

Chapter 1

To this day I remember the long road to the City of M. It dragged on and on while the thoughts plaguing me mingled with the scenes along the way. It seemed as if everything around me was already at one with the place, even though I still had a few hours to go. I passed indistinct farms in empty fields, small villages and lonely estates surrounded by cultivated greenery and forest hills. Manmade ponds and natural lakes skirted the road and reeked of wetlands, which later, right before M., turned into peat bogs and marshes. The countryside was dotted with humble towns sprouting out of the earth, the highway briefly becoming their main street: squares and clusters of stores glimmered in the sun; banks and churches rose up close to the center; a belfry whizzed by, silent as usual. Then the junk shops and gas stations at the outskirts said farewell without a word, and just like that, it was over. The town was gone, without having time to agitate or provoke interest. Again the road wound its way through the fields, its monotony wearing me down. I saw the peculiar people who swarmed over the countryside – for a fleeting moment they appeared amusing, but then I stopped noticing them, understanding how unexceptional they were measured against their surroundings. At times, locals waved to me from the curb or just followed me with their eyes, though more often than not, no one was distracted by my fleeting presence. Left behind, they merged with the streets as they withdrew to the side.

At last the fields disappeared, and real swamps engulfed the road – a damp, unhealthy moor. Clouds of insects smashed into the windshield; the air became heavy. Nature seemed to bear down on me, barely letting me breathe, but that didn't last long. Soon I drove up a hill; the swamps retreated to the east, to the invisible ocean. The trees grew dense, casting the illegible calligraphy of their shadows over the motorway, until, several miles ahead, the road became wider and a sign said I had crossed the city limits of M.

Everything I had heard was turning out to be true. I recognized not the details, but their essence: the frequently repaired pavement full of cracks and potholes, the impoverished projects, the industrial warehouses, and the unfinished Memorial with its useless, gleaming steel. Then the gold coating of a garish arch – a monument to Little Blue Birds – flashed and passed without a trace in the setting sun. Cars slowed; intersections interrupted the flow of traffic; trees gave way to cheap motels and antique shops. After reaching the inner city, I crawled through a traffic jam for half an hour and finally found myself downtown.

Instantly it all changed. The area around me contracted, and it became difficult to see in the congestion. Houses of different shapes and sizes surrounded me, their sides dilapidated, pockmarked with spots blackened by the moist climate. The architecture did not impress me, yet the buildings had a look of dignity and didn't need visitors to assess their value. The streets weren't empty at this afternoon hour, but the people on them didn't seem to be an

important part of the area. The city would do just fine without them, for what could they give it – a beggar with an ashy gray beard and one white pupil, a crowd of bored youths by the movie theater, isolated groups of housewives, or a small cluster of strangers, me and my sedan? Nothing offered me a sign, neither an indication nor a clue; no one had noticed me among the utterly ordinary others. The world had not reacted to my appearance and wasn't interested in my intentions.

I told myself this was how it should be: real things don't reveal themselves right away. Nonetheless, the impatience made my chest ache, forcing me to twist my face and shake my head. Look at me, I wanted to cry out to the silent buildings, look, I didn't come empty-handed. I brought you a great intrigue, equal to your most formidable mysteries. I am capable of a lot, my scheme is pernicious and clever – what else do you need to breathe life into your daydreams? But the stone wouldn't reply, life resumed its normal course, and I began to have doubts: am I cheating by asking too high a price in advance? Certainly, ahead of time, I couldn't prove anything – neither to myself nor to others...

My thoughts spun with the web of streets, turns and alleys, road signs and store names. My route became unclear; I slowed down and began to block traffic. People honked and stuck their heads out the window as they passed. I tried to figure out where I was, then veered to the right without a goal in mind, just to get out of someone's way, and stopped short in a dead end.

That was the right thing to do – the city had already become a little too close to my heart. It's probably the same for a third of its visitors, and the remaining two-thirds are just hopeless fools. The dead end calmed me down. I climbed out of the car and took a seat on a bench next to a small apartment house. Sheets were drying on a line hung between trees, the courtyard was empty, and only an apparently stray cat gazed blankly at my car from a basement window. A vacant lot off to the side stretched down the hill. It was under construction: workers were digging a pit and pattering about with concrete blocks for the foundation; an excavator discharged a high-pitched screech, leaving behind a flawlessly leveled edge. "Good work," I thought ironically, feeling all of a sudden that the City of M. was losing its aura and turning into something conventional, even if I still knew almost nothing about it.

