Italo Calvino

If on a winter's night a traveler

Translated from the Italian
by William Weaver

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You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel, *If on a winter's night a traveler.* Relax. Concentrate. Dispel every other thought. Let the world around you fade. Best to close the door; the TV is always on in the next room. Tell the others right away, "No, I don't want to watch TV!" Raise your voice—they won't hear you otherwise—"I'm reading! I don't want to be disturbed!" Maybe they haven't heard you, with all that racket; speak louder, yell: "I'm beginning to read Italo Calvino's new novel!" Or if you prefer, don't say anything; just hope they'll leave you alone.

Find the most comfortable position: seated, stretched out, curled up, or lying flat. Flat on your back, on your side, on your stomach. In an easy chair, on the sofa, in the rocker, the deck chair, on the hassock. In the hammock, if you have a hammock. On top of your bed, of course, or in the bed. You can even stand on your hands, head down, in the yoga position. With the book upside down, naturally.

Of course, the ideal position for reading is something you can never find. In the old days they used to read standing up, at a lectern. People were accustomed to standing on their feet, without moving. They rested like that when they were tired of horseback riding. Nobody ever thought of reading on horseback; and yet now, the idea of sitting in the saddle, the book propped against the horse's mane, or maybe tied to the horse's ear with a special harness, seems attractive to you. With your feet in the stirrups, you should feel quite comfortable for reading; having your feet up is the first condition for enjoying a read.

Well, what are you waiting for? Stretch your legs, go ahead and put your feet on a cushion, on two cushions, on

the arms of the sofa, on the wings of the chair, on the coffee table, on the desk, on the piano, on the globe. Take your shoes off first. If you want to, put your feet up; if not, put them back. Now don't stand there with your shoes in one hand and the book in the other.

Adjust the light so you won't strain your eyes. Do it now, because once you're absorbed in reading there will be no budging you. Make sure the page isn't in shadow, a clotting of black letters on a gray background, uniform as a pack of mice; but be careful that the light cast on it isn't too strong, doesn't glare on the cruel white of the paper, gnawing at the shadows of the letters as in a southern noonday. Try to foresee now everything that might make you interrupt your reading. Cigarettes within reach, if you smoke, and the ashtray. Anything else? Do you have to pee? All right, you know best.

It's not that you expect anything in particular from this particular book. You're the sort of person who, on principle, no longer expects anything of anything. There are plenty, younger than you or less young, who live in the expectation of extraordinary experiences: from books, from people, from journeys, from events, from what tomorrow has in store. But not you. You know that the best you can expect is to avoid the worst. This is the conclusion you have reached, in your personal life and also in general matters, even international affairs. What about books? Well, precisely because you have denied it in every other field, you believe you may still grant yourself legitimately this youthful pleasure of expectation in a carefully circumscribed area like the field of books, where you can be lucky or unlucky, but the risk of disappointment isn't serious.

So, then, you noticed in a newspaper that *If on a winter's night a traveler* had appeared, the new book by Italo Calvino, who hadn't published for several years. You went to the bookshop and bought the volume. Good for you.

In the shop window you have promptly identified the

cover with the title you were looking for. Following this visual trail, you have forced your way through the shop past the thick barricade of Books You Haven't Read, which were frowning at you from the tables and shelves, trying to cow you. But you know you must never allow yourself to be awed, that among them there extend for acres and acres the Books You Needn't Read, the Books Made For Purposes Other Than Reading, Books Read Even Before You Open Them Since They Belong To The Category Of Books Read Before Being Written. And thus you pass the outer girdle of ramparts, but then you are attacked by the infantry of the Books That If You Had More Than One Life You Would Certainly Also Read But Unfortunately Your Days Are Numbered. With a rapid maneuver you bypass them and move into the phalanxes of the Books You Mean To Read But There Are Others You Must Read First, the Books Too Expensive Now And You'll Wait Till They're Remaindered, the Books ditto When They Come Out In Paperback, Books You Can Borrow From Somebody, Books That Everybody's Read So It's As If You Had Read Them, Too. Eluding these assaults, you come up beneath the towers of the fortress, where other troops are holding out:

the Books You've Been Planning To Read For Ages,
the Books You've Been Hunting For Years Without Success,
the Books Dealing With Something You're Working On At The Moment,
the Books You Want To Own So They'll Be Handy Just In Case,
the Books You Could Put Aside Maybe To Read This Summer,
the Books You Need To Go With Other Books On Your Shelves,
the Books That Fill You With Sudden, Inexplicable Curiosity, Not Easily Justified.

Now you have been able to reduce the countless embat-

tled troops to an array that is, to be sure, very large but still calculable in a finite number; but this relative relief is then undermined by the ambush of the Books Read Long Ago Which It's Now Time To Reread and the Books You've Always Pretended To Have Read And Now It's Time To Sit Down And Really Read Them.

