





# **MOSSAD WRITER**





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*Some stories call for sources.  
Others call for courage.*



# Prologue

The reader always arrives late.

Perhaps the reader has never thought about this, which is understandable, there are things we do all our lives without feeling the need to examine the mechanism behind them, open a door, shake someone's hand, believe a photograph, begin a book, but when the reader opens the first page everything they are going to find has already happened, people have already said what they had to say, including what they will later swear they never said, planes have landed or crashed, lovers have stayed or left, governments have denied before confirming, confirmed before knowing, the dead have died without having the courtesy to wait for the narrator to understand why and, somewhere, sitting in front of a computer, a man who knows the ending has chosen the first sentence.

That man, in this case, is me.

The advantage is considerable.

I now know the importance of people to whom, when they appeared, I paid too little attention, I remember words that seemed banal to me at the time and today carry the inconvenient weight of things that have outlived those who uttered them, I know that certain questions were asked for the wrong reason and certain answers were correct despite having been given by people I should not have trusted, a circumstance that greatly complicates the moral logic of stories, because we have been taught to prefer the truth told by good people and the lie told by bad people, when experience shows that bad people may tell the truth out of self-interest and good people may lie out of fear, and that between the two lies the far more numerous species: those who do not know exactly what they are doing but do so with enough conviction that consequences follow.

All this I know now.

At the time, I knew much less.

It would be possible to try to reproduce that ignorance, to pretend on every page that I do not know what lies on the next, to show

surprise where I no longer feel it, to cast a shadow over the face of someone whose identity I now know, to write “I heard that” without adding that years, months or merely days later I understood something else, and perhaps this is one of the necessary conventions of the novel, the writer knows that the door is going to open but writes as though it were still closed, knows who is on the other side but delays turning the handle because the reader has paid, in money or time, for the right not to know too soon.

There is, however, a problem.

I did not invent all these doors.

Nor did I choose all the people who were on the other side.

Some came in.

Others were invited.

Certain people told me the truth.

Certain people lied.

At least one of these two categories will still be open to question when the book ends.

The reader will say that I am off to a bad start, because a narrator who announces on the first page that he cannot reliably distinguish truth from lies should perhaps have chosen another line of work, to which I might reply that this is precisely why I chose this one, although the answer is too charming to merit complete trust.

Charm is a danger often underestimated.

A well-constructed sentence can do for an idea what a good lawyer does for a guilty client: he does not necessarily alter the facts, merely puts them in an order in which they seem less inconvenient, begins with childhood, moves on to the circumstances, introduces doubt where certainty once stood, saves for the end the detail that would have changed how the beginning was read and, when he is done, no one can accuse him of lying because all the pieces were on the table.

They simply did not arrive at the same time.

Over these months I have learned that the order in which a truth arrives can be as important as the truth itself.

Perhaps I knew that already.

There are forms of knowledge we recognise only after suffering their consequences.

The reader will see an image and want to know whether it is true, a sensible but insufficient question, because it will then be necessary to ask when it was made, by whom, who received it first, who decided to show it, what was left outside the frame, what words were placed beneath it, who translated those words, who repeated them and, finally, why we all have this childish need to believe that something true carries a true interpretation with it.

It carries only what it contains.

We bring the rest.

The same is true of books.

Consider this title.

“Mossad Writer”

It has already done some work before I begin.

It has put an organisation inside the reader’s head, perhaps men in dark suits, perhaps airports, surveillance, clandestine operations, rooms no one enters by accident, people who know our name before we introduce ourselves, all those images that cinema gave us for nothing and which we later demand of reality as though it were obliged to match the imagination.

Perhaps the reader bought the book because of those words.

Perhaps the reader opened it precisely to discover what it means for me to be a Mossad writer.

The construction is especially loaded, as such constructions almost always are when a powerful institution is placed directly before a profession, because “Mossad Writer” seems to establish a relationship that writing about the Mossad, for the Mossad, against the Mossad, because of the Mossad or despite the Mossad would still leave open.

I could explain the title now.

It would be discourteous to the pages ahead and imprudent on my part.

For the time being, let us content ourselves with grammar.

Grammar has condemned people for less.

There is one other thing I must declare before we begin, declaration is too strong a word, I admit, it calls customs and courts to mind, but perhaps it is appropriate for precisely that reason, because a

writer who recounts events in which he took part should be required to complete something resembling a declaration of interests.

I knew some of these people before I began this story.

I liked some of them.

I desired some of them.

I distrusted people who might not have deserved my distrust and trusted others who had certainly done something to deserve it, though perhaps not what I thought.

I had financial interests.

I was vain.

I was afraid, less often than would have been prudent and more often than I admitted at the time.

I wanted to understand.

I also wanted to be right.

The two desires are not synonymous.

Perhaps this is the most useful information I can offer the reader before asking them to accompany me.

A man investigating something seeks the truth, one might say, but a man who has already formulated a hypothesis often seeks only material solid enough to allow him to stop calling it a hypothesis, and there is an enormous difference between the two activities, although from the outside they may involve the same phone calls, the same documents, the same planes and the same sleepless nights.

I also wrote this book.

That fact puts me in a worse position.

I can edit out a hesitation.

I can place two conversations side by side even though fifteen days elapsed between them.

I can remember a look after learning what happened and ascribe to it an intention I did not see at the time.

I can say I had my suspicions.

I can write that something troubled me.

I may even sincerely believe it.

Memory is excellent at manufacturing premonitions after learning of the disaster.

For that reason, when I write that I did not know at the time, the reader may believe me or not.

When I write that I know now, I recommend greater caution.  
Hindsight is a very comfortable form of intelligence.

There is an even more dangerous temptation: to confess one's own faults in advance so as to prevent the reader from discovering them unaided, an old and quite effective technique; I admit that I am vain and perhaps the reader will stop looking for manipulation, I acknowledge that I had a financial interest and it seems we have resolved the conflict of interest, I explain that I may have been used and immediately transform myself, by a small narrative miracle, from accomplice into victim.

The reader would do well not to make it that easy for me.

Nor do I ask the reader to do the opposite.