All at once a feeling of melancholy rose up in me. It seemed coming here was pointless: there was no hope of finding what I sought. But the whim passed quickly; I was now a different man and had almost forgotten how to pity myself. The uninspiring nature of M.'s welcome suited me just fine; I was not expecting an inspiration from without. My gaze turned inward – looking within, one can always find something to arrest the eye. I felt calm, forgetting the triviality of my surroundings, thinking about my own matters, going over and over the well-trodden paths – not like a traveler rushing to his last stop but like a flaneur out for a walk.

I drifted through fragments of my past although they were not worth much, especially when I returned to them time and again. Here they are in space: reverberating streets; a dim background; frozen groups of mute characters in backyards – pathetic pieces with no content. Then come the more distinct ones: an old park, trees packed close together with their branches intertwined, scratches and chipped paint on a bench – the echo of a place where I was once loved in my youth. No one lives there now, yet there's still more – a stadium and a boat stop, someone's tanned arm, the small puzzle of my first apartment divided into three unequal sections... But no, we're getting out of order. That's from the realm of Chronos: summer vacation and a pile of carefree plans, a time of big bumblebees buzzing through the air, then a time of wishes that were way too brave, and – a time when I suddenly grew up without realizing what I was sacrificing. Three unequal sections. With roommates and without. One woman. Another. Then – alone and no distractions...

As so many times before, I tried to imagine the exact shapes and vibrant paints, something I knew by heart, even if it was only the color of the leaves, the wallpaper, or the blanket on the narrow bed. But you can never alter the order of memories; the links are involuntary; you can't force one thought to freeze and stay as it is for a thorough scrutiny. You're always on the go – the glimmer of taxis, strange games of hide-and-seek in the rat race, the faces of people who are drawn to you, trying to find a connection, convinced there's something special in the union no one else knows about. Hopes deceived and deceiving. Mostly unintentionally.

It's easier with faces – you can remember them longer. You can feel touched or hate them all over again, or challenge them to a duel without wishing your opponent any harm. You can kick them out in disgust, knowing all the same that their memory will stay as long as you don't close the trap door. But it soon gets messy – everything drifts out of sync. You lose your way in wordless gestures, in a silent movie with no captions. And when you remember the dialogue, you romanticize and embellish; you improvise something new every time, for the temptation is too great.

That's how it was as I sat delving into the past, uttering names I hadn't heard in ages. Time and again I caught myself in an excessively bold lie. With some embarrassment I tried to worm my way out of it, feeling I wasn't able to, didn't want to, or that I'd almost run out of memories. Soon, I couldn't even distinguish between the images from the last few months and the last few years. They ran together, long and brief, and added up to a vision of my own gloomy self: waiting for a call, waiting for letters, waiting for bad news, receiving bad news, waiting for another call... Off you go – back around the loop. But the loop is unstable, if you aren't afraid to break it, if you make up your mind to rip it up abruptly, like taking a dive and resurfacing to: first self-pity, then inert apathy, later cold mockery, and finally a decision.

Yes, that was the crucial difference: the self-contained coil broke apart. I had something now, and I called it *my secret* – words add another dimension. You can live with

this secret, believe me, and set off for the City of M. – which is exactly what I did. I severed my ties, all of them. Everyone'd think this was the road to despair, yet, in fact, it brought peace of mind. Again and again I thought it over from all sides, and every time my consciousness painted not a vicious circle, but something rational and almost real. It was my secret and the City of M., with me inside it, right in the middle – a spy who had passed through the body check, an undercover agent of an invisible army. Now everyone would say: yes, the distinction is unmistakable; he's a completely different person.

Let's take a closer look: a different man, an unfamiliar hero, an unemployed and reckless fugitive-pilgrim. He doesn't have a permanent address, doesn't currently live anywhere, except perhaps in his sports car, a five-year-old Alfa Romeo with stiff springs. This is who I am; the circumstances do not bother me; no attachments are holding me back. I have no one to worry about, and no one cares about my future. I do have Gretchen, but she doesn't count – I'll explain that later. Is it better this way? Let's compare the items on the list. The pluses and minuses come out equal. Then again, there's a lot I didn't take into account...