With a zigzag dash you shake them off and leap straight into the citadel of the New Books Whose Author Or Subject Appeals To You. Even inside this stronghold you can make some breaches in the ranks of the defenders, dividing them into New Books By Authors Or On Subjects Not New (for you or in general) and New Books By Authors Or On Subjects Completely Unknown (at least to you), and defining the attraction they have for you on the basis of your desires and needs for the new and the not new (for the new you seek in the not new and for the not new you seek in the new).

All this simply means that, having rapidly glanced over the titles of the volumes displayed in the bookshop, you have turned toward a stack of *If on a winter's night a traveler* fresh off the press, you have grasped a copy, and you have carried it to the cashier so that your right to own it can be established.

You cast another bewildered look at the books around you (or, rather: it was the books that looked at you, with the bewildered gaze of dogs who, from their cages in the city pound, see a former companion go off on the leash of his master, come to rescue him), and out you went.

You derive a special pleasure from a just-published book, and it isn't only a book you are taking with you but its novelty as well, which could also be merely that of an object fresh from the factory, the youthful bloom of new books, which lasts until the dust jacket begins to yellow, until a veil of smog settles on the top edge, until the binding becomes dog-eared, in the rapid autumn of libraries. No, you hope always to encounter true newness, which,

having been new once, will continue to be so. Having read the freshly published book, you will take possession of this newness at the first moment, without having to pursue it, to chase it. Will it happen this time? You never can tell. Let's see how it begins.

Perhaps you started leafing through the book already in the shop. Or were you unable to, because it was wrapped in its cocoon of cellophane? Now you are on the bus, standing in the crowd, hanging from a strap by your arm, and you begin undoing the package with your free hand, making movements something like a monkey, a monkey who wants to peel a banana and at the same time cling to the bough. Watch out, you're elbowing your neighbors; apologize, at least.

Or perhaps the bookseller didn't wrap the volume; he gave it to you in a bag. This simplifies matters. You are at the wheel of your car, waiting at a traffic light, you take the book out of the bag, rip off the transparent wrapping, start reading the first lines. A storm of honking breaks over you; the light is green, you're blocking traffic.

You are at your desk, you have set the book among your business papers as if by chance; at a certain moment you shift a file and you find the book before your eyes, you open it absently, you rest your elbows on the desk, you rest your temples against your hands, curled into fists, you seem to be concentrating on an examination of the papers and instead you are exploring the first pages of the novel. Gradually you settle back in the chair, you raise the book to the level of your nose, you tilt the chair, poised on its rear legs, you pull out a side drawer of the desk to prop your feet on it; the position of the feet during reading is of maximum importance, you stretch your legs out on the top of the desk, on the files to be expedited.

But doesn't this seem to show a lack of respect? Of respect, that is, not for your job (nobody claims to pass judgment on your professional capacities: we assume that

your duties are a normal element in the system of unproductive activities that occupies such a large part of the national and international economy), but for the book. Worse still if you belong—willingly or unwillingly—to the number of those for whom working means really working, performing, whether deliberately or without premeditation, something necessary or at least not useless for others as well as for oneself; then the book you have brought with you to your place of employment like a kind of amulet or talisman exposes you to intermittent temptations, a few seconds at a time subtracted from the principal object of your attention, whether it is the perforations of electronic cards, the burners of a kitchen stove, the controls of a bulldozer, a patient stretched out on the operating table with his guts exposed.

In other words, it's better for you to restrain your impatience and wait to open the book at home. Now. Yes, you are in your room, calm; you open the book to page one, no, to the last page, first you want to see how long it is. It's not too long, fortunately. Long novels written today are perhaps a contradiction: the dimension of time has been shattered, we cannot love or think except in fragments of time each of which goes off along its own trajectory and immediately disappears. We can rediscover the continuity of time only in the novels of that period when time no longer seemed stopped and did not yet seem to have exploded, a period that lasted no more than a hundred years.

You turn the book over in your hands, you scan the sentences on the back of the jacket, generic phrases that don't say a great deal. So much the better, there is no message that indiscreetly outshouts the message that the book itself must communicate directly, that you must extract from the book, however much or little it may be. Of course, this circling of the book, too, this reading around it before reading inside it, is a part of the pleasure in a

new book, but like all preliminary pleasures, it has its optimal duration if you want it to serve as a thrust toward the more substantial pleasure of the consummation of the act, namely the reading of the book.

So here you are now, ready to attack the first lines of the first page. You prepare to recognize the unmistakable tone of the author. No. You don't recognize it at all. But now that you think about it, who ever said this author had an unmistakable tone? On the contrary, he is known as an author who changes greatly from one book to the next. And in these very changes you recognize him as himself. Here, however, he seems to have absolutely no connection with all the rest he has written, at least as far as you can recall. Are you disappointed? Let's see. Perhaps at first you feel a bit lost, as when a person appears who, from the name, you identified with a certain face, and you try to make the features you are seeing tally with those you had in mind, and it won't work. But then you go on and you realize that the book is readable nevertheless, independently of what you expected of the author, it's the book in itself that arouses your curiosity; in fact, on sober reflection, you prefer it this way, confronting something and not quite knowing yet what it is.