It would be equally convenient to turn every silence into a conspiracy, every coincidence into a plan, every reserved man into an agent and every agent into a perfect representative of the institution to which he belongs, as if states possessed a single will and organisations were creatures with minds of their own, without incompetents, dissidents, the vain, the cautious, fanatics, officials who are stupid, burnt out or tired, and people who simply received an order on a Friday and would like to get home on time.

Be suspicious, then.

Include me on the list.

I ask only one thing, and even this I have no authority to demand: wait for the facts to arrive before choosing the explanation.

I myself will fail to maintain that discipline more than once.

Perhaps the reader will too.

That is how these things work.

First, something happens.

Then someone gives it a name.

Next we begin to fight over the name and, when we finally look again at what happened, almost no one can see it without the caption.

I could begin this story in Lisbon.

I could begin it in an embassy.

I could choose a room, a question, a name spoken by someone who knew more than I did, because I now understand the narrative

value of such things and no writer is unaware of the advantage of opening a book with a well-placed threat.

It would be false.

The story began somewhere far less convenient for a thriller.

It began with happiness.

A woman was with me.

This too, I now understand, will make the reader jump to conclusions.

I will not try to stop the reader.

At that moment I was not thinking about this book, I was not thinking about intelligence services, I was not thinking about governments, influence operations, images, sources, attributions or the order in which one truth must arrive if it is to defeat another.

I was on holiday.

Perhaps this is the last entirely innocent sentence in this book.

# 1

## *The Foot in the Water*

Spain, Majorca, Ses Salines, Es Carbó

My foot dipped into the water as the *llaüt* dropped with the swell, came out again, then dipped back in, and for a while that was the only measure of the world I was willing to accept: the warm touch climbing over my toes and the sun-warmed wood beneath my back. I lay lengthways beside the gunwale, one leg bent inside the boat and the other dangling over the side, the book open on my chest, held in place by my thumb so that the breeze would not force me to reread pages I had already read. The hull rocked unhurriedly. So did I.

In the shade of the pale awning, a bottle of white wine sat in a small cool box amid melting ice and two containers of fruit. There were two glasses on the benches, one bearing the mark of Cláudia's lips, the other beside my shirt, and a towel lay twisted over a fender. The engine was off. The ropes made small snapping sounds against the varnished wood, enough noise to remind us that the boat had weight and history, not enough to demand any decision from us.

Cláudia was swimming a few metres away, appearing and disappearing behind the glare on the surface: an arm, wet hair, her face raised to breathe. She had stayed in the water when I climbed aboard, which was predictable, as predictable as her stealing my towel despite having brought two, or denying at night that she snored, with the serenity of someone who knows there are no impartial witnesses in a shared bed. I knew these little laws of hers. She knew mine and broke them for sport.

Seen from the sea, Es Carbó was a long strip of very pale sand, with dunes and low scrub behind it, no hotel breaking the line of the beach, no café terrace, no one trying to sell shade to people who already had more than enough sun. A low islet interrupted the near horizon and, farther off-shore, almost dissolved in the brightness, Cabrera could just be made out. We had left Es Port that morning and anchored over a patch of sand, far from the part of the beach where those who had arrived on foot through the dunes had spread themselves out.

I lifted my foot when a slightly higher wave wet me above the ankle, waited for it to pass and let my leg drop again. The page I was reading had

one corner turned down, although I was using a receipt folded into quarters as a bookmark, a contradiction of no consequence, one of the many that a man on holiday can tolerate without opening a case. I took a sip, set the glass down on the wood, and it left a damp ring.

The phone began to ring inside the beach bag.

I let it ring, and the reader will concede that this is a small pleasure: it costs nothing and feels good. Cláudia took another two strokes, rolled onto her back for a few seconds, then continued. The sound persisted, muffled by clothes and sun cream, unpleasant not because it was loud—it was not—but because it came from another life, the one I had left beyond the coast. When it stopped, I returned to the interrupted sentence and did not reach the end before the phone started again.

Cláudia raised her head, looked towards the sound and made for the *llei* with short strokes. She grasped the ladder, climbed aboard over the stern, paused for a moment to catch her breath as water ran from her hair down her shoulders, opened the bag, pushed my shirt aside and found the phone before I did.

— It's been ringing for ages.

— It's not my fault.

— No, of course not. It must be the phone's fault.

She looked at the name on the screen, said nothing and handed it to me. Drops ran down her forearm into my hand; one fell on the open page and darkened the paper. I sat up, ran my thumb along the edge of the page and answered.

— Yes?

— Are you alone?

I looked at Cláudia, who had picked up her glass and stood drinking, with no concern for the water she was leaving on the deck.

— No.

— Can you talk for a minute?

— I can.

The man calling me was a Jewish Portuguese friend from Lisbon, whom I had known long enough that he had no need to invent a pretext whenever he felt like talking to me. He did not work in security, did not make his living from confidential information, had never presented himself as a bridge to any institution. He knew people, as we all do, although certain social connections acquire retrospective importance when something happens later, and it is by this crooked route that a contact list becomes a web and a dinner becomes a planning meeting—an operation for which the narrator writing this bears as much responsibility as anyone else.

— They asked me to let you know something — he said. — Someone from the Israeli Embassy wants to talk to you.

I pulled the book away from the wet patch and left it on the bench.

— Who?

— I don't know.

— Who asked you?

There was a brief pause, not a mysterious one but a cautious one, a much more common thing.

— Someone I know. They only asked me to pass this on to you.

— And what's it about?

— They told me it has something to do with some questions you've been asking. That was the only explanation.

I had asked many questions over the course of my life, and two or three that week, but only one recent matter could explain why an Israeli diplomatic mission in Lisbon would track down my number through a mutual friend. Days earlier, through a Spanish channel entirely unconnected to that man, I had received a vague warning about Ceuta: someone seemed to believe that something out of the ordinary was being set in motion there, or that certain people knew in advance more than they had any business knowing, and the wording was so poor that it could serve equally well as a genuine warning, a rumour, a provocation or merely a desire to appear informed, the cheapest of the four and the most common.