Having gotten carried away, I jumped to new episodes in the silent movie: the unfamiliar hero comes out of a dilapidated apartment building one sunny morning. He jerks as he walks, while a fleeting memory entrances his gaze. He'll never return there; he has said his last farewell to the concierge-gossiper. He has moved his belongings out and given them away. His keys have been handed over too – or discarded, or lost – and if he turns around now, he'll have to find a new home. He betrays not a hint of doubt, feels no regret. His car is already waiting at the entrance, its tank full of gas. All the bills have been paid – simply out of habit. He has no idea when he might return, has not given any thought to those who will forget him. All he's willing to do is imagine some scenes from a distant future that include:

A former resident of the capital steps out of his first-class coach at the main train station. He is tanned and somber, his gaze turned inward. No one is there to meet him, and he hardly has any luggage. His collar is raised – as protection against the dampness and fog. A taxi driver mistakes him for a vacationer and tries to cheat him but gets caught, takes offense, and falls silent. This is the welcome from his hometown – they are waiting for him here. Hello, you look so refreshed – like an entirely different man. Where are we going? To theater square? To the opera house? The streets are empty – who will suggest another address? The former resident of the capital touches his coarse wolf's hair and glances around, frowning. What did he do there, way off in the distance? What did he live through? He says nothing...

Images are just images, yet some of them almost come to life. Capital or no capital, returning is not crucial. Instead, you could go farther south, live in the sun among bleached houses, drink with expats, sleep with prostitutes. It's as enticing as a glittering dream. You can win easy money and build a mansion, acquire horses and servants, donate a lot to the local church... The opportunities are endless and most of them are awfully boring.

That's why you shouldn't think about the future, I told myself, stretching my arms. The City of M. and my secret are more alive than all fleeting images. I haven't yet had a chance to savor them to my heart's content, so I am hurrying now to show them my quick affection, despite the mustiness of the courtyard sheltering my temporary weakness. But this isn't the time to be weak – and there is nothing to hide. I can even take off my mask now. They don't catch spies here, and besides, I haven't come for mysteries.

My thoughts calmed down. Silent movie shots faded little by little, scattering like fine dust. Nearly an hour had passed, perhaps even more. The house regained consciousness after its afternoon siesta. Voices wafted through the air; a child's sobs spluttered out from the open window above me. By the lobby next door, a small group of men had gathered – I could imagine their wary words, the absence of curiosity, the usual aversion to strangers. To feel unwanted, it is enough to be ignored – but I couldn't have cared less. If anything, we were equally disinterested. Tired of sitting, I got up to move my legs. The screech of the excavator became louder, more high-pitched; the cat disappeared; evening was setting in. After dawdling a little, I started the engine and drove back to the main street.

Everything had become livelier: work was over, the city animated and alive. Even more cars packed the street, while people congregated on the sidewalks, their faces flowing together. No one was honking at me now. My car rolled along easily with the general flow and I wasn't suspected of being an outsider. Storefronts and entrances slipped by; traffic lights blinked, dictating the cars' rhythm and introducing an even tempo as the first sign of recognition. I reveled in my freedom; it was still new, not yet disturbing or obsolete. For the first time I was running not from something but toward something, which is completely different. Of course, what this something really was, I still needed to figure out, and I looked forward to long evenings without distractions, the blessed solitude of clarification, which can always be interrupted by going to a nearby pub. But the main components were there, on the tip of my tongue, ready to turn into phrases. They straightened out the curves and drew a thick line to the final dot, not at random but still ignoring the subtlety of the original outline. That, of course, was just an approximation, yet in my case it might work. I could refer to two genuine names: M. and Julian – they were each much more reliable than the usual marks, which one commonly makes do with. We'll get to Julian later, for the blood still pulsates wildly when I think of him. The City of M., however – here it is around me, so even the approximation might not be needed unless laziness gets in the way. But no – I'm not that lazy!

I turned off the avenue, following the fork in the road that sent my car into a tricky U-turn. Now I was circling through narrow cross streets, a pageant of small shops, cafés, and bars – some crowded, others half-empty. With cars parked on both sides, it wasn't easy to

drive, and I slowed to a crawl, picking my way carefully like a man in a dense mechanical forest.

It would be easy to get seriously lost here, I imagined. To get lost and remain face-to-face with the urban ghosts, feeling their shadows slither along my clothes as they came out of the arches and alleyways. I could feel the tickle of excitement running down my spine – the city's magic was enveloping me. It became clear: everything here was for real. Every corner hid either an ally or an overt enemy, my secret victim. I even had to hold myself back in order not to succumb to the opiate and do something dumb – so I thought about cigarettes, deeming it a really good time for one. Yet I remembered I'd finished the last pack a while ago and began looking impatiently for a store.

One appeared on the very next corner. I bought my favorites and lingered a little before walking through the open door of an adjacent café. I was anticipating hot chocolate, or at least coffee with sugar and milk, but found only disappointment. An elderly waiter informed me gloomily that the only hot drink they had was tea. He then proceeded to stand stock-still with his arms folded over his belly, as if he were ready to be thrashed and humiliated but would not be forced back an inch. I nodded, peeking in exasperation at the cheap, fake gold on his ring finger. The waiter cast another glance at me, opened his pad, scribbled something down, and retreated, stooping and dropping his shoulders. As he shuffled across the room, I noticed several people turning to watch him.