If on a winter's night a traveler

The novel begins in a railway station, a locomotive huffs, steam from a piston covers the opening of the chapter, a cloud of smoke hides part of the first paragraph. In the odor of the station there is a passing whiff of station café odor. There is someone looking through the befogged glass, he opens the glass door of the bar, everything is misty, inside, too, as if seen by nearsighted eyes, or eyes irritated by coal dust. The pages of the book are clouded like the windows of an old train, the cloud of smoke rests on the sentences. It is a rainy evening; the man enters the bar; he unbuttons his damp overcoat; a cloud of steam enfolds him; a whistle dies away along tracks that are glistening with rain, as far as the eye can see.

A whistling sound, like a locomotive's, and a cloud of steam rise from the coffee machine that the old counterman puts under pressure, as if he were sending up a signal, or at least so it seems from the series of sentences in the second paragraph, in which the players at the table close the fans of cards against their chests and turn toward the newcomer with a triple twist of their necks,

shoulders, and chairs, while the customers at the counter raise their little cups and blow on the surface of the coffee, lips and eyes half shut, or suck the head of their mugs of beer, taking exaggerated care not to spill. The cat arches its back, the cashier closes her cash register and it goes pling. All these signs converge to inform us that this is a little provincial station, where anyone is immediately noticed.

Stations are all alike; it doesn't matter if the lights cannot illuminate beyond their blurred halo, all of this is a setting you know by heart, with the odor of train that lingers even after all the trains have left, the special odor of stations after the last train has left. The lights of the station and the sentences you are reading seem to have the job of dissolving more than of indicating the things that surface from a veil of darkness and fog. I have landed in this station tonight for the first time in my life, entering and leaving this bar, moving from the odor of the platform to the odor of wet sawdust in the toilets, all mixed in a single odor which is that of waiting, the odor of telephone booths when all you can do is reclaim your tokens because the number called has shown no signs of life.

I am the man who comes and goes between the bar and the telephone booth. Or, rather: that man is called "I" and you know nothing else about him, just as this station is called only "station" and beyond it there exists nothing except the unanswered signal of a telephone ringing in a dark room of a distant city. I hang up the receiver, I await the rattling flush, down through the metallic throat, I push the glass door again, head toward the cups piled up to dry in a cloud of steam.

The espresso machines in station cafés boast their kinship with the locomotives, the espresso machines of yesterday and today with the locomotives and steam engines of today and yesterday. It's all very well for me to come and go, shift and turn: I am caught in a trap, in that

nontemporal trap which all stations unfailingly set. A cloud of coal dust still hovers in the air of stations all these years after the lines have been totally electrified, and a novel that talks about trains and stations cannot help conveying this odor of smoke. For a couple of pages now you have been reading on, and this would be the time to tell you clearly whether this station where I have got off is a station of the past or a station of today; instead the sentences continue to move in vagueness, grayness, in a kind of no man's land of experience reduced to the lowest common denominator. Watch out: it is surely a method of involving you gradually, capturing you in the story before you realize it—a trap. Or perhaps the author still has not made up his mind, just as you, reader, for that matter, are not sure what you would most like to read: whether it is the arrival at an old station, which would give you a sense of going back, a renewed concern with lost times and places, or else a flashing of lights and sounds, which would give you the sense of being alive today, in the world where people today believe it is a pleasure to be alive. This bar (or "station buffet," as it is also called) could seem dim and misty only to my eyes, nearsighted or irritated, whereas it could also be steeped in light diffused by tubes the color of lightning and reflected by mirrors in such a way as to fill completely every passage and interstice, and the shadowless space might be overflowing with music exploding at top volume from a vibrant silence-killing machine, and the pinballs and the other electric games simulating horse races and manhunts are all in action, and colored shadows swim in the transparency of a TV and in that of an aquarium of tropical fish enlivened by a vertical stream of air bubbles. And my arm might not hold a briefcase, swollen and a bit worn, but might be pushing a square suitcase of plastic material supplied with little wheels, guided by a chrome stick that can be folded up.

If on a winter's night a traveler

You, reader, believed that there, on the platform, my gaze was glued to the hands of the round clock of an old station, hands pierced like halberds, in the vain attempt to turn them back, to move backward over the cemetery of spent hours, lying lifeless in their circular pantheon. But who can say that the clock's numbers aren't peeping from rectangular windows, where I see every minute fall on me with a click like the blade of a guillotine? However, the result would not change much: even advancing in a polished, sliding world, my hand contracted on the light rudder of the wheeled suitcase would still express an inner refusal, as if that carefree luggage represented for me an unwelcome and exhausting burden.

