

## 1 **Insomnia**

I wandered through the streets for I couldn't tell how long, I only know I went down many streets with dogs barking, many streets with their lamps missing a pane of glass, many streets with cars parked on the pavement with broken windows through which dangling wires could be seen, as if the nerves and veins of a machine had been pulled out, many streets that had nothing to say but houses jumbled together and stuck to each other, with dark eyes and eyelids drooping in wrinkles. I hated my insomnia with all the brutality a man can hate with; it reminded me of original sin, the punishment received for living, hell, the dark and shelterless world that awaits us beyond death. Only those who suffer from it know what I'm talking about. Insomnia is being so close to the shadow that you recognise its breath, that you feel a sticky, slimy embrace as if the vapours of spirits were sizing you up.

And yet it was in insomnia that my brain discovered unknown places, lived far from my body, thought without my fears and felt free from the sordid problems with which I tormented it in my everyday existence. This was why at first I respected it and kept faith with it, joined forces and played with it; but later I foolishly provoked it, challenged it and suffered a definitive defeat.

I remember the first time well; I hadn't gone in search of it, as often happens with the best finds; a timely hand, for a reasonable price, held out a fistful of the now unobtainable Dixidrine. This was how I came across this other existence. At the beginning, the experience of the amphetamines and that of the insomnia came mixed together and I wasn't able to define their borders. I wasn't even able to work out what it was that I was beginning to enjoy. I took Dixidrine for a while, a flock of us used to

gather outside the duty chemist's to pass off our forged prescriptions. When the authorities got tough on Dixidrine, we went for Portuguese amphetamines. A door had opened that I would never want to close, or at least this was what I thought then.

Little by little, as I made the acquaintance of my secret companion, my secret place, the paradise of wakefulness, I began to discover the tunnels and pathways that led me there without any need for amphetamines. Insomnia had taken hold of me, never again to let go. Like all friends it offers favours and complicity, shared games, and in the end it also offers servitude and ill-treatment. But it was some time before I found out about the latter. So long as I was dominant - so long as I called for it and it came, so long as I was the boss, the joker, the leader, the one with ideas, the one who seeks out adventures - and it followed me, it was all a great joy for me. I played at being the lover of the seven beds, the shadow of the night, the misty rain, the neighbourhood night-watch, the anaemic, lunatic poet. What did I care about the comments the next day on my appearance, my general scruffiness, my bloodshot eyes, the rings always under them, my uncombed greasy lank hair. I knew I was living two lives - with them, the world, and then again while they were sleeping. I knew I was living twice; what I didn't suspect was that I was going to have to pay for it. Those were years when I lived as if I'd come across a treasure, a talisman to which few have access, a secret spell. Under its protection I wrote innumerable poems, sketched out ideas and played with words. I became a denizen of the night and of its mysteries, I scrutinized the darkness listening to the sounds of the shadows, learning of their hidden loves, the echoing of their footsteps, their absinthes, their servitudes. Already then I knew the night had other denizens, but I fled only one of them: terror, fear. I can't remember the first time I felt terror, because I didn't even allow myself to feel it fully; I knew it occupied a place in the night into which I didn't want to venture. I

trusted that we would respect each other, in the way that cats and I felt mutual respect. Whenever I sensed that fear might be close, I felt a shudder running up my spine, a nail in my soul, and I threw myself at papers, always writing, writing on and on.

But now, with my feet worn down, in these nameless streets of the great metropolis where fear peeps from every window churning my bowels, it does me little good to remember the beginnings of what I considered a discipline, a treasure, which has become the cell that keeps me imprisoned without pity. Now I stumble along, as if lacking the breath of life, as if bearing on my back the heaviest cross that man or Christ has borne, the cross of the eternity of suffering, the cross of infinity, of the bottomless hole, of the endless stairway, of the lockless door - all the nightmares that frighten and disturb one as a child live together inside me. The most pitiless punishment that any man, living or dead, has endured: insomnia.

My rage has now disappeared, now I'm not fighting insomnia, futile attempts are now far distant, getting up to eat cakes, reading dull books ... only alcohol had any effect, my other shackle, only by flooding my body with whisky did I achieve results, but I can feel the price I paid in these rotting, failing organs and limbs. Now I move chained to my insomnia; I know I cannot confront it. My tortured feet drag themselves along these streets like old papers blown by the night wind, aimless and desperate. And my bleeding brains groan with every stab of my tyrant's spurs. I'd like to fall asleep in a corner somewhere, but there is no peace for me.