I waited for my tea, lighting a cigarette and examining the locals. There weren't many of them – just a few homely fellows, the only interesting one being a scrawny man of about forty in wrinkled, soiled clothes, with disheveled hair and two-day-old stubble. But his gaze was astonishing – full of pure sadness that struggled through his dense eyebrows. Having noticed I was furtively watching him, he nodded to me and smiled so openly his wizened face became ten years younger while his eyes grew much older – although the sadness in them disappeared and gave way to passive melancholy. I was stunned by the change and turned away, just barely nodding in response, but the man, after fidgeting a little, got up and made his way toward me.

This was pointless and wasn't part of the plan. Annoyed, I berated myself and thought I'd have to leave without getting my tea. But the stranger didn't make an attempt to sit down and talk. He asked for a cigarette, received it, and then swiftly dug a small harmonica out of the recesses of his raincoat. Taking two steps back and turning to the side, he started playing an excerpt from something unfamiliar, filling the room at once with the sound of sobbing violins. It was unexpectedly good – it seemed the air even rang, soot fell from the walls, and the dim lanterns on the ceiling turned into a sparkling crystal chandelier. Yet a moment later it all ended – he stopped as abruptly as he'd begun and awkwardly bowed his head before returning to his chair. Someone laughed, someone applauded jokingly. It was obvious they had gotten used to him long ago and such episodes surprised no one. I felt a strange sense of

uneasiness and tried not to look at him anymore as I hurried to finish my cigarette and gulp down the hot and almost tasteless tea that had appeared on the table out of nowhere.

Suddenly I heard loud steps resonating as if steel were banging on concrete. Another visitor burst into the café: a tall man, a bit over thirty, with slicked-back, raven hair, dressed in an expensive black suit and an elegant scarf. He walked without regarding anyone, his entire appearance in absolute contrast to the rest of the crowd. His arrival quieted them down and made them cringe. Only my random acquaintance, the man with the harmonica, jumped to his feet and dashed to meet the newcomer, his face lighting up with joy when he realized who it was. His expression was totally out of place for everyone, including the man in the expensive suit, who barely turned his head as he put out his arm and gave the musician a jolt in the chest. The other nearly fell and had to grab a table at the last minute, his harmonica flying to the corner. There were chuckles all around, but he wasn't discouraged in the least, scrambling to his feet and smiling benignly at those who were laughing. At the far end of the room, the tall man sat down and began reading something with his back to everyone and his head propped on his palm. "Good work," I thought again, yet it didn't turn out ironically. Something had sobered me up. The city was showing its unfamiliar side, agitating me and hitting a sore spot. Interfering still crossed my mind for some time, but I was unsure how and just cursed my stupidity, chucked some change in the saucer, and walked off.

It was already getting dark, and the lights came on. A sharp gust of wind made me shiver. The first encounter is over, I thought somewhat sadly, I'm ready to get used to the new place and forget my fantasies. In fact, they had already retreated into the darkness and hid in the corners with all their demons, supplanted by a tedious list of mundane trifles. My recent revival faded; I was alone in a strange city, completely preoccupied with itself, and I had yet to determine my role in its life.

My car was waiting for me, its bumper shimmering reassuringly. It was time to find where to spend the night. I started the engine, went around an obelisk that rose up in front of me, and drove in search of a store where I could buy a tourist guide. But a guide wasn't needed: a hotel soon appeared with a neon vacancy sign. Then came another and subsequently a third, where I stopped and secured a single with a bathroom and windows looking out onto the courtyard. I haphazardly unpacked a few things and lay down on the bed, dozing off quickly.

Chapter 2

It wasn't long before someone woke me by knocking politely at the door. I opened it and found myself standing face to face with an elderly man in a uniform consisting of a jacket with a carnation in the buttonhole and wide pants with stripes on the sides. He introduced himself as Piolin, an innkeeper who had been in business for many years and was getting up there in years himself. The man greeted me with a nod and walked in slowly, taking a seat in the room's only chair. As he made himself comfortable, I went over to the window and stood there with my arms crossed. His presence irked me, and I was waiting for him to leave.

Piolin was in no rush however. He asked about my trip, wondered if the room wasn't too hot, and inquired into what I disliked more – the heat or the cold. When I snapped back I couldn't stand either one, he informed me the air conditioner was at its highest setting and the room wouldn't get any cooler under any circumstances.