Something must have gone wrong for me: some misinformation, a delay, a missed connection; perhaps on arriving I should have found a contact, probably linked with this suitcase that seems to worry me so much, though whether because I am afraid of losing it or because I can't wait to be rid of it is not clear. What seems certain is that it isn't just ordinary baggage, something I can check or pretend to forget in the waiting room. There's no use my looking at my watch; if anyone had come and waited for me he would have gone away again long ago, there's no point in my furiously racking my brain to turn back clocks and calendars in the hope of reaching again the moment before something that should not have happened did happen. If I was to meet someone in this station, someone who perhaps had nothing to do with this station but was simply to get off one train and leave on another train, as I was to have done, and one of the two was to pass something to the other—for example, if I was supposed to give the other this wheeled suitcase which instead has been left on my hands and is scorching them—then the only thing to do is to try to re-establish the lost contact.

I have already crossed the café a couple of times and have looked out of the front door onto the invisible

square, and each time the wall of darkness has driven back inside this sort of illuminated limbo suspended between the two darknesses, the bundle of tracks and the foggy city. Where would I go out to? The city outside there has no name yet, we don't know if it will remain outside the novel or whether the whole story will be contained within its inky blackness. I know only that this first chapter is taking a while to break free of the station and the bar: it is not wise for me to move away from here where they might still come looking for me, or for me to be seen by other people with this burdensome suitcase. And so I continue to cram tokens into the public telephone, which spits them back at me every time. Many tokens, as if for a long-distance call: God knows where they are now, the people from whom I am to receive instructions or, rather—let's come right out and say it—take orders. It is obvious that I am a subordinate, I do not seem the sort of man who is traveling for personal reasons or who is in business for himself; you would say, on the contrary, that I am doing a job, a pawn in a very complicated game, a little cog in a huge gear, so little that it should not even be seen: in fact, it was established that I would go through here without leaving any traces; and instead, every minute I spend here I am leaving more traces. I leave traces if I do not speak with anyone, since I stick out as a man who won't open his mouth; I leave traces if I speak with someone because every word spoken is a word that remains and can crop up again later, with quotation marks or without. Perhaps this is why the author piles supposition on supposition in long paragraphs without dialogue, a thick, opaque layer of lead where I may pass unnoticed, disappear.

I am not at all the sort of person who attracts attention, I am an anonymous presence against an even more anonymous background. If you, reader, couldn't help picking me out among the people getting off the train and contin-

ued following me in my to-and-fro-ing between bar and telephone, this is simply because I am called "I" and this is the only thing you know about me, but this alone is reason enough for you to invest a part of yourself in the stranger "I." Just as the author, since he has no intention of telling about himself, decided to call the character "I" as if to conceal him, not having to name him or describe him, because any other name or attribute would define him more than this stark pronoun; still, by the very fact of writing "I" the author feels driven to put into this "I" a bit of himself, of what he feels or imagines he feels. Nothing could be easier for him than to identify himself with me; for the moment my external behavior is that of a traveler who has missed a connection, a situation that is part of everyone's experience. But a situation that takes place at the opening of a novel always refers you to something else that has happened or is about to happen, and it is this something else that makes it risky to identify with me, risky for you the reader and for him the author; and the more gray and ordinary and undistinguished and commonplace the beginning of this novel is, the more you and the author feel a hint of danger looming over that fraction of "I" that you have heedlessly invested in the "I" of a character whose inner history you know nothing about, as you know nothing about the contents of that suitcase he is so anxious to be rid of.

Getting rid of the suitcase was to be the first condition for re-establishing the previous situation: previous to everything that happened afterward. This is what I mean when I say I would like to swim against the stream of time: I would like to erase the consequences of certain events and restore an initial condition. But every moment of my life brings with it an accumulation of new facts, and each of these new facts brings with it its consequences; so the more I seek to return to the zero moment from which I set out, the further I move away from it:

though all my actions are bent on erasing the consequences of previous actions and though I manage to achieve appreciable results in this erasure, enough to open my heart to hopes of immediate relief, I must, however, bear in mind that my every move to erase previous events provokes a rain of new events, which complicate the situation worse than before and which I will then, in their turn, have to try to erase. Therefore I must calculate carefully every move so as to achieve the maximum of erasure with the minimum of recomplication.

A man whom I do not know was to meet me as soon as I got off the train, if everything hadn't gone wrong. A man with a suitcase on wheels, exactly like mine, empty. The two suitcases would bump into each other as if accidentally in the bustle of travelers on the platform, between one train and another. An event that can happen by chance, but there would have been a password that that man would have said to me, a comment on the headline of the newspaper sticking out of my pocket, on the results of the horse races. "Ah, Zeno of Elea came in first!" And at the same time we would disentangle our suitcases, shifting the metal poles, perhaps also exchanging some remarks about horses, forecasts, odds; and we would then go off toward different trains, each pushing his suitcase in his own direction. No one would have noticed, but I would have been left with the other man's suitcase and he would have taken away mine.