My eyes have now almost lost the ability to distinguish colours; I live in a world of fog that rises over my feet and tries to choke me in my throat. In the fog I hear a murmuring of voices laughing and joking about in a car. It's an old Triumph, and on its bonnet it bears bestial warriors, horrifying and murderous, killing and

biting each other in fury. The voice of a mad, toothless woman grates against the windows.

‘Bring me that one.’

‘We aren’t enough for you, you old tart,’ a hoarse voice as of someone manhandling his trousers into place.

The car door was flung open and swung on its hinges. A pair of ragged jeans emerges from the door, over battered army boots with steel toecaps, and little by little a greasy body slips from the front seat, until it comes out spluttering menacingly spat words.

‘Hey you. Miriam wants another bang.’

The guy looked me up and down, he had red cheeks with their skin peeling from infections or wretchedness, and his face pierced with studs. His lips, dark and fleshy, dribbled as he glared at me. Greasy arms with a jumble of tattoos. He was glaring at me with a murderous expression and breathing with difficulty. And now the rear door opened and the scratchy voice of a crow with appendicitis could be heard.

‘Come on, Rog, grab him.’

A pair of skinny legs brought out a guy who was filthy from top to toe, and thin with bones about to pop out of his body; he had a half-bottle of vodka in his hand and a tattoo of a snake ran down from his eye to his upper lip. He was leaning on the bonnet to stay upright.

‘Come on, Rog, stick his head into Miriam’s cunt. If there’s room for two there’s room for three.’

At that moment all I wanted was for them to start to beat me up until they left me for dead, for them to pound me with their scabies-ridden fists. I wanted them to smash me to pieces, in my search for that half-death of unconsciousness which would

allow me some rest. I remained motionless, defiant, wanting their punches, wanting them to unleash against me all their hatred, all their boundless rage. But Rog, the fat red man, confined himself to grabbing the bottle of vodka and with a swift and precise movement he plugged it into his mouth and drank half of it; he glared at me in silence and climbed into the car without ceasing to glare. The other followed him in a flash, I heard the sound of the doors almost in unison, and with that sound my hopes of finding some rest disappeared.

‘You’re a couple of shit-scared chickens.’

‘Shut up, you whore, you didn’t see anything.’

And then just screeches and blows, words smothered by pressing hands, and jerks of the car. May the dark of the night devour you and steal your souls away, why don’t you make me the victim of your fists? It would be so easy to break a bottle over my head. It would be so easy to give me some respite; any passing pain is more merciful than this walking on, this stumbling on over streets that become concave and convex under my feet.

I have never been fond of cats; you can be certain that I know them well, but we’ve never liked each other, there isn’t room in the night for both of us. With their seven lives they take everything over and leave little space for all the other punished of the shadows. Between them and me there’s a repulsion that comes from long ago. We’ve never accepted each other, and if they hate me as much as I hate their seven lives there isn’t a corner of their hearts that doesn’t suffer from the cancer of hatred. I hate their silence, their measured gait, their feline agility while I stagger on along accursed streets.

When I saw it with its black markings standing still on the pavement, I made myself ready for its leap and its scratches, but contrary to my expectations it didn’t

leap and didn't threaten me from behind, it didn't cross in front of me indicating the line that I must not go over, it simply walked towards me, as if cats didn't talk to each other! as if they didn't communicate and tell each other about me! rashly it didn't respect our law of hatred and didn't keep its distance. With that false mask of innocence it came towards me, silently, and before I noticed, it had walked through my legs. My senses betray me to such an extent and such is cats' art of walking that I didn't notice. I cursed my body, my punishment, my dragging myself along, and with every effort I could manage I plodded on.

A shape in the background, a shape that's moving, what I'm afraid of doesn't move, I don't know what it is but it doesn't move. A hand covered with scabs clutches sheets of newspaper and tugs at them; nothing so human can harm me, I hear a groan, a groan uttered without strength and without breath, the faltering hand pulls at more sheets, a pool of blood, and the cough of somebody with no lungs, who has had them torn out by a bad life or by a bad illness. A ragged hat covered him down to his grey beard and all that could be half-heard was a stream of sounds that dropped on to his bloodied belly. He became aware of my presence but didn't look up, and went on talking to his wounded gut.

'I know you're there, you can walk straight past if you like, nobody can see you. But you can also free me from this torment a villain has left me in, all for a bottle of spirits - you can win a place in heaven, my friend.'