“Under any circumstances,” he repeated with gusto. Then he became interested in the size of the shoes I wear and the ties and shirts I prefer. He gave me a detailed description of the hotel's laundry and ironing services – completely standard ones – and asked which soap, shampoo, and shaving cream I liked to use. After going into the bathroom to get a bar of the hotel's soap, he was about to give it to me for a sniff but sniffed it himself instead, bending his head so I could see the round bald spot on his crown. Smelling it, he said it reeked something wretched, then broke the bar in two, tossing both halves into the trash can, and went to sit on the bed.

The conversation moved on to cologne. Piolin described minutely the three brands of cologne he had preferred in the course of his conscious life as a man, also mentioning various incidental types he had not gotten accustomed to and thus did not deserve in-depth consideration. He asked me to describe the cologne I used, and when I simply offered him to try it, he screwed up his face and said he hadn't meant that at all. A scent, he added, was rather easy to characterize. A color, for instance, would be simply impossible to explicate in words, but with a scent it was quite doable, wasn't it?

“All the more so, young man, when someone has talents like yours,” Piolin went on authoritatively. In his hand I saw the registration card I'd filled out, putting *journalist* into the *occupation* field. This was a lie and it made me feel ashamed. Piolin, however, wrapped up the conversation on cologne, apologizing for his insistence and explaining he was generally interested in smells: they had occupied a significant place in his life and had always been very important, just like women – things that were closely related indeed.

I decided to get rid of him or at least change the subject, which was irrelevant and dull. Besides, I was hungry and told him this, yet Piolin only mumbled distractedly, “Yes, yes, hungry, that's not good...” and started talking about his niece Mary, who ate quite a lot

yet was incredibly skinny. “Here, you can see for yourself,” he suggested, pulling a threadbare notebook out of his breast pocket and plucking an old photo from its pages. Before holding it out to me, though, he glanced at it, frowned, slipped it back in, and pulled out another. He probably has a lot of nieces, I thought with a smile. Mary turned out to be an unattractive girl with a long, thin face and bulging eyes. She didn’t resemble Piolin in the least, and I told him that just to say something.

Piolin replied with genuine curiosity, “Really?” and added, “But everyone says we look alike. Well, it’s hard to say from the photo. The lighting, you know, the focus – there’s no life on paper.” He held the photograph in his hands a bit longer, peering at it suspiciously, then lifted his eyes to me and smirked slyly. “By the way, she lives in your part of the world now. You haven’t met her by any chance, have you?”

“No, not that I recall,” I responded in the same tone – and a moment later I found myself hearing the story of how Mary got involved with a teacher from the capital. He had come to M. for a three-month job but took off after a month or so because of the unprecedented heat wave that had tormented the city that summer. “And this dimwitted floozy ran away with him, without even saying good-bye,” Piolin confided in a whisper. “At first she was indifferent and treated him coldly, but soon you wouldn’t have recognized her. She went crazy and got pregnant at once, like a cat. The guy brushed her aside of course, but she’s still there; she wasn’t going come back,” he complained and added they could’ve crippled Mary’s seducer for life, even in the capital, yet it was no longer relevant because she was pregnant again – and this time it wasn’t the teacher.

“Uh huh,” I drawled, not knowing what else to say. “It’s interesting indeed. Well, thanks for stopping by. I suppose I’m going to go have some dinner now, if you don’t mind. I’ve been on the road all day and haven’t eaten anything substantial.”

At this, I resolutely walked across the room to demonstrate I was ready to leave, but that didn’t make much of an impression on Piolin.

“Well, sure, you need to have dinner. You and I can eat together,” he said contemplatively, looking off to the side before transferring his gaze to me and adding with some irritation, “But why are you in such a hurry, why can’t you sit still? We need to get to know each other first, have a talk like human beings.”

“Actually, I was planning to eat alone,” I objected, a bit bewildered.

Piolin casually dismissed me, “Eat alone? Nonsense, nonsense.” He raised his finger and repeated, “You’ve got to act like a human being!”

Then he closed his eyes and admitted he wasn’t there just to chat. That is, he was there to chat too, why not, but he also had some business to discuss. He needed to ask me a question – “a completely formal one; nothing personal” – and there was no way to avoid it, because the city laws required it, and all innkeepers were obliged to obey the law, like other residents of M. As for me, I was not one, and its laws did not apply to me, so I was

completely within my rights not to give an answer. But even if the laws had applied to me, I still could have refused to respond, because first of all, there was no law requiring me to do so, and then there was no one who would ask me such a question in this case.