A perfect plan, so perfect that a trivial complication sufficed to spoil it. Now I am here not knowing what to do next, the last traveler waiting in this station where no more trains arrive or leave before tomorrow morning. It is the hour when the little provincial city crawls into its shell again. At the station bar the only people left are locals who all know one another, people who have no connection with the station but come this far through the dark square perhaps because there is no other place open

in the neighborhood, or perhaps because of the attraction that stations still exercise in provincial cities, that bit of novelty that can be expected from stations, or perhaps only in recollection of the time when a station was the single point of contact with the rest of the world.

It's all very well for me to tell myself there are no provincial cities any more and perhaps there never were any: all places communicate instantly with all other places, a sense of isolation is felt only during the trip between one place and the other, that is, when you are in no place. I, in fact, find myself here without a here or an elsewhere, recognized as an outsider by the nonoutsiders at least as clearly as I recognize the nonoutsiders and envy them. Yes, envy. I am looking from the outside at the life of an ordinary evening in an ordinary little city, and I realize I am cut off from ordinary evenings for God knows how long, and I think of thousands of cities like this, of hundreds of thousands of lighted places where at this hour people allow the evening's darkness to descend and have none of the thoughts in their head that I have in mine; maybe they have other thoughts that aren't at all enviable, but at this moment I would be willing to trade with any one of them. For example, with one of these young men who are making the rounds of local shopkeepers collecting signatures on a petition to City Hall, concerning the tax on neon signs, and who are now reading it to the barman.

The novel here repeats fragments of conversation that seem to have no function beyond that of depicting the daily life of a provincial city. "What about you, Armida? Have you signed yet?" they ask a woman I can see only from behind, a belt hanging from a long overcoat trimmed with fur, the collar turned up, a thread of smoke rising from the fingers gripping the stem of a glass. "Who says I want to put a neon sign over my shop?" she answers. "If the City is planning to save money on street lights, they

certainly aren't going to light the streets with my money! Anyway, everybody knows where Armida's Leather Goods is. And when I've pulled down the metal blind, the street will just stay dark, and that's that."

"That's a good reason for you to sign," they say to her. They address her familiarly, as *tu;* they all call one another *tu;* their speech is half in dialect; these are people used to seeing one another daily year after year; everything they say is the continuation of things already said. They tease one another, even crudely: "Admit it, you like the street dark so nobody can see who comes to your place! Who visits you in the back of the shop after you've locked up?"

These remarks form a murmuring of indistinct voices from which a word or a phrase might emerge, decisive for what comes afterward. To read properly you must take in both the murmuring effect and the effect of the hidden intention, which you (and I, too) are as yet in no position to perceive. In reading, therefore, you must remain both oblivious and highly alert, as I am abstracted but prick up my ears, with my elbow on the counter of the bar and my cheek on my fist. And if now the novel begins to abandon its misty vagueness and give some details about the appearance of the people, the sensation it wants to transmit to you is that of faces seen for the first time but also faces that seem to have been seen thousands of times. We are in a city in whose streets the same people often run into one another; the faces bear a weight of habit which is communicated even to someone like me, who, though I have never been here before, realizes these are habitual faces, whose features the bar mirror has watched thicken or sag, whose expressions evening after evening have become wrinkled or puffy. This woman was perhaps the beauty of the city; even now I feel, seeing her for the first time, she could be called an attractive woman; but if I imagine looking at her with the eyes of the other customers at the

bar, then a kind of weariness settles on her, perhaps only the shadow of their weariness (or my weariness, or yours). They have known her since she was a girl, they know everything there is to know about her, some of them may have been involved with her, now water under the bridge, over and done with; in other words, there is a veil of other images that settles on her image and blurs it, a weight of memories that keep me from seeing her as a person seen for the first time, other people's memories suspended like the smoke under the lamps.

The great pastime of these customers at the bar seems to be betting: betting on trivial events of daily life. For example, one says, "Let's bet on who comes first to the bar here tonight, Dr. Marne or Chief Gorin." And another says, "And when Dr. Marne does get here, what will he do to avoid meeting his ex-wife? Will he play billiards or fill in the football-pool form?"

In an existence like mine forecasts could not be made: I never know what could happen to me in the next half hour, I can't imagine a life all made up of minimal alternatives, carefully circumscribed, on which bets can be made: either this or that.

"I don't know," I say in a low voice.

"Don't know what?" she asks.

It's a thought I feel I can also say now and not keep for myself as I do with all my thoughts, say it to the woman who is here beside me at the bar, the owner of the leather-goods shop, with whom I have a slight hankering to strike up a conversation. "Is that how it is, here in your town?"

"No, it's not true," she answers me, and I knew this was how she would answer me. She insists that nothing can be foreseen, here or anywhere else: of course, every evening at this hour Dr. Marne closes his office and Chief Gorin comes off duty at the police station; and they always drop by here, first one or first the other; but what does that signify?

"In any case, nobody seems to doubt the fact that the doctor will try to avoid the former Madame Marne," I say to her.

