

UNA MACCHIA NEL SOLE
A STAIN ON THE SUN

BY
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I

Jon's flight was twenty minutes late. Lighting a cigarette, Boriz moved into the large glassed hall beside the departure area. From there he would be able to see the planes taking off and touching down.

"Exoter airport, in the capital of Invernica. Such a long time, since... it feels like yesterday..."

He stared through the glass windows at the few planes standing on the apron. The pale sun, like a vague cloud amid the greyness of the sky, brought a faint gleam to the silvered paint on the fuselages. A setting sun, timid, feeble, meagre. He imagined the dazzle with which those fuselages would have shone under the blue sky of Farland, the country where he had been born, the memory of which was now as distant and cold as that same sun.

Just here, on this same tarmac, twenty-five years earlier, had landed the aeroplane which had borne him from the temperatures of thirty degrees Centigrade in his native land to the six degrees of Exoter. He had been wearing – he clearly remembered – a blue summer suit, of extremely light material. The moment he alighted from the aircraft, he had felt the freezing in his veins. And now he felt the same chill gripping his mind and his soul.

He was just a boy back then, with pitch-black hair. He was young, wild. He remembered that his presence among the people of Exoter, where he had come to work for a time and to learn the Invernian language, had been a cause of curiosity. And he had felt like a fish out of water. But back then, he would never have imagined that time was going to change nothing, and that after years he would still feel a stranger. Ten years had passed, then twenty, then twenty-five, but nothing had changed, save perhaps the colour of his hair.

He had left Farland with a few coins in his pocket and an empty space in his heart, in a whirlwind of emotion. But it was his strong spirit of escape that had driven him to leave home.

He had never succeeded in ridding his mind of one particular image which continued to haunt him: the innocent, unbelieving face of his brother Jon at the moment when they said goodbye at the station. He could not forget the sadness in those eyes or the movement of his brother's hand waving to him as the train pulled slowly away along the track of no return. He had abandoned Jon, his only brother, who was just eleven years old, at the point when, as his elder brother, he should have been there with him to fill up the void left by their mother, who had died only a year previously.

Lost in these thoughts, Boriz felt a tear sliding down his cheek, but the deafening loudspeaker announcement of a departing flight startled him, dragging him back to reality. He glanced at his watch; half an hour had already gone by. His brother's flight, he read on the board, had already touched down. He hurried to the arrivals hall. He couldn't wait to see Jon once more.

His brother's character was the opposite of his own; he was what could be described as reason personified. Together with eagerness to see him again, Boriz was pervaded by a sense of insecurity.

How was he going to cope with the inevitable barrage of questions from Jon after so many years without seeing him?

"I know one thing," Boriz thought, "he'll frown at me just like Dad used to frown at us when we were kids."

At last, among the crowd of unknown travellers filtering intermittently through the automatic doors of the arrivals hall, he saw his brother's face. Recognising Boriz, Jon did not frown. Walking faster, he hurried to meet him. The two brothers embraced without a word, their tongues tied by their feelings.

"Was your journey all right?" Boriz asked, his eyes shining with tears and a lump in his throat.

"Yes, absolutely fine," Jon replied.

"Come on, let's get in the car. It's this way, along here. Not too far. Here we are..."

Boriz opened the car door to let his brother in. After locking the suitcase into the boot, he took his own place behind the wheel.

"How long is it since we last met? Ten years, eleven years?"

"Exactly twelve years and one month," Jon replied promptly, lowering his head to avoid Boriz's gaze.

His brother, from Jon's tone of voice, understood that this could be a reproach, although he knew that his brother, in spite of everything, had always had a deep respect for him.

"How are the family? And your son? I can just imagine how big he must have grown."

"Everybody's fine," replied Jon.

In saying that, the expression on his face became calm.

"Tor is thirteen now."

A silent pause followed, while the car carried the two brothers swiftly between rows of trees through which filtered the pink light of sunset, intermittently lighting up their faces.