After reasoning along these lines for several more minutes, Piolin fell silent, assumed a dignified air, and inquired in a soft, ingratiating voice, “Tell me please, what is the purpose of your visit to the City of M.?” And with this, something swiftly changed: he exuded a sense of threat, becoming a sly and unpleasant man. I sensed he was uptight and even a little anxious, as if he were getting to something he’d been expecting for a while and had now almost reached.

There was nothing bad about his question. And though I’m not fond of idle curiosity, there was no reason not to reply to it – that is, for anyone other than me, because just then I did have reasons and couldn’t tell the truth to the first person I met. That caused me to feel offended: it was as if someone were obstinately prying into my soul, trying to penetrate its most private places.

My cheeks started burning. I realized I was blushing and saw that the expression on Piolin’s face reflected poorly concealed excitement. He knew he’d nailed me on something – and I needed to pull myself together. It wasn’t worth arguing with the man, yet I was totally confused: what could I say without saying anything? How could I possibly pretend to be nonchalant when my nerves began to tremble at the very first thought of Julian and my secret plan? So I just stood there baffled for a few seconds and didn’t say a word. Then, at last, I came to myself and mumbled that I wanted to leave the question unanswered, as I had a fairly personal reason.

Piolin continued to look at me expectantly, not giving the slightest impression we had concluded the matter. I grew irritated and told him more brusquely that the question itself surprised me somewhat. This made me angry at myself – I was saying something unnecessary and losing my temper – but irritation got the better of me again, and I added that the very article in the civil code of M. seemed strange, smelling of restrictions on personal freedom and causing some unpleasant habits in innkeepers. This upset my companion tremendously – though I’m not sure which disturbed him more, my refusal to answer or my chaotic accusations.

As he remained seated on the bed with his head tilted to the side, Piolin began to explain tediously that there were no restrictions on freedom here since the law didn’t forbid anyone from doing anything. It also didn’t force anyone to take any actions – well, almost – and if it did, it was only to inquire about trivial matters. Furthermore, he went on, it forced an insignificantly small group of people to do this – just innkeepers and no one else. You could certainly talk about restricting the freedom of innkeepers, he said, but it’s not worth it because they don’t feel their liberties have been violated or circumscribed. Give them the right to act as they please and the first thing they’ll do is ask their guests the very same

question, as anyone else would, because – and here Piolin raised his finger – because how else can these guests interest the residents of M., if not by telling us why they came to the city? And especially out of season, this takes on a rather unhealthy form: as soon as a new guest appears, everyone keeps trying to squeeze the reason out of him, digging and digging until he finally loses his temper. So the law was passed to help regulate all that and – what’s more – to protect innkeepers just a bit. And if it doesn’t protect them, then at least it provides moral support, since they are usually among the first people to meet a visitor, and consequently it is even more difficult for them to restrain their curiosity. On top of that, Piolin continued, you have to consider the neighbors’ inquisitiveness – and innkeepers are well aware of this. It excites them, drives them to extract the truth hastily, leaving them confused and embarrassed afterward. So now they do it in compliance with the law, as if others require it, and they are only subject to a small fraction of the embarrassment, an insignificant amount of it, which can’t really be called that – it’s just a little awkwardness, nothing more.

He went on in this vein until I interrupted him and proceeded to expound just as tediously that everything appeared in a different light now and I was not insulted in the least. And the law itself, I added, seems quite natural and even somewhat logical, especially if you consider the remarkable curiosity of the residents of M., and so on and so forth.

The minutes went by. Piolin sat on the bed, shaking his head from time to time. When I finished, it became clear I might well understand the situation, but, nonetheless, did not intend to answer his question.

He then sighed and tried to persuade me. He explained that this collective curiosity, the City of M.’s little weakness, was not something humiliating for its visitors – you should consider it as simply part of the local color, which is one of the main attractions anyway for everyone who’s dying to come here. Moreover, Piolin added, no one is interested in the crafty phraseology that seems to roll off some people’s tongues. No, he continued, visitors can’t get away with lame excuses; they’re expected to give real answers, not those clichés like “to do some sightseeing” or, even worse, “to swim in the ocean.” In these instances, the asker simply feels hurt; and hurting your hosts, even slightly, is never a good way to begin a stay in an unfamiliar place!

Once again, I felt something unpleasant emanate from Piolin and a shudder ran involuntarily through my body. With a scowl on my face, I noted it was easy to imagine the kind of people who came here for precisely the reasons Piolin had suggested – and, moreover, those visitors probably made up the vast majority. At this moment I remembered I was very hungry and decided I just couldn’t take it any longer.