"I am the former Madame Marne," she answers. "Don't listen to them."

Your attention, as reader, is now completely concentrated on the woman, already for several pages you have been circling around her, I have—no, the author has—been circling around the feminine presence, for several pages you have been expecting this female shadow to take shape the way female shadows take shape on the written page, and it is your expectation, reader, that drives the author toward her; and I, too, though I have other things to think about, there I let myself go, I speak to her, I strike up a conversation that I should break off as quickly as I can, in order to go away, disappear. You surely would want to know more about what she's like, but instead only a few elements surface on the written page, her face remains hidden by the smoke and her hair, you would need to understand beyond the bitter twist of her mouth what there is that isn't bitter and twisted.

"What stories do they tell?" I ask. "I don't know a thing. I know that you have a shop, without a neon sign. But I don't even know where it is."

She explains to me. It is a leather-goods shop, selling suitcases and travel articles. It isn't in the station square but on a side street, near the grade crossing of the freight station.

"But why are you interested?"

"I wish I had arrived here earlier. I would walk along the dark street, I would see your shop all lighted up, I would go inside, I would say to you: If you like, I'll help you pull down the shutter."

She tells me she has already pulled down the shutter, but she has to go back to the shop to take inventory, and she will be staying there till late.

The men in the bar are exchanging wisecracks and slaps on the back. One bet has already been decided: the doctor is coming into the place.

"The chief's late tonight. I wonder why."

The doctor comes in and waves a general greeting; his gaze does not stop on his wife, but he has certainly noticed that a man is talking with her. He goes on to the end of the room, turning his back on the bar; he thrusts a coin into the pinball machine. Now I, who should have remained unnoticed, have been scrutinized, photographed by eyes that I cannot deceive myself I have eluded, eyes that forget nothing and no one connected with the object of jealousy and pain. Those slightly heavy, slightly watery eyes are enough to make me realize that the drama between the two has not yet ended: he continues coming to this café every evening to see her, to open the old wound again, perhaps also to know who is walking her home this evening; and she comes to this café every evening perhaps deliberately to make him suffer, or perhaps hoping that the habit of suffering will become for him a habit like any other, that it will take on the flavor of the nothingness that has coated her mouth and her life for years.

"The thing I'd like most in the world," I say to her, since at this point I might as well go on talking with her, "is to make clocks run backward."

The woman gives some ordinary answer, such as, "You only have to move the hands." "No, with thought, by concentrating until I force time to move back," I say; or, rather, it isn't clear whether I really say it or would like to say it or whether the author interprets in this way the half sentence I am muttering. "When I got here my first thought was: Maybe I achieved such an effort with my thoughts that time has made a complete revolution; here I am at the station from which I left on my first journey, it has remained as it was then, without any change. All the lives that I could have led begin here; there is the girl

who could have been my girl and wasn't, with the same eyes, the same hair. . . ."

She looks around, as if making fun of me; I point my chin at her; she raises the corners of her mouth as if to smile, then stops: because she has changed her mind, or because this is the only way she smiles. "I don't know if that's a compliment, but I'll take it as one. And then what?"

"Then I am here, I am the I of the present, with this suitcase."

This is the first time I mention the suitcase, even though I never stop thinking about it.

And she says, "This is the evening of square suitcases on wheels."

I remain calm, impassive. I ask, "What do you mean?"

"I sold one today, a suitcase like that."

"Who bought it?"

"A stranger. Like you. He was on his way to the station, he was leaving. With an empty suitcase, just bought. Exactly like yours."

"What's odd about that? Don't you sell suitcases?"

"I have a lot of this model in stock at the shop, but nobody here buys them. People don't like them, or they're no use. Or people don't know them. But they must be convenient."

"Not for me. For example, just when I'm thinking that this evening could be a beautiful evening for me, I remember I have to drag this suitcase after me, and I can't think about anything else."

"Then why don't you leave it somewhere?"

"Like a suitcase shop," I say.

"Why not? Another suitcase, more or less."

She stands up from the stool, adjusts the collar of her overcoat in the mirror, the belt.

"If I come by later on and rap on the shutter, will you hear me?"

"Try."

She doesn't say good-bye to anyone. She is already outside in the square.

Dr. Marne leaves the pinball machine and approaches the bar. He wants to look me in the face, perhaps overhear some remarks from the others, or only a snicker. But they are talking of bets, the bets on him, not caring if he listens. There is a stirring of gaiety and intimacy, of slaps on the back, which surrounds Dr. Marne, a business of old jokes and teasing; but at the center of this merriment there is a zone of respect that is never breached, not only because Marne is a physician, public health officer or something of the sort, but also because he is a friend, or perhaps because he's a poor bastard who bears his misfortunes while remaining a friend.

"Chief Gorin is arriving later than all the predictions tonight," someone says, because at that moment the chief enters the bar.

He enters. "Good evening, one and all!" He comes over to me, lowers his eyes to the suitcase, the newspaper, mutters through clenched teeth, "Zeno of Elea," then goes to the cigarette machine.