"How long is it since you've heard from Dad?" Jon asked in a tone of disconsolate curiosity.

Boriz looked at him for a moment. He heaved a sigh. He knew that sooner or later Jon was bound to mention their father.

"Did you hear that he had two heart attacks?" Jon went on in an emotional tone.

Boriz knew about his father's heart attacks; he had heard about them some months previously.

"Am I supposed to feel responsible for that too?" he mused to himself, while, sitting at the wheel of his car with his brother on board, he drove like a robot without realising that it had already grown dark. Jon had to remind him to switch on the headlights. Already the stars were prickling weakly behind a veil of grey clouds which, almost as if for a punishment, was hiding their mysterious charm.

At a traffic light he was too late in stopping and went through the lights as they were turning red. A few yards further on he realised, glancing in his rear-view mirror, that a policeman on a motorcycle was following him. The motorcycle overtook him and, blocking his path, forced him to stop.

"Here we go!" Boriz thought, "more trouble with this fellow now! He's going to tell me I went through on the red, then he'll ask for my licence, pull out his notebook and tell me I've broken the rules of the road, and that I'm to be summonsed to appear in court."

"You normally go through red traffic-lights, do you?" the motorcycle cop said with a truculent air.

"Well, to be accurate, it's not exactly normal," Boriz replied.

"Don't get smart," the policeman went on in an increasingly truculent tone. "First name, surname and address!"

Boriz, powerless before this figure of authority, bit back his words. Then, in a voice choked with fury, he spelled out his identification. Since coming to live in Exoter he had always found the policemen's conduct hard to accept. Although he always complied with the law, he unintentionally had found himself in other situations like this: knowing that he had never committed serious offences, he saw discrimination in policemen's behaviour.

After complying with the burly traffic cop's demands, he went back and sat at the wheel beside his brother, who had witnessed the scene in silence without getting out of the car.

Jon looked at Boriz as he started up the engine again to continue on their way, and read in his face an expression of suppressed fury, his cheeks pale with anger. But in his eyes he perceived a sense of sad, calm resignation. What Boriz would actually have liked to do was to lift up the policeman by his collar and, with blazing eyes, let out a howl so loud that it would resound in every corner of the planet, until all the world's bullies heard it and fled in terror to seek refuge like herds of wild beasts in the jungle at the first lightning-flashes of a storm. But instead, he had not reacted at all, indeed had behaved like one who is willing to turn the other cheek. Was this powerlessness, or was it the last gasp of moral exhaustion? That policeman was just one example of coercion, of oppression which one human being feels entitled to inflict upon another. Society needs rules, it is true, but they must not oppress the innocent.

By now, Boriz was living his life without even the will to ask the reason for every action, resigned to the cruelty of the inevitable, to an apathetic sterility of the mind in reacting both to good and to evil. Although he would have wished to love so much, he was no longer capable even of hatred.

"We'll be home in a couple of minutes," he said, with a half-smile to his brother, after a long silence.

They arrived at the opening of the long gravel driveway which led to the house; along the driveway the car wheels made stones crunch and fly on all sides.

The two brothers got out of the car. Boriz busied himself with opening the boot, to lift Jon's suitcase out, while Jon stretched, yawned with his hand covering his mouth, and looked around. He had not known that his brother lived in such an isolated area, so far from the city centre. He knew though that he lived in a rented apartment, because he had told him so in a letter many years before.

Meanwhile, amid the high fleeting clouds, the moon's timid outline could be glimpsed, and the rustling

of the tops of nearby trees, swaying in the wind, mingled with the hooting of a distant owl.

Jon felt a shiver in the cold autumn evening. He glanced again at the house.

"Strange," he thought, "all dark."

He asked nervously: "Is there nobody in?"

Boriz did not reply at once. With Jon's suitcase in his hand, he took out his keys to open the door. After a few moments he made up his mind to respond.