Instantly, as if he were reading my mind, Piolin turned into the man who had entered my room an hour before – an elderly, polite, and very ordinary innkeeper. He apologized for his talkativeness and said with a wink he wouldn’t mind getting a bite to eat too, proceeding

further to beg my pardon for his forgetfulness. “You must be dying of hunger, while I’m harassing you with conversation,” he said. “It’s already high time to expand the scope of your knowledge about the hotel and the City of M. in general, and the best way to do that is to go to the restaurant downstairs and have a proper meal.”

He headed for the door but stopped halfway and started to describe the roast rabbit in red wine with a local plum sauce we were going to enjoy. I certainly should have refused with the utmost firmness, yet the useless discussion had depleted my energy so much I could no longer argue. I said I was ready to go, yet Piolin held me up with a cautious gesture and intoned gently, gazing into my eyes, “The only problem is that I have a little question for you, one about the affinity of souls, so to speak. Tell me...” and he again inquired about the purpose of my visit to the City of M., as if we hadn’t just spent a torturous half hour squabbling over precisely that subject. I dropped down on the bed in despair, sitting in the place he had occupied earlier, while Piolin just kept going. He passionately explained he didn’t want to torment me. On the contrary, he wanted to be as hospitable as possible, but still there was no avoiding the matter. He wouldn’t even insist on a complete description of all my motives and surreptitious reasons, but he did expect at least a hint, at least a tiny clue.

Because every hint is true in its own way, Piolin was saying. If you try, it’s possible to find a compromise that’s acceptable on all sides. But some effort is needed, and a little goodwill as well – after all, a compromise doesn’t come out of nowhere. It was all up to me now, he said, after he had told me so much – about M. and the weaknesses of its residents. He had been candid with me, to say the least, and was now presuming I wouldn’t just slip away and slam the door in his face without making any attempt to help.

“Okay,” I sighed. “You win, Piolin. I’ll answer your question with the utmost sincerity, because I’ve got no more energy.” Then I went to the window, looked spitefully into the street, and divulged I had come there to find a certain person, an acquaintance who, as far as I had heard, had already been living in M. for six months.

Piolin’s face took on an expression of interest, and he asked about the name of my acquaintance – if, of course, I could tell him; that is, if there was no reason for me to conceal it.

I interrupted him quite harshly with my tongue not obeying me as I enunciated the name Julian, and added, “Now, if you don’t mind, I would finally like to eat.”

Then I took a step away from the window, but Piolin appeared next to the door with surprising agility, his arms extended toward me as if to hold me in the room. I could tell he was going to keep me inside until he had obtained everything he wanted. And he knew that I knew this.

“Just one sec, though,” he said. “Just one short second, because you misunderstood something, and we need to clear it up right away. This mix-up is so obvious it’s a little bit strange even to talk about it,” and Piolin really did stop speaking for a moment, as if to give

me a chance to intervene and clear up the problem on my own. But I was silent, and he continued, embarking on a long speech.

“No one comes to M. looking for a specific person,” he pontificated sadly. “It’s impossible to find a certain person in M., the one you’ve come for and knew before. You have no hope of finding someone here, even an old friend, even if you remember his face and the details from his former life. You may repeat his name over and over again, write it down somewhere and keep it in your pocket; you may be on good terms with your memory and armed to the hilt, yet in reality you are absolutely unarmed, because there’s no such person in the City of M. You have to understand this,” he poked his finger at me. “Understand and not give in to delusion. It’s certainly easier to lie to yourself than it is to look the truth in the eye, but I’ll tell you the truth because I see you’re worthy of it. You won’t find anyone here, not your friend, not a woman if you need a woman, not compassion if you deserve compassion, and you’ll leave the city without resolving its riddles because your misunderstanding won’t let you open your eyes. Your goal isn’t clear to me, but I can see your confusion a mile away. Give it up, abandon the useless, and M. will come to your aid. Otherwise... otherwise, you will remain a stranger, and those who you come across here will view you as a stranger and respond with indifference.”

Piolin became agitated. His jacket puckered and his carnation bent sadly over to the side as it wilted away. Even his face transformed: his cheeks sagged over his chin, where a deep wrinkle or scar slit the skin; his eyes sank into their sockets and looked out from deep pits, like those of a hermit who had lost track of time.

I was surprised by his pompousness and tried to slow him down with objections, but there was no stopping Piolin: he stood his ground, becoming deaf to the words of others.