Have they thrown me to the police? Is he a policeman who is working for our organization? I go over to the machine as if I were also buying cigarettes.

He says, "They've killed Jan. Clear out."

"The suitcase?" I ask.

"Take it away again. We want nothing to do with it now. Catch the eleven o'clock express."

"But it doesn't stop here. . . ."

"It will. Go to track six. Opposite the freight station. You have three minutes."

"But . . ."

"Move, or I'll have to arrest you."

The organization is powerful. It can command the police, the railroad. I trail my suitcase along the passages

between the tracks until I reach track six. I walk along the platform. The freight section is at the end, with the grade crossing that opens into the fog and the darkness. The chief is at the door of the station bar, keeping an eye on me. The express arrives at top speed. It slows down, stops, erases me from the chief's sight, pulls out again.

[2]

You have now read about thirty pages and you're becoming caught up in the story. At a certain point you remark: "This sentence sounds somehow familiar. In fact, this whole passage reads like something I've read before." Of course: there are themes that recur, the text is interwoven with these reprises, which serve to express the fluctuation of time. You are the sort of reader who is sensitive to such refinements; you are quick to catch the author's intentions and nothing escapes you. But, at the same time, you also feel a certain dismay; just when you were beginning to grow truly interested, at this very point the author feels called upon to display one of those virtuoso tricks so customary in modern writing, repeating a paragraph word for word. Did you say paragraph? Why, it's a whole page; you make the comparison, he hasn't changed even a comma. And as you continue, what develops? Nothing: the narration is repeated, identical to the pages you have read!

Wait a minute! Look at the page number. Damn! From page 32 you've gone back to page 17! What you thought was a stylistic subtlety on the author's part is simply a printers' mistake: they have inserted the same pages twice. The mistake occurred as they were binding the volume: a book is made up of sixteen-page signatures; each signature is a large sheet on which sixteen pages are printed, and which is then folded over eight times; when all the signatures are bound together, it can happen that two identical signatures end up in the same copy; it's the sort of accident that occurs every now and then. You leaf anxiously through the next pages to find page 33, assuming it exists; a repeated signature would be a minor inconvenience, the irreparable damage comes when the proper

signature has vanished, landing in another copy where perhaps that one will be doubled and this one will be missing. In any event, you want to pick up the thread of your reading, nothing else matters to you, you had reached a point where you can't skip even one page.

Here is page 31 again, page 32 . . . and then what comes next? Page 17 all over again, a third time! What kind of book did they sell you, anyway? They bound together all these copies of the same signature, not another page in the whole book is any good.

You fling the book on the floor, you would hurl it out of the window, even out of the closed window, through the slats of the Venetian blinds; let them shred its incongruous quires, let sentences, words, morphemes, phonemes gush forth, beyond recomposition into discourse; through the panes, and if they are of unbreakable glass so much the better, hurl the book and reduce it to photons, undulatory vibrations, polarized spectra; through the wall, let the book crumble into molecules and atoms passing between atom and atom of the reinforced concrete, breaking up into electrons, neutrons, neutrinos, elementary particles more and more minute; through the telephone wires, let it be reduced to electronic impulses, into flow of information, shaken by redundancies and noises, and let it be degraded into a swirling entropy. You would like to throw it out of the house, out of the block, beyond the neighborhood, beyond the city limits, beyond the state confines, beyond the regional administration, beyond the national community, beyond the Common Market, beyond Western culture, beyond the continental shelf, beyond the atmosphere, the biosphere, the stratosphere, the field of gravity, the solar system, the galaxy, the cumulus of galaxies, to succeed in hurling it beyond the point the galaxies have reached in their expansion, where space-time has not yet arrived, where it would be received by nonbeing, or, rather, the not-being which has never been

and will never be, to be lost in the most absolutely guaranteed undeniable negativity. Merely what it deserves, neither more nor less.

But no. Instead you pick it up, you dust it off; you have to take it back to the bookseller so he will exchange it for you. You know you are somewhat impulsive, but you have learned to control yourself. The thing that most exasperates you is to find yourself at the mercy of the fortuitous, the aleatory, the random, in things and in human actions—carelessness, approximation, imprecision, whether your own or others'. In such instances your dominant passion is the impatience to erase the disturbing effects of that arbitrariness or distraction, to re-establish the normal course of events. You can't wait to get your hands on a nondefective copy of the book you've begun. You would rush to the bookshop at once if shops were not closed at this hour. You have to wait until tomorrow.

You spend a restless night, your sleep is an intermittent, jammed flow, like the reading of the novel, with dreams that seem to you the repetition of one dream always the same. You fight with the dreams as with formless and meaningless life, seeking a pattern, a route that must surely be there, as when you begin to read a book and you don't yet know in which direction it will carry you. What you would like is the opening of an abstract and absolute space and time in which you could move, following an exact, taut trajectory; but when you seem to be succeeding, you realize you are motionless, blocked, forced to repeat everything from the beginning.