"No," he said in a flat, detached tone which held no promise of further explanation.

"And your wife?" Jon went on with natural curiosity.

"Oh, Cleo," Boriz said, with some embarrassment "well, she's not at home, she's gone to Fixter to see her mother. She may spend a few days with her because she's not well."

"So you're on your own," said Jon, somewhat preoccupied.

Boriz did not reply. Then he slowly raised his head and looked him in the eye.

In his brother's brown-eyed gaze, Jon found an indefinable expression of abandonment, a boundless sadness, behind which was hidden who knows what terrible secret. That expression was like an abyss into which he could feel himself sinking.

They went into the house. Placing the suitcase on the ground, Boriz took off his jacket and laid it on a chair. Jon did likewise. The room contained nothing but a table, a sofa, two chairs and, off to one side, a fridge and a two-ring cooker. Slowly, Boriz went over to the fridge and took out a bottle of wine, some left-over vegetables and some cheese. Then he placed bread, cutlery and two glasses on the table.

"Sit down, Jon," he said, "let's have something to eat, you must be hungry after your journey."

They sat down, facing each other. Boriz had not yet answered the question about Cleo, and Jon, after swallowing a mouthful of wine, asked again:

"How's Cleo?"

Boriz was chewing slowly on a mouthful of bread and cheese. The food filled his jaws giving him an expression of even greater severity and annoyance, like somebody who was set to explode at any moment.

For a few moments, still chewing, he raised his eyes to meet his brother's gaze, but he did not answer.

He lowered his head. He grasped the bottle to pour himself more wine, but the moment the neck of the bottle touched the rim of the glass, his hand shook and he poured more wine on the table than in the glass. Clenching his teeth in rage, he placed his free hand on his arm to stop the shaking.

Jon observed his brother's action and expression. He shuddered. "Poor Boriz," he thought, "he's unrecognisable."

Setting out for Exoter, he had been greatly excited by the idea of seeing him again. During the journey, he had imagined seeing the same Boriz of old, nervous but full of vitality. "Maybe he'll have a few white hairs," he had mused, "but it will still be him, Boriz, with his open character and love of life." What he had least expected to meet was the vexed, hunched man sitting opposite him now.

But why was he so unwilling to speak about his wife? He felt his heart gripped in a vice. He realised that it would be indelicate to ask further questions on that topic – in any case he would only receive enigmatic answers.

He looked around, feeling miserable and wondering where he was going to sleep. Boriz, without doing so deliberately, was quick to satisfy his curiosity.

"Maybe it's time to go to bed," he said, rising to his feet and starting to clear the table hurriedly. "You can sleep here in the living-room, on that sofa-bed. I'll be in the bedroom next door. I'm afraid there's no guest room; there's only one bedroom in this place."

He spoke in a flat but not unfriendly tone, intended merely to express a bare fact.

He opened out the sofa until it was a bed, and fixed up sheets, blankets and a pillow in a rough and ready way.

"Leave it, I'll do it," said Jon, trying to take his brother's place and save him the trouble of making the bed.

Boriz, however, paying him no attention, completed the task he had begun. Then he gave his brother a half-embrace.

"Good night, Jon" he said in a tired voice. "The bathroom is back there if you need it."

"Good night," Jon replied, feeling embarrassed by the idea of spending this first evening in the home of his brother, whom he now had difficulty both in recognising and in understanding.

Boriz went into his room and switched on the light. He left the door ajar for a few moments, just long enough for Jon to see the disorder in the room. He could see the double bed with blankets and pillows rumbled on one side only, while on the other side they were in perfect order, with the pillow-slip still tucked

under the pillow: a sign that Boriz had been sleeping alone in that bed for some time. On the table at his side of the bed, there were hundreds of sheets of paper in a messy heap.

Boriz switched off the light and closed the door without a word.

