, with little regard to the means employed.

Comforted by this example of valour, the Englishman straightens up and strides towards the Velázquez room. He is so fascinated by this painter's work that he never looks at more than one painting at a time. This was how he studied them years earlier, going to the Prado every day to examine the canvases one by one, jotting down all their details in a notebook as he discovered them. Then, exhausted but content, he would return to his lodgings and copy his notes into a larger book.

This time however he has not come to write anything. Instead he has come like a pilgrim to a saint's shrine, to beg for his protection. This is the feeling at the back of his mind when he comes to a halt in front of a painting, positions himself at the right distance, wipes his glasses and stands motionless, almost without breathing, to contemplate it.

Velázquez painted the portrait of "Don Juan of Austria" when he was the same age as the Englishman now staring at it in astonishment. In its day it was part of a collection of buffoons and dwarves that decorated the royal apartments. That someone could commission a great artist to paint the portraits of these pathetic beings and then convert the canvases into outstanding features of the palace décor might seem shocking to us nowadays, but that cannot have been the case back then, and anyway, what really matters is that the King's strange whim gave rise to these remarkable paintings.

Unlike his companions in the collection, the person known as

"Don Juan of Austria" did not have any fixed employment at the court. He was a part-time buffoon, taken on to fill a temporary absence or bolster the array of sick, crazy or demented people who kept the King and his entourage amused. There is no record of his name in the archives, only his outlandish nickname. To put him on a level with the imperial armies' greatest military leader, someone who was Charles V's natural son, must have been part of the joke. In the portrait, the buffoon, to do honour to his name, is standing upright, while at his feet are an arquebus, a breastplate, a helmet and some iron balls that could have come from a modest cannon. Nobly dressed, he is grasping a staff of command and wearing a hat that is too big for him tilted slightly to one side, crowned by a striking plume of pink and white feathers. This magnificent attire cannot disguise reality, but only serves to accentuate it: the viewer immediately notices the ridiculous moustache and frowning brow that with several centuries' anticipation make him look a little like Friedrich Nietzsche. The buffoon is no longer young. His hands are firm, but his legs are thin and suggest a frail physique. His face is extremely gaunt, with prominent cheekbones. He looks shifty-eyed and wary. To complete the joke, behind him in one corner of the painting there is a glimpse of a naval battle or its aftermath: a ship ablaze, engulfed in a dense black cloud of smoke. The real Don Juan of Austria had commanded the Spanish fleet at the battle of Lepanto against the Turks – as Cervantes tells it, the most heroic battle of all time. In the painting, nothing is clear: it could be a fragment of reality, an allegory, a parody or the buffoon's dream. The intention is satirical, and yet the Englishman's eyes cloud over when he sees the battle portrayed with a technique far in advance of its time, one employed by Turner for the same purpose more than two centuries later.

With an effort, Anthony recovers his composure and glances again at his watch. He does not have far to go, but he ought to be setting off if he is to arrive with the punctuality that is doubtless expected of him,

not as a virtue or sign of politeness, but as a picturesque characteristic of his race: the proverbial English punctuality. Since no-one can see him, he nods his head in the direction of the buffoon, turns on his heel and leaves the museum without so much as a glance at the other masterpieces hanging on its walls.

To his surprise, as he steps out into the street he realises that the melancholy feeling induced by his study of the painting has lifted his own low spirits rather than reinforcing them. For the first time, he is aware that he is in Madrid, a city that not only brings pleasant memories but gives him an exciting sense of freedom.

Anthony Whitelands has always liked Madrid. Unlike so many other cities in Spain and Europe, Madrid's origins are not Greek or Roman. They are not even medieval, but date from the Renaissance. Philip II created it out of nothing when he established his court here in 1561. For this reason, Madrid does not have founding myths going back to some obscure divinity, or a Romanesque virgin sheltering it under her carved wooden cloak. Nor does it have an august cathedral casting its shadow over an old quarter. There is no battle-hardened slayer of dragons on its coat of arms; its patron saint is a humble peasant in whose name picnics and bullfights are organised. In order to preserve its natural independence, Philip II built El Escorial, and by so doing spared Madrid from becoming a spiritual centre as well as a centre of power. By the same token, he refused to have El Greco as court painter. Thanks to these prudent measures, the people of Madrid may have many faults, but religious fervour is not one of them. As the capital of a colossal empire supported and held together by religion, Madrid could not always remain aloof, but whenever possible it delegated its darkest aspects to other cities: Salamanca saw the bitterest theological debates, Avila was the backdrop for the ecstasies of Saint Teresa, Saint John of the Cross and Saint Peter of Alcántara, while the terrible *autos da fe* took place in Toledo.

Reassured by the company of Velázquez and the city that had not

only welcomed the painter but raised him to the height of fame, and in spite of the cold and wind, Anthony Whitelands walks up Paseo del Prado to the Cibeles fountain, then along Paseo de Recoletos to Paseo de la Castellana. There he looks for the number he has been given, and finds himself confronted by a high wall and an iron gate. Through the bars he can see a two-storey mansion at the end of a garden. It has a portico and tall windows. This unostentatious grandeur reminds him of the purpose of his visit, and his euphoria gives way to his earlier discouragement. Too late now to turn back. He pushes open the gate, crosses the garden to the entrance and rings the bell.