The next day, as soon as you have a free moment, you run to the bookshop, you enter, holding the book already opened, pointing your finger at a page, as if that alone were enough to make clear the general disarray. "You know what you sold me? . . . Look here. . . . Just when it was getting interesting . . ."

The bookseller maintains his composure. "Ah, you, too?

I've had several complaints already. And only this morning I received a form letter from the publisher. You see? 'In the distribution of the latest works on our list a part of the edition of the volume *If on a winter's night a traveler* by Italo Calvino has proved defective and must be withdrawn from circulation. Through an error of the bindery, the printed signatures of that book became mixed with those of another new publication, the Polish novel *Outside the town of Malbork* by Tazio Bazakbal. With profound apologies for the unfortunate incident, the publisher will replace the spoiled copies at the earliest possible moment, et cetera.' Now I ask you, must a poor bookseller take the blame for the negligence of others? We've been going crazy all day. We've checked the Calvinos copy by copy. There are a number of sound volumes, happily, and we can immediately replace your defective *Traveler* with a brand-new one in mint condition."

Hold on a minute. Concentrate. Take all the information that has poured down on you at once and put it in order. A Polish novel. Then the book you began reading with such involvement wasn't the book you thought but was a Polish novel instead. That is the book you are now so anxious to procure. Don't let them fool you. Explain clearly the situation. "No, actually I don't really give a damn about that Calvino any more. I started the Polish one and it's the Polish one I want to go on with. Do you have this Bazakbal book?"

"If that's what you prefer. Just a moment ago, another customer, a young lady, came in with the same problem, and she also wanted to exchange her book for the Polish. There, you see that pile of Bazakbal on the counter, right under your nose? Help yourself."

"But will this copy be defective?"

"Listen. At this point I'm not swearing to anything. If the most respected publishing firms make such a muddle, you can't trust anything any more. I'll tell you exactly

what I told the young lady. If there is any further cause for complaint, you will be reimbursed. I can't do more than that."

The young lady. He has pointed out a young lady to you. She is there between two rows of bookshelves in the shop, looking among the Penguin Modern Classics, running a lovely and determined finger over the pale aubergine-colored spines. Huge, swift eyes, complexion of good tone and good pigment, a richly waved haze of hair.

And so the Other Reader makes her happy entrance into your field of vision, Reader, or, rather, into the field of your attention; or, rather, you have entered a magnetic field from whose attraction you cannot escape. Don't waste time, then, you have a good excuse to strike up a conversation, a common ground, just think a moment, you can show off your vast and various reading, go ahead, what are you waiting for?

"Then you, too, ha ha, the Pole," you say, all in one breath. "But that book that begins and then gets stuck there, what a fraud, because it happened to you, too, I'm told; and the same with me, you know? Having given it a try, I'm dropping this one and taking this other, but what a coincidence, the two of us."

Hmm, perhaps you could have coordinated it a bit better, but you have at least expressed the main ideas. Now it's her turn.

She smiles. She has dimples. She is even more attractive to you.

She says: "Ah, indeed, I was so anxious to read a good book. Right at the beginning, this one, no, but then it began to appeal to me. . . . Such a rage when I saw it broke off. And it wasn't that author. It did seem right away a bit different from his other books. And it was really Bazakbal. He's good, though, this Bazakbal. I've never read anything of his."

"Me either," you can say, reassured, reassuring.

"A bit too unfocused, his way of telling a story, too much so for me. I rather enjoy that sense of bewilderment a novel gives you when you start reading it, but if the first effect is fog, I'm afraid the moment the fog lifts my pleasure in reading will be lost, too."

You shake your head pensively. "In fact, there is that risk."

"I prefer novels," she adds, "that bring me immediately into a world where everything is precise, concrete, specific. I feel a special satisfaction in knowing that things are made in that certain fashion and not otherwise, even the most commonplace things that in real life seem indifferent to me."

Do you agree? Then say so. "Ah, yes, that sort of book is really worthwhile."

And she continues: "Anyway, this is also an interesting novel, I can't deny that."

Go on, don't let the conversation die. Say something; just keep talking. "Do you read many novels? You do? So do I, or some at least, though nonfiction is more in my line. . . ." Is that all you can think of? Now what? Are you stopping? Good night! Aren't you capable of asking her: Have you read this one? And this? Which of the two do you like better? There, now you have something to talk about for half an hour.

The trouble is that she's read many more novels than you have, especially foreign ones, and she has an orderly memory, she refers to specific episodes; she asks you, "And do you remember what Henry's aunt says when . . ." and you, who unearthed that title because you know the title and nothing more, and you liked letting her believe you had read it, now have to extricate yourself with generic comments, like "It moves a bit slowly for me," or else "I like it because it's ironic," and she answers, "Really? You find it ironic? I wouldn't have said . . ." and you are upset. You launch into an opinion on a famous author,