I then called three contacts. One said he knew nothing. Another spoke to me for six minutes without answering the question, an exercise that requires more talent than one might suppose. The third never returned my call. I could assign those reactions to four explanations, and I did, because that is what I do: they had no information; they had it and could not share it; they thought the premise absurd; or they did not want to be associated with it. The difficulty, which seemed far smaller to me that Sunday than it does today, was that I did not have a single fact that would allow me to choose between the four.

— How did they find me? — I asked.

— I don't know, Octávio.

— Do they know where I am?

— I knew you were on holiday. They didn't ask me where.

Cláudia sat beside me, stretched her legs out in the sun, picked up the book, saw the drop on the page and passed me the end of the towel, not as a favour, but because I had been the one to complain when she climbed aboard dripping, and there is an everyday justice in such acts of repayment that requires no comment. If she heard the name of the Embassy, she gave

no sign of it; the volume was low, the sea tapped lightly against the hull, and my friend's voice was little more than a vibration pressed to my ear.

— Is there anything else?

— Just this. They may call from a withheld number. If that happens, answer. That's what they asked me to tell you.

— The Embassy?

— That's what they told me.

The meagreness of the answer was, in his case, the best credential he could offer, because people who know little tend to make up for it with interpretations, especially when they want to go on being needed, and he did nothing of the sort. He asked if everything was all right, I said yes, we exchanged a couple of remarks about Lisbon and hung up. He never acted as an intermediary again, either in that matter or in any other.

I dried the page with the towel, slowly, so as not to tear the softened paper. I write this knowing what came afterwards, and I recognise that this is a corrupting advantage, because it would allow me to make the man sitting on that deck more perceptive than he was, when the true inventory of what he knew was short enough to fit into three lines: someone from the Embassy wanted to speak to him; the reason might lie in his recent questions; the call might come from a withheld number. Everything else was added later, by the facts, by people with an interest in the facts, and by me as well, hardly the most disinterested of the three.

Cláudia set her glass down between us.

— Who was it?

— A friend from Lisbon.

— Work?

— Not exactly. He said the Israeli Embassy wants to call me.

She wiped the water from her eyes with both hands and waited for the next part. When I did not provide it, she merely asked:

— Do we have to go back?

— No.

— Is there trouble?

— Not yet.

— Great. Then you have time to get in the water.

— I'm reading.

— You were answering calls.

— One call.

— Two attempts. I counted.

She reached for the book, I moved it away, she came after it along the bench, I raised my arm, and for a few seconds we behaved with all the

composure available to two nearly naked people fighting over a book in a small boat, which is to say, none. Cláudia gave up first, which should have put me on my guard, picked up her glass and tilted it towards the pages.

— Don't you dare.

— This is wine. It doesn't hurt holiday books.

— It'll hurt this one.

— Then put it somewhere safe and come in.

I marked my place with the receipt, closed the cover, put the book in the bag, and when I turned round she was already at the stern, one foot on the first rung of the ladder, her chin raised towards the sea.

— To the bow and back.

— That isn't a distance.

— It's far enough for you.

She dived in before I could answer and I followed, not because I had accepted the competition, I would say if there were still any point in lying about such small matters, but because staying aboard would have proved her accusation right, and some men swim through life merely to avoid confirming things said by good-humoured women. The water received me without a jolt. I swam a few metres underwater, surfaced alongside the hull and saw her already rounding the curved bow, helping herself along with one hand on the edge, which would have earned her disqualification before any sporting tribunal.

I caught up with her on the way back. She tried to grab me by the ankle, missed, then caught hold of my arm and ended up pressed against my chest, laughing and swallowing a little water. We kissed there, our legs searching for balance where there was no footing, a brief, salty kiss that she broke to breathe. Then she pushed me away.

— I lost because of you.

— You invented the race.

— And you beat me.

— Because of you too.

We stayed by the ladder a while longer, no longer competing. Her hand passed over the back of my neck, mine moved down her back and stopped at her waist. That gesture held neither promise nor the lack of it; there was the body, present, the warmth stored up by the day and the ease of two people who already knew where they could touch without asking all over again for what had already been consented to, though either could change their mind and the other could recognise the change without a word.

We climbed aboard. Cláudia commandeered the towel with which I had saved the page and wrapped herself in it, leaving me the second, dry

one, which, according to a system of justice entirely her own, belonged less to her. I poured us both more wine. The bottle was still cold, the glass misted in my hand and a drop ran down the label to the base.

— Where are we having dinner? — she asked.

— We'll see when we get back.

— You said that yesterday and we ended up at the first place with a table.

— We ate well.

— You were hungry. That's not the same criterion.

She sat in the shade and separated her hair into strands with her fingers to let it dry. We talked about the days ahead, about returning to a cove where we had already been, crossing the island without deciding the night before where we would sleep, staying another night in Colònia de Sant Jordi because changing accommodation always stole a morning from us. Our plans ended with her return and my August commitments, and neither of us thought it necessary to discuss what lay beyond that, a silence others might interpret as something missing but which, there, was simply a matter of proportion.

— Are you really going to Naples on the sixth? — she asked.

— I have to.

— I thought you could sort it out remotely.

— So did I. It can't be done.

— Because of the boat data?

— Maritime data.

— That's what I said.

— You said boats.

— Octávio, do they float?

— Some of the objects the data relates to do, yes.

— There you are, then.

I had worked on two components of Ariadne and had not designed the entire system, a distinction worth repeating in my field because people credit whoever speaks about a piece of work with authorship of everything they do not understand. One of those components organised maritime information. We still had to finalise an arrangement with a partner in the Naples region, partly in cash, partly in usage rights, and the company my sister and Cláudia had together needed me at the table.

— Because of Ariadne? — Cláudia asked.

— Yes. That monster.

— Monster?

— You know what I mean.

— That thing only sorts paperwork for lawyers.

— Of course.

— So it's useful.

I didn't correct anything else. She knew enough to know that I had helped with two parts and that, because of that, I knew how far it could go, an honesty I appreciated, perhaps because most of my professional life was spent in rooms where everyone pretended to understand before finding out whether understanding paid. Naples was already in the calendar. No call from Lisbon had put it there.