“Certainly anything can happen,” he was saying. “You can run into the person you’re searching for on the street, and you’ll recognize him from the photo in your wallet. You’ll be sure he’s in front of you, sure you can’t be mistaken. He may even respond to the name you know and agree he’s the one you’re so unceremoniously trying to find, perhaps against his will. And you’ll think you’ve accomplished your goal, yet that’s hardly the case, because the chances are minimal – minimal to no end. The City of M. isn’t as small as it might seem at first sight. If you enter on the main road, then you’re downtown in a flash, and it looks like the whole city is right there, half of it left behind, but no, there’s a lot more to M., things that don’t reveal themselves immediately. One glance isn’t enough to take it all in while hoping to capture the face you need. If you look at the map – and I’ll bring you a map – you’ll see how confusing it is, what intricate lines can be drawn by tracing one single street with a pencil. And there isn’t just one street here, but hundreds, hundreds... Furthermore, there are also quite a few people, each one different from the others; you can live here all your life and fail to understand who’s who. That’s what happens to the majority, and not all of them are dumb.

Here, many are searching for many, and some of the many who were once very visible. Well, just try and unearth them now – you won't find a thing!"

"Your acquaintance may be someone extraordinary," Piolin continued, calming down a little. "Yet there are always others who are no worse. It's useless to ask everyone where you can find so-and-so who's like this and that. At best, they'll just go their own way, though they might laugh behind your back, or even in your face. And allegories won't help: every hint has a cost, but the cost usually isn't high and the white stitches always stick out, betraying a fake... Of course, if you don't want to talk, don't." He shrugged. "My job is simply to warn you. My amicable sentiments as well as my official duty require it – because I don't even know how long you'll stay here. Be it long or short, it's better to spend your time beneficially – for your benefit, of course, not mine. Remember, sometimes you act with the best of intentions, but run up against a wall, and those intentions get you nowhere. The least you can do is not act deviously." He tilted his head, enticing me toward the door and letting me go first. "It would be best if you said right away you didn't want to answer, although it's your business, of course."

As we walked down the corridor of the hotel, Piolin's face didn't show any sign of emotion. He appeared just as he had at the very beginning of our acquaintance, and even the carnation in his buttonhole freshened up and acquired its original spiffy look. Politely directing me to the elevator, Piolin drew my attention to the new carpet and ornate chandeliers – signs of the hotel's prosperity. He thanked me on behalf of the entire staff for deciding to stay there, and assured me the service was excellent, the staff well-trained, and the maids gentle and modest, with some being very cute. And he noted that the oceanside was windy at the moment, which was why most of the rooms were unoccupied, although it's difficult to find a place there during the holiday season.

"It's all full, young man; it really is," Piolin said and, becoming somewhat distracted, pushed the wrong elevator button, then turned away and started humming some melody.

Suddenly he swiveled around again and thanked me in the most official tone for the understanding I had shown. He appreciated my cooperation in the formal procedure he was obliged to follow, which had been demonstrated by the fact that I, in full compliance with the rules for visitors, had refused to respond to his enquiry while stating this in a clear and intelligible manner. It was delightful, because sometimes people try to be sly and elusive, which leads to mutual exhaustion and even dissatisfaction with the other party. That's why one couldn't help but rejoice when the whole matter goes quickly and smoothly because, in truth, it's not worth a damn.

As for my request, Piolin continued when we were in the elevator, my request for help with the search for my acquaintance, a certain Julian, a person, it seems, with enviable gifts and qualities, he was sure the entire hotel staff would be glad to help a visitor, or better yet, a guest, with whatever he was doing there. They would, for example, provide useful advice or

offer topographical materials for a decent price – and Piolin again turned away and started humming under his nose. The elevator crawled so slowly one could hardly say it was moving, and it seemed like a very long time before the doors opened and we proceeded down a large, bright passageway.

“But I have to warn you right off the bat,” Piolin livened up. “Have to warn you: there’s no guarantee this help will produce any results. It’s generally hard to find anything here, even an inanimate object, let alone a human being. Furthermore, sometimes, while looking for a thing, you come across a totally different one. Instead of finding person X, you find Y, and only then do you realize you needed Z. It’s the same now: you might think you’re searching for Julian, but end up finding someone named Gibbs, for instance – and it’s easier to find Gibbs because it’s he who manages the restaurant where we’re going. So we’ll certainly achieve our goal here – at least to some degree.” Piolin chuckled shrilly at his own joke. “And there’s no need to wince and be upset, because Gibbs is in fact an expert on the ocean Dunes, a local trailblazer, so to say, and if he can’t help us find something in M., then nobody can. But even if the matter comes to nothing, it’s not that bad either, because Gibbs will surely give us something to munch on. That’s why it’s clear none other than Gibbs is our man at the moment,” and again Piolin turned away, continuing to hum to himself as if he’d completely lost interest in me.