He rambled on like this, with the pride of wretches begging for pity, full of themselves and boasting of their bad luck, as if he thought he had a right to something, even to be heard. If I stopped it wasn't because of him, he can be certain of that; if I stopped, it's because something took it upon itself to tear my lungs out too

- if only it had torn my life out! I decided to take in some air sitting on a box in front of him.

‘Have you ever done anything for anyone? Hey ... you pigheaded old fool, have you ever given anything for nothing? You’ve got the chance to save yourself from eternal damnation: see these guts slipping out of me, give them a pull, give them a pull and I’ll be left here to be carted off by the dustmen; I don’t want crosses, I don’t even want anything sheltering my corpse; I don’t want to have dead what I never had alive; I want gulls and rats to share out my body. Hey, friend, have you ever done anything for anyone? You loner. Maybe it’s your last chance to save your soul.’

How can he beg me for pity, that scratched record of pain; I’d be happy to pull his guts out but only so he’d shut up, so as not to hear that stupid sermon from someone who thinks he has the right to spit his woes into others’ faces. The wretch has no right to complain, his agony isn’t as slow as mine.

‘Pull my guts out, don’t leave me lying here like this.’

Let him lie there half-dead, soon he’ll be somewhere more restful than where I am, and may it rot his soul, the lucky bastard.

I sensed the presence of light very close, reflected in the windows of the houses. As I crossed towards the bright street, a bent-over body came clattering out of a house, and it held a little boy by the hand. It was an old woman in a wig and a shiny skirt.

‘Come here, come to carnal Victoria’s arms.’

And so saying she lifted her skirts, revealing flaccid white legs that seemed to be hooked on to her hip bones with wires. One of her shoes fell off, the little lad bent down to put it back on and she whacked him behind the ear.

‘Stay where you are, you cheeky sod, trying to get a look at my knickers.’

As she leaned over her wig slipped off, revealing a red scalp with a few dead hairs.

‘Come and have some fun, don’t go getting into trouble with any old tart; carnal Victoria awaits you with open arms.’

And there, in the midst of that squalor of broken streets, serving as dens for semihumans with one foot in the grave, there opened up before me a great avenue the existence of which I’d never suspected before. I’d never seen anything like it, and yet it was familiar to me; it was stored away somewhere in my treacherous mind; it’s possible I’d seen it before, but hadn’t noticed it. There were beacons burning or a fire that had set the trees on either side aflame, it gave out a light that flickered and yet was constant, agonizing.

‘Where are you going, you devil, Victoria’s waiting for you.’

Suddenly I was able to forget my tiredness, and I walked on without hurrying. At the end of the avenue there was a great building with innumerable stairs leading up to it. It looked like Lámego cathedral, by the River Douro, where the faithful climb the stone steps on their knees, in search of a cure from Nosa Senhora dos Remedios.

As I walked along, I could hear the sound of the wind humming through the burnt branches. It was a dark wind, promising bad luck. After walking like this for a while, I turned round and the old madwoman was still at the other end of the street waving her arms and tottering on her ungainly high heels, not daring to follow me. I had known terror; I had always found a way to lay a false trail for it, but today it had found me, it had heard me breathing and followed me, and, enclosing me in its trap, cornered me in this street of monsters amid the fire. This street that’s closing behind me to stop me from turning back. Victoria’s shouts could no longer be heard, a silence of flames crackling as they devour the sap of crucified trees. A silence that’s added to

more silence and more silence and more silence until it explodes in your ears. A silence that hurts the ears more than the most anguishing of screams. A silence that is never quiet. I wish I could fall on my knees and pray gazing at my intertwined hands that plead to God, but what prayer could I say? There can't be any prayer that would come to me, there are no sacred words in my mouth that can distance me from my enemy. Fear dominates me and there cannot be any cry that will stop it.

Suddenly I heard shrill screams: a burning vixen comes out from the left, writhes on the ground and walks on dragging one of its front legs, pushing itself forward with all its strength, its jaw pressed to the ground. It falls on its back and lies in the middle of the street, its teeth grinding and its legs stiffening. I walk on and avoid its rigid, burnt body. I no longer dare look back, because I feel infernal eyes eying me from every side and tongues of smoke licking my body, as if these tongues of smoke and gusts of air bore sticky mouths dirtying me with poisonous saliva. I would have liked to sit down and weep, to press a button and make everything stop, to wake up from a nightmare, but I knew that only he who sleeps can have nightmares. I can't have nightmares, because I live twice, I live all the time while others sleep; I'm always awake, I'm always like this. There's no other world to escape to, I haven't any rest, any repose. All I have is fear, fear of living so much. Fear of living without a break, fear that gnaws at my bowels, fear that comes in through my mouth and drips from my ears. That is my fear, it is now that I feel it, it is now that it has found me or I have discovered it in its true form. In its endless form, in its formless eternal form.