She lay down on the bench with her head resting on the bag, closed her eyes and, before long, her breathing slowed. I returned to my book, found the stain from the drop and read past it without difficulty. The beach filled up over the course of the afternoon, although from the sea it still looked almost deserted, small groups appearing on the sand after the walk through the dunes, looking for a spot, putting up parasols and going into the water. No one had come there because of us, and I write that sentence precisely because, months later, it would have been convenient to write the opposite.

A larger boat passed farther out and sent a swell towards us that had softened by the time it arrived. I caught the glass before it fell. The bow rose, fell, and my foot, once again dangling over the side, briefly lost contact with the surface. The awning snapped. Cláudia opened one eye.

— Are we still alive?

— Barely.

— Wake me if it gets worse.

She went back to sleep. I read a few more pages, closed the book without marking my place and watched the mast's shadow move across the deck. I did not think about the Embassy for an interval I cannot measure, and I won't inflate it to make myself look better. The phone did not ring. The wine finally began to lose its chill, the sand grew less white, and Cabrera eventually became indistinguishable from the sky.

Later she woke up hungry, ate the remaining fruit and accused me of having chosen the hardest peaches in the market. We dived in again, this time with no race and no winner. She climbed out first and lay in the sun to dry while I held on to the ladder with half my body submerged, listening to the sound the swell made inside the hull, hollow and regular, a sound that asked for no translation.

As the light faded, we put away the glasses, closed the cool box and put our clothes in the bag. Cláudia tied back her hair and took a fender to the stern. I weighed anchor; it came up clean from the sandy bottom,

shedding only water and pale grains. I stowed the line, checked that nothing had been left loose and started the engine.

The *Ilaiüt* moved off slowly and Es Carbó gradually lost its detail: first the strip of sand, then the low vegetation reduced to a line, while the islet that for hours had seemed within arm's reach was left behind us. Cláudia sat beside me with a shirt over her swimsuit and rested her feet where I had been lying. We did not talk about the call. We did, however, argue about whether the first to shower at the villa should be the one who had done the driving or the one who had done more swimming.

— Driving doesn't put salt in your hair — she said.

— Swimming was your choice.

— It was yours too, after I made you.

— That only makes my argument stronger.

— You don't have an argument.

As we approached Colònia de Sant Jordi, the engines returned, the voices, the nearby boats, the bustle of the harbour, the town beach pressed up against the houses. I reduced speed. Cláudia got the fender ready, waited for me to indicate which side and stood ready by the edge, without turning her help into a performance, a rare quality on land and rarer still on water. We entered Es Port with the ease of people who had known from the beginning that the day would end ashore, among people, plates and electric light.

After we had moored, she jumped onto the quay and waited for me to pass her the bag. I checked my phone. No call from a withheld number, no message from the Embassy, no further contact from my friend. I put the phone in my pocket.

— Where are we having dinner? — she asked, already walking towards the restaurants.

I set down the last line I was holding, left it on board and followed her.

## 2

### *The Withheld Number*

Spain, Majorca, Port de Sóller

The mobile phone vibrated against the table and made the spoon slide two centimetres across the saucer. Cláudia broke off our argument about the tram—which, for her, was only worth taking if it got us out of the heat and, for me, was worthwhile precisely because it did not get us anywhere quickly—and looked at the display when I picked it up. No name, dialling code or string of digits appeared. Behind her, the tracks ran along the sea-front and the curve of the bay enclosed a sheltered expanse of water, full of masts, the clatter of crockery and the voices of people still eating lunch beneath the awnings.

— Withheld number.

— Is that the one?

I remembered the warning received in Es Carbó, and Cláudia remembered that I had told her about it, nothing more, which may seem little to anyone who considers intimacy to mean the right to know everything, but it was enough for us, who had never measured affection by the number of explanations demanded.

— It must be.

— Answer it.

I answered. The woman confirmed my name, introduced herself as an Israeli staff member at the Embassy of Israel in Lisbon and asked if I could talk. Her Portuguese was correct, and I did not try to extract a biographical clue from her pronunciation, a practice much favoured by anyone wishing to turn two vowels into a personal file.

— I can. I'm in Majorca.

— Thank you for letting me know. We would like to speak to you in person when you return to Portugal.

— About what?

— Questions you have asked recently.

— Who did I ask?

— About Ceuta.

Cláudia signalled to the waiter and mouthed a request for the bill without taking her attention off me. The tram went past at that moment,

squealing on the bend, its windows full and its varnish throwing back the sun, so I covered my other ear for a few seconds.

— Is there a problem?

— We would prefer to speak in person.

— Is it a consular matter?

— No.

— Am I speaking to a diplomat?

— At the moment, you're speaking to me.

The reply irritated me, perhaps because it was impeccably true and therefore useless, a quality I would often encounter in that circuit, where a sentence could deliver everything it promised and leave its recipient without what they needed.

— And who will I be speaking to in Lisbon?

— You'll be introduced to him there. Can you be at 16 Rua António Enes on Monday at eleven?

I repeated the day, more to buy time than because I had misheard.

— Is that a problem?

— On the sixth, I have to be in Naples.

— Then Monday seems more convenient than Friday.

There was no irony in her voice, or I failed to detect it. I accepted the time. The woman explained that I would receive a standard confirmation with access instructions and ended the call without asking for details of my journey, my whereabouts on the island or a promise of confidentiality. The banality of the conversation did not reassure me, but nor did it authorise me to make up what was missing.

Cláudia waited for me to put the mobile phone on the table.

— So it was them?

— Yes. The Israeli Embassy.

— What do they want?

— To talk.

She kept her eyes on me for a moment, then paid the bill the waiter had brought.

— I gathered that.

— It's about Ceuta.

— Spain?

— Yes.

— Is it serious?

— I don't even know if it's anything.

Cláudia folded the receipt, put it in her wallet and pointed towards the tram, which was already making its way around the curve on the far side of the bay.

— We've missed this one.

— There'll be another.

— What if we stay by the sea?

— I'd rather. The tram's very touristy.

— Perfect, then.

We stayed. We went down to the stretch of Es Través, wandered aimlessly through the built-up area and hired two sun loungers for the hours during which the slopes of the Tramuntana gradually drew the light away from one side of the bay. The boats barely moved within the shelter, although everything around them was organised around movement: families arriving, waiters clearing plates, bicycles crossing the tracks, passengers waiting for the next tram. Es Carbó had allowed us to pretend that the world had remained on the far side of the coast; Port de Sóller handed it back to us ready-made, served and billed.

Cláudia read for half an hour and fell asleep with her sunglasses in her hand. I saw the confirmation from Lisbon come through, read the entry rules and filed it away. I did not open the conversations about Ceuta. I had made three attempts and obtained three distinct forms of uselessness, and persisting at that moment would mainly have served to convince me that I was taking action, the illusion so many amateur investigators use in place of results.

When Cláudia woke, she wanted to know whether we were going through Sóller the next day or heading on to Palma. I said we could decide when we woke up. She reminded me that she had a direct flight to Paris and needed to collect a suitcase she had left at another hotel; I would return to Lisbon, prepare for Naples and find some way to fill the gaps between commitments with tasks that, from the outside, looked as though they had already been done.

— Are you going to Porto? — she asked.

— I doubt it.

— But isn't your return flight to Porto?

— I want to sort out the Lisbon thing.

— Lisbon? What thing?

— The Embassy.

— Oh! I'd completely forgotten about that.

We went to get ice creams, watched the tram return packed and ended up boarding near the end of the service, sitting apart for half the journey.

Cláudia talked to a French child who asked her whether the carriage was a toy train. When a seat beside me became free, she came over and took it, resting her knee against mine.

— She thinks this is a toy train.

— It almost looks like one. We're crawling along.

— But it's fun.

— It is.

Cláudia looked out of the window for a while. We passed between houses, low walls and trees, slowly enough for everything to seem closer than it was.

— Majorca was good — she said.

— It was.

— We should have stayed another two days.

— You've got Paris.

— Yeah. Just the thought of it... work.

— That needs doing too.

She ate the rest of the ice cream and sat with the wooden spoon between her fingers.

— Are you really going to the Embassy?

— Obviously. I'm going to Lisbon just for that. I don't particularly like Lisbon.

— Do you know anyone there?

— At the Embassy? Not that I know of.

— And in Israel?

I thought for a moment.

— I don't know. I know a few Jews with connections to Israel. People who work with people there. People with connections...

She turned her head towards me.

— Connections?

— Yes. They know people.

— What people?

— I don't know, Cláudia. People. Government, companies, that kind of thing.

— Right. I see. One of those things of yours. Better not to know.

The tram rounded a bend and she pressed her knee against mine again.

In the days that followed, Ceuta began bursting into the television news with a frequency capable of making even the sound of the place-name seem suspect, without bringing any clarity as to what was happening, for a name repeated by the collective voice eventually acquires a taint that many sense and few know the source of. The picture had already turned

grim in the previous seven days; more than a thousand people had reached the enclave by sea, swimming, and municipal officials had raised the alarm. It was all known, laid out for anyone who cared to take note, and that alone would have been enough for many to foresee worse, without a whisper, a prophecy or a hand behind the plot, for certain predictions only seem miraculous when scrutiny begins after the fact.

I would read two or three articles, turn off the screen and go and find Cláudia. We ate, swam and argued over where to go. Life has that kind of insolence; it demands hunger, water, movement, sleep, even when an idea finally begins to say Ceuta.

We said goodbye in departures at the Majorcan airport, between the baggage scale and a display directing us to different gates. Cláudia pulled a light jacket out of her bag, unused throughout our stay, put it on and checked the boarding information. I was going to Lisbon. She to Paris. Neither of us mentioned a detour.

On a television, Ceuta appeared again; swimmers made for land, police ran alongside the fence, newsreaders used language whose weight was increasing faster than the knowledge available. Twice I heard a martial term, capable of turning a journey into an offensive without knowing who gives the orders, who carries them out, who is fleeing or who is merely trying to get there.

I had already heard it days earlier, in the thread that had brought me the question about Morocco, the CIA and Mossad, and it was that echo that held my attention, not because it revealed coordination—that would have been too neat, perhaps childish, for a useful formula roams freely and finds imitators with no leader—but because it seemed forged for the case that would later lend it the semblance of a clue, as though the mould had appeared first and reality, obedient, arrived afterwards to take its shape.

Cláudia followed my gaze.

— Do you have to go?

— I do.

— So do I.

We kissed, held each other for a few seconds and she stepped back to adjust the handle of her suitcase.

— Have fun in Naples.

— I'm going there to work.

— That's what I said.

— Have a good trip.

— You too.

She headed for security and did not look back, not out of coldness, nor to leave me with a literary image, but because she was looking for the card she had just put away. I watched her disappear into the queue, walked to my gate and bought a newspaper I never opened. The happiness of those days was not diminished by ending there. It had lasted for the time we had both given it.

The scale changed during the journey. The airport screens were still speaking of thousands; by the time I landed, the ministry's estimate was approaching forty-nine thousand arrivals in a single day, by sea and land, and the reports cited dozens of deaths. Spain was trying to stem the flow and send back many of those who had crossed. The figures changed from broadcast to broadcast, the images repeated, and the European dimension arrived through political language, that mechanism by which a human tragedy also becomes a dispute over borders, sovereignty, responsibility and words.

I was holding a suitcase full of clothes I had worn on the island and watching, on an overhead monitor, people in the water, some moving forward, others being pulled, while a caption classified the episode. I thought of the order in which the terms had reached me: Ceuta, pressure, Morocco, Americans, Israelis. The private account had included no date, number, route or death toll. It contained a geography and actors broad enough to survive a range of outcomes, which should have made it weak, although the actual outcome had lent it an appearance of precision.

Writing afterwards confers a dishonest advantage, and I could use it to make the Octávio of that week a more perceptive observer than he was, give him numbers that had not yet been published, images that did not yet exist and the intelligence of someone who senses History approaching; but the reader knows the episode, and I did not know it when I asked. I had one word, Ceuta, and far too many intelligence services added by third parties. Ignorance should be preserved at the point in the narrative where it belongs, for changing the order of knowledge is a very efficient way of falsifying without altering a single fact.