A line of columns indicates the way to the building; they are clumsily carved with grotesque heads, with protruding tongues bitten by animals. Martyrs occupy the upper part of the columns and their heads with their spreading manes of hair form the capitals. My breath stuck in my throat when I saw that their vestments were fluttering

in the wind; I walked on still staring at those fabrics, trying to discover whether it was a trick of the light, until I slipped on a puddle that had appeared. As I fell I could see the thick red colour of the blood, I looked at my smeared hands and observed that the blood was dripping from a martyr and that a lion had broken his neck with a blow of its paw. I coughed out my swallowed tears, I sat down, I wanted to get away; none of this could be true, fear couldn't be so cruel. Nothing human or inhuman could treat me like this. Nobody could hate me so much.

A saint I wasn't able to recognize, pierced by three arrows, an eagle pecking at his soul, had a leg dangling loosely. A blast of cold air hit me in the face, which I didn't understand, surrounded by so many flames. And I realized that it came from the intensely white light of the immaculate building; I began to climb and the silence and the light and the cold became more and more powerful. I thought for a moment about going up the steps on my knees, the final penitence, but there was something inside me saying it was all useless now. I didn't know what was at the top, I didn't know what was inside that light, but I felt that there, behind that wall of light shining more intensely than moonlight, was something that was waiting for me. I climbed like someone crossing a desert without water, I climbed like someone running away from himself, I climbed to what I sensed was my fall. On reaching the top I didn't look back, I only wanted to know what had brought me here, why was I here? what was behind those shining doors, behind those infernos of light? As I walked through a door that opened at my approach the light enveloped me, and surrounded with an aura all my moving limbs. At the entrance there was a counter, long corridors with tiled floors and white walls stretched out on either side and before me. I went up to what seemed to be the reception desk, and there I saw, written at the bottom of the list, my

name. A shudder ran through my bones and I looked all around for someone to answer all the questions I had in my mouth.

From the rooms came cries of people dying, and, as I walked down the central corridor, I saw bodies on beds with tubes going into their noses and into their arms. At the end of the corridor there was a glass door; I walked on towards it thinking that there I might find the meaning of everything that was happening to me. Something like a dull murmuring could be heard. I opened the door and there was a group of people beneath a lamp hanging from the ceiling. They weren't moving and some seemed to be praying under their breath. As I came closer I began to feel a cold sweat all over my body, my mouth was drying up, and my face was smeared with blood and dried tears. I couldn't believe what I was seeing, I didn't want to believe, I knew the people there, they were people I'd loved before I fell into the infernal abyss I've been in for the last years of my - life? I approached them, I coughed so they could hear me, but nobody turned round, they were concentrating on their prayers. There was a man in an operating mask and a blood-smeared gown, I looked him in the face, and I'm sure he looked at me, but he didn't bother to tell the others. It's me, it's just that you don't recognize me. I touched my last wife on the shoulder: what was she doing there crying with all the others? I came up closer to see the centre of attention. It wasn't very easy to reach the centre except by pushing and there was no moving them. I could see feet hanging from the bed, whoever it was lying there had a broken nail on the broken big toe of his right foot just like me. When a nurse walked away I took my chance to get close to his face. And there with a tube going into its nose was my motionless body. My chest had been cut open and I was swimming in blood. Suddenly the surgeon covered the body with a sheet.

'We did what we could,' he said taking off his mask.

What did those wretches mean, they'd done what they could? I was still there. They couldn't be going to bury that body without me. If my body is dead, I want them to bury me with it. I want to be dead as well. They can't be going to leave me here. I don't want to live any more. A nurse came in and took away the bed with the dead body on it, with my dead body on it; damn them, they can't be going to leave me here; and they call themselves my loved ones. Those present watched them go through the door performing the rite of death. But as for me, now I understand fear, now I understand why it waited, made ready for me the cruellest and most perfect of revenges. Fortunate those who fear death, for their fear will come to an end when the Holy Lady of the Scythe covers them with her cloak, but ... what is left for me? I shall not find rest even in death. I shall continue walking, walking, living twice without respite, trying in vain to get through the lockless door, falling into the bottomless abyss, climbing the endless stairway. Bearing on my back the heaviest of crosses, the cross of eternal life.

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