In Lisbon, I left my suitcase unopened, took out my passport and the documents for Naples, confirmed the time on Rua António Enes and searched for updated accounts of the crisis. Public sources made it possible to establish what had been seen, announced or estimated; they did not link the CIA, Mossad or Moroccan agencies to a joint covert operation. The distance between those two levels grew with every video, rather than shrinking, because the more real the suffering became, the easier it was to attach the narrative already waiting to enter circulation.

On the appointed morning, I arrived at Rua António Enes ten minutes early. I showed my identification, followed the instructions I had been given and waited in a functional room with chairs, water and institutional publications. I found no secret corridors, illuminated maps or doors designed to satisfy the imagination of someone visiting a diplomatic mission in search of espionage; I found entry procedures and staff carrying out their duties, which proved neither innocence nor conspiracy, only a real institution functioning while I remained unaware of what sort of person had asked to see me.

An official came in and introduced the visitor accompanying him.

— Ariel Nevo, from Jerusalem.

Ariel shook my hand and thanked me in Portuguese. He wore a dark suit without a tie and carried a light jacket folded over his forearm, but no briefcase. He sat down after I did, tried another two sentences in my language and switched to English with a brief apology. We spoke in English; here, for once, the language on the page is the language we actually used.

— Ministry of Foreign Affairs? — I asked.

— Government.

— That covers a lot.

— Yes.

He gave no job title. On the table stood a jug, two glasses and a notepad with no letterhead. Ariel did not open the pad.

— Who told you about Ceuta when the public emergency was still on a different scale?

The question came without preamble, and my unease arose not because he knew I had made enquiries—that much had already been disclosed—but because he placed the relevant moment at a stage when most people still saw a severe but limited problem, rather than the events that would later preoccupy Europe.

— They didn't tell me about Ceuta. They asked me a question.

— What question?

— Whether I could find out if Israelis were involved.

— Israelis?

— They said Mossad.

Ariel's posture did not change.

— And what did you do?

— I said I had no access to Mossad.

— Then you contacted three people.

Three, he said, and it was that number, so small and so exact, that made me pause. It is worth bearing in mind that I had not told the Embassy

official how many there had been, nor did my acquaintance in Lisbon, who knows or pretends to know so many things, have access to that detail.

— Were they the ones who told you?

— Is that important?

— To me, yes.

— I understand.

— You understand? But you don't tell me what you really want, you don't answer anything, you only ask me questions. If this is an investigation, it would be better conducted at the Public Prosecutor's Office, with a lawyer present.

— I asked you here to understand what you received.

— And I need to understand who wants to know.

Ariel poured water for us both. He did not use the pause to appear threatening; he drank, set down his glass and resumed the conversation at the point that suited him, which was more effective than any theatrics.

— The fact that we're asking does not confirm what you heard.

— Nor does it deny it.

— I didn't invite you here for a game of logic.

— That's precisely what you did.

He exhaled through his nose, without smiling.

— Who wanted you to believe that?

I had prepared myself for a discussion about the truth of the rumour, or at least for an Israeli refusal to discuss it, and the change of tack left me without an answer for a few seconds. Whoever had passed the question on to me might have been seeking verification, using me to reach channels they did not have access to, or merely wanting me to start repeating the association. All three hypotheses fitted the same initial act.

— I don't know.

Ariel opened his jacket, took out three folded printouts and lined them up. They were screenshots of short texts, with no headers that would allow me to identify the sender, recipient or platform. He did not point to any names. He ran his forefinger along the sequence of terms.

— Ceuta. Morocco. United States. Israel.

One screenshot said CIA, another Americans; two said Mossad, the third used the phrase Israeli support. The time window was vague but short. The wording I had received did not match any of them word for word, though it shared the same combination and sequence.

— Was it similar? — he asked.

— Yes.

— How similar?

- Similar enough to make me want to see where these came from.
- You can't.
- Then I can't assess their provenance.
- You can say whether you recognise the pattern.
- I recognise it.

Ariel gathered up the printouts, keeping them in the same order. Three similar texts could have originated from a common source, successive copying or convergence between rumours fed by the same news reports. They could also have been planted to establish an attribution. The table offered no means of choosing between them.

- How did it reach the Spanish circuit?
- Through a private channel.
- Izar?

Hearing the name there had an effect I tried not to let show on my face. Izar had been born in Ceuta, had ties to the PSOE and belonged to a phase of my life I had no intention of reactivating to satisfy the curiosity of an official whose position fitted within the word Government.

- I haven't spoken to her in a long time.
- That isn't what I asked.
- Izar didn't pass the rumour on to me. I haven't contacted her and I don't intend to.
- Why?

— Because I haven't spoken to her in a long time. Besides, being born in Ceuta doesn't make her a source on everything that happens there. In fact, Izar has lived in Brussels with her daughters for many years — I paused. — But you must already know that.

Ariel nodded once. I could not tell whether he was acknowledging the jab, the boundary I had set or merely noting it.

— You're trying to set up an association in Spain inspired by Portugal's CITIZENS' VOICE.

- There's no secret about that.
- I didn't say there was.
- The people I speak to in Madrid about consumer issues don't necessarily talk to me about Israel.
- People rarely talk for only one reason.
- That sentence allows you to suspect everyone and conclude nothing.
- Sometimes, concluding nothing is the objective.

Ariel said it diplomatically but without mincing words, and perhaps that was why the remark bothered me all the more. I had already worked in contexts where the origin, order and selection of true elements changed

the way a campaign was read; I knew that influence did not require control over every participant and that an intermediary could serve a particular outcome without knowing the plan. Knowing those distinctions in the abstract did not stop me forgetting them when my own name appeared in the circuit.

— I'm not going to approach Izar under another pretext — I said. — I won't use CITIZENS' VOICE as cover, and I don't write texts subject to approval by governments.

— Do you still write?

— I do. It isn't my main occupation.

— Perhaps that is what makes it interesting. You are not an accredited journalist, civil servant, diplomat or foreign policy specialist. If you continue to follow this matter, if you visit Israel, if you speak to people who can show you documents, perhaps one day you will write about what you saw.

— If I write, the text is mine. You may correct dates, names and verifiable facts, protect sources or explain specific risks. You do not remove a criticism because it is inconvenient for Israel, nor do you get to approve the conclusion.

— I haven't even asked you to write yet.

— I'm saying it now, before you ask.

This time Ariel smiled, but with no visible pleasure.

— Do you always negotiate over things you haven't yet been offered?

— It prevents misunderstandings.

— It can also create them.

— Then we'll have something to talk about next time.

I had asserted my editorial independence in advance with the speed of someone afraid of losing what he did not even possess, a contradiction that does me no favours and therefore deserves to remain. Ariel might merely have been testing my willingness to continue observing Ceuta; I was already defending the sovereignty of a work that did not exist.

— If you're looking for someone who will automatically defend Israel, you've chosen badly — I said. — I acknowledge the massacre perpetrated by Hamas, the hostages, Israel's right to defend itself, the organisation's terrorist nature and the existence of tunnels where that has been demonstrated. I continue to have serious criticisms regarding Gaza, especially civilian deaths, and the more I hear Israel's technological capabilities praised, the harder it becomes to accept "we didn't know" as a universal explanation.

Ariel did not challenge the framing, recite Israeli casualty figures or try to win the argument through an accumulation of suffering.

— Then come and see what you think you know.

— Is that an invitation?

— It's a suggestion.

— Government?

— Mine, at the moment.

— That still tells me very little.

— We've made progress.

The dryness of the exchange did not make us allies. It merely established that he did not need me to be obedient and I did not want to appear amenable, two positions compatible for an hour and perhaps incompatible for all that followed.

— Did Israel intervene in Ceuta? — I asked.

— I will neither confirm nor deny intelligence operations.

— That doesn't help.

— I can tell you something else. Israel wants to know who first began linking the name Mossad to Ceuta when the publicly known scale was still limited. The question does not mean that Israel has no interests in the region, or that it is not in dialogue with Morocco and the United States. It means that an attribution surfaced early and circulated through more than one channel.

— How many?

— More than one.

— I already know that.

— Excellent.

— And what if the attribution is correct?

— Its early appearance does not make it correct. Nor would its being false, by itself, explain who put it out.

Ariel looked at me for a few seconds.

— *והשדהו כבדהו*.

— What?

— *Kabdehu ve-hashdehu*. It is Hebrew. "Respect him and suspect him."

— It sounds like an exhausting way to live.

— It is a useful way to listen.

— Or never to believe anyone.

— Belief is not necessary. Listening is.

Ariel put the printouts away in his jacket. What he had just said limited the conclusion without absolving Israel, and I had to acknowledge that

such restraint was intellectually more serious than the alternative I had brought with me, according to which the invitation to Rua António Enes would confirm involvement or a cover-up. The institutional presence demonstrated interest. It did not fully reveal the motive.

— Preserve the original texts — he said. — Do not seek out any more Israeli contacts for the time being. If the Spanish channel resurfaces, listen to what they tell you without immediately trying to prove a theory. And we would prefer you not mention this meeting.

— I did not sign anything.

— I asked. I did not order you.

— I will not disclose it unnecessarily. I cannot promise to conceal it if it becomes relevant to protecting myself or explaining a choice.

— That works.

— Works? For whom?

Ariel ignored the question.

I looked at my watch. The conversation was taking longer than I had expected.

— When are you available next week?

— I'm not. I'm going to Naples.

— Holiday?

— Work.

— Until when?

— The twelfth at the latest.

I did not explain the maritime data to him, or the contracts, or the usage rights, or the company my sister and Cláudia had together, and Ariel, for his part, did not ask, which might have meant a lack of interest but might also have meant precisely the opposite, because there are questions asked only by those who do not yet know the answers, and I was almost certain that somewhere, in a real file or in one of those files that no longer need paper to weigh on a person, there would be enough information about me, my family, the people who worked with me and perhaps even some who had merely had the misfortune to appear too often near my name. If Naples meant more to him than the name of an Italian city, he kept that knowledge to himself, like someone who recognises a street he has visited before and prefers to let the other person believe he is seeing it for the first time.

— We'll speak later — he said.

We stood up. I looked on the table for a card he had no intention of giving me.

— How do I contact you?

— When we need to speak, we'll call.

— Another withheld number?

— Perhaps.

The Embassy official escorted me to the exit. Outside, the Lisbon light forced me to squint, and for several steps I did nothing but walk past façades, parked cars and trees that bore no responsibility for the opacity of the Israeli government. Only then did I check the screen. There was a message about Naples: the time of the contract meeting had been changed and they wanted confirmation.

I replied that I would be there. Then I opened the three conversations through which I had tried to clarify Ceuta. Each contained a different version of my question and a different degree of evasion. I wrote to no one.

On that Monday, I still believed Naples was the only commitment already fixed for the week. I closed the conversations and scrolled the calendar to Thursday.

6 AUGUST — NAPLES.



# 3

## *The Small Island*

Italy, Procida

I rested my feet on a sturdy chair, braced my hands on the floor and aligned my body between the two supports, without letting my hips sag as I lowered my chest. The hotel room had little space for that arrangement, which was why one hand was beside the bed and the other over the seam between two floor tiles, but it was enough. I pushed myself up, held my breath for a moment, then lowered myself again. At a certain point, brief pauses began to separate the repetitions, the air came in more heavily and what until then had been rhythm now depended on a choice renewed each time. I could stop. I did two more.

I lowered my feet to the floor, crouched until my breathing recovered and straightened the chair. There was no celebration, note or promise to do better the following day. I stepped into the shower, let the water run until the accumulated heat was gone and dressed for a meeting that had been in the diary for months, when Ariel Nevo had not yet entered my life and Ceuta was, for me, primarily a piece of Spanish geography associated with Izar.

The room was in an office building in the Piazza Municipio area and belonged to Partenope Tracce Marine, a fictional company in the sense that the name used here does not refer to any real Neapolitan company, although, within the events I recount, it had employees, accounts, clients and the Neapolitan irritation of someone who had sold a resource and discovered that the buyer had made more from it than expected. Virtuo Turing had licensed historical commercial AIS data, port-call records, public vessel identification, transmitted positions, schedules, meteorological data and open-source information on ownership and management; commercial satellite images were purchased separately. None of it was classified.

On the table were two versions of the contract and a laptop connected to a monitor. The disagreement came down to a question that was easy to ask and expensive to answer: when a licensed dataset is incorporated into an analysis that cross-references many other elements, does the result remain derived from the original dataset, or does it become a new product? Partenope wanted additional payment. Virtuo Turing was willing to

review specific uses but refused to pay a percentage on inferences built from multiple layers.

I was there because I had worked on two components of Ariadne. In one of them, devoted to the maritime domain, my contribution had focused on the questions, the logical design, the definition of an anomaly, the criteria that prevented false alarms and the relationship between disparate entities. I had not coded the system or designed its overall architecture, nor did I possess that almost divine expertise which commercial presentations like to attribute to anyone capable of pointing at a screen without hesitation. I did, however, know where the record ended and inference began, a boundary that, after Ceuta, I already knew could be crossed without changing a single fact.

One of the Partenope representatives brought up an example. For days, a cargo ship had transmitted regularly. Then a gap appeared. Farther on, the signal reappeared, and Ariadne had matching events, weather conditions, declared port calls, management references and public tracks, without settling on a definitive explanation.

— The system finds vessels that disappear — he said.

— It does not find ships. It finds gaps in the data.

— It's a way of putting it.

— It's the distinction at the heart of our argument over payment.

I zoomed in on the empty segment. The absence of a transmission might be the result of a technical failure, loss of coverage, an aggregation error, faulty transmission or deliberate behaviour, among other possibilities. Ariadne ranked hypotheses and preserved the provenance of the data used; it did not turn the gap into criminal intent. If it did, it would stop analysing and start writing fiction with an assurance that many novelists, whether more honest or merely more cautious, would not dare claim.

The negotiations dragged on over the distinction between embedded use and disguised resale, two expressions any lawyer can keep alive until hunger makes the parties reasonable. We arrived at a limited supplementary payment for certain maritime products, excluded claims on multi-source inferences and agreed to more rigorous provenance records. The solution did not entirely please either side, a modest but common feature of compromises that survive.

We also reviewed the instrument granting me contingent economic rights in Virtuo Turing. My remuneration for the work had combined an immediate payment and a stock option, dependent on the company's value and on events I considered unlikely. I left it unchanged. When I walked

out, I still assumed that the most fanciful thing about Virtuo Turing was my sister's valuation of it. Other valuations would emerge.

I crossed the historic centre with the folder under my arm, no longer inclined to sit down in a restaurant. On Via dei Tribunali, scooters threaded their way through pedestrians, the worn façades threw back the heat and the counter at Pizzeria e Friggitoria Dal Purgatorio offered the solution the meeting had not: a cheap, quick choice free of clauses. I ordered a *margherita a portafoglio* and a Pepsi. The pizza cost one euro fifty; together they came to around two euros fifty, an indecorously small sum compared with the dining rooms where I usually ate and where the crockery alone seemed to demand declared income.

I was handed the folded *margherita*, wrapped in paper. The tomato and hot cheese forced me to adjust my grip with every bite, while an orange stain spread beside my fingers. I ate standing up, walked a few paces, drank the cold Pepsi and looked at what remained.

In Italy it is always difficult to watch your waistline.

The threat was not in that pizza. It lay in the certainty that I could repeat the experience two hours later, with the same conviction that the morning's discipline authorised gastronomic recidivism. I carried on along Via dei Tribunali, passing through the area of the Complesso Monumentale di Santa Maria delle Anime del Purgatorio ad Arco without confusing the religious institution with the establishment where I had bought my lunch, a banal distinction worth preserving because proximity and a shared name are sometimes enough for narrators to create connections the world did not.

As I put away the empty can, I saw that I was only a few minutes from Via Vincenzo Bellini. The decision to go to the Bourbon Street Jazz Club came without research or a plan. I knew where it was. I would return after dark.

The familiar door led down to the basement, and it was Ruggiero who came with me through memory, not Cecilia. He had taken me there long ago, choosing a table near the musicians, where I heard "Autumn Leaves" and watched the saxophonist with an attentiveness that would later contribute to my buying the Selmer, a top-of-the-range saxophone. Some impulses do not return with a bang; they merely move a finger we thought was still and wait for the rest of the hand to follow.

I sat where I could see the quartet and ordered sparkling water. The musicians had no names I could give the reader without inventing them, and inventing them would perhaps have been a small act of violence, because it would have taken away precisely what, that night, it was enough

for them to be: four men playing for people who did not know who I was and had no need to know. The light caught the tenor saxophone on the stage and, for a few bars, the fingers of my right hand repeated an old position on the table, learnt on the instrument's keys and apparently forgotten, like so many things the body takes it upon itself to preserve after memory has decided they are no longer needed. I stopped when I noticed the gesture.

Cecilia appeared later, accompanied by Chiara and by the memory of another time we had entered that club. Ruggiero had looked at me and called me *Lelè*. No one from that recent life knew that name, Cecilia included, and her surprise had not come from discovering a lie, because I had not lied to her, but from realising that there was a part of me I had kept apart from the man of reports, companies, meetings and all those occupations through which we offer others a sufficiently coherent version of ourselves.

Ruggiero had then pushed me towards a borrowed tenor saxophone and I had played, imperfectly, as one would expect, perhaps without even the skill that memory later bestows on the things we loved, but I played and stood there exposed by the sound and above all by the joy, perhaps more by the joy than by any wrong note, because our flaws rarely surprise those who love us, whereas the parts of our lives in which we were happy without them can hurt in a way no one is prepared for.

I did not go to Bourbon Street to recreate that episode. I did not ask after Ruggiero, tell the waiter that I had once stood on that stage or look for Cecilia's contact details. I stayed until the interval, paid my bill and looked one last time at the musician's saxophone, which was his and would remain his after I left.

This time no one called me *Lelè*.

Out on the street, I took the phone from my pocket. Ariel had advised me not to sound out any more contacts in his circle for the time being; Yael fell close enough to that boundary for writing to her to constitute partial disobedience, and far enough outside it for me to argue otherwise if challenged. Human beings do not need good arguments to disregard advice, only available ones.

I wrote: "Are you in Italy?"

The reply came shortly afterwards: "*Procida*."

"Tomorrow?"

"Can you be here tomorrow?"

"I'm in Naples."

"Naples? Must be serious."