Jon lay down lazily on the sofa-bed without taking his clothes off. Crossing his arms behind his head, he stared at the ceiling: it was crisscrossed with cracks, and patches of damp showed here and there. From the centre hung half a metre of blackened wire with a bare unshaded bulb throwing a feeble glow over the room. There was a window in the wall opposite the main entrance. Getting up slowly from the bed, he went over to the window. He looked out and saw a small unkempt garden bounded by a low half-ruined wall, beyond which he could see a steep wooded incline. Between the trunks of two trees he thought he saw something gleaming. Cupping his hands like a visor against the glass he was able to make out the source of the light: a stream, perhaps a pond, reflecting the moon. And as he watched, the treetops, ruffled by a sudden gust of wind, shook in a sad, mysterious, moonlit dance. He looked at his watch: exactly ten o'clock. After his journey he should be feeling tired, but instead an inexplicable sense of suffering and agitation was keeping him awake. He had come to see his brother in a foreign country where he had never been before, so he should be feeling relaxed, warmed by the thought that he had finally succeeded in fulfilling this little dream. But no: all around he saw a depressing squalor. The pleasure he had felt in seeing Boriz again had lasted only a few hours: his brother's enigmatic behaviour, the house he lived in, that cramped garden, the mystery of the night outside, almost caused him to curse himself for making that journey.

Taking off his clothes and putting on his pyjamas, he switched off the light and lay down again, pulling the blankets over him. He had almost fallen asleep when he was awoken by indistinct noises which sounded like weeping. The noises were coming from his brother's room. He got up, and went over to the door so as to hear better. It was Boriz, tossing and turning, in the grip of a nightmare, stammering senseless monosyllables.

"No... mh... nooo... sto... mh... "

Jon turned the handle of the door and opened it a crack. He saw Boriz, shaking his head frantically, with copious perspiration covering his face and pouring down to his neck. He wanted to go over to him, hug him, comfort him, wake him up from that terrible nightmare, but he decided to do nothing. "What on earth can he be dreaming about?" he wondered, deeply concerned. He went back to bed, seized by an inexpressible sense of discomfort and, at the same time, pity for his brother. Then he switched off the lamp beside him and got under the covers. Closing his eyes, he drifted off to sleep with his mind still filled with the vivid picture of Boriz's delirious face. As if by magic, that vision was quickly transformed into a dream of his own which began from the precise moment when Boriz's nightmare had ended. Once again he saw his brother in bed, gripped by that nightmare, and then suddenly he could make out a female figure swathed in veils who approached his bedside and sat down on the edge of the bed. She was an astonishingly beautiful woman, slender, with red-blond hair and heavenly features. Her presence lit up the room with a dazzling light. All traces of perspiration disappeared from Boriz's face, and the bristles on his unshaven jaw also vanished. That nymph who had materialised from nowhere leaned over Boriz's mouth and kissed it, while her almost transparent body blended into his brother's body and made it fade from sight, so that there was no trace of anything left on the unmade bed.

In a state of agitation, Jon woke up with a start. The room was now illuminated by a feeble light. Was it still moonlight, or the first glimmer of dawn? He turned his eyes to the window, and through it, in his half-waking state, he saw or thought he saw the fleeting silhouette of a human figure dressed in white, with loose hair streaming in the wind. He shuddered. Was this the same female figure which he dreamed about a few minutes earlier?

"Impossible," he thought to himself. Was this the same woman that had appeared in his dream, joined to his brother in a heavenly embrace? He could not understand it. And that silhouette, out there in the garden, in the darkness of the night... like an apparition, a ghost!...

A whirlwind of conflicting emotions overwhelmed him, and, exhausted, he fell back into a deep sleep.

II

Next morning Jon was awakened by a clattering sound. It was Boriz, who had got up early and was making breakfast.

"Did you sleep all right?"

"Yes," Jon nodded. He wanted to talk to him straight away about all that he had seen, heard, dreamed. He wanted to tell him that during the night he had had a terrible nightmare, but he decided to say nothing about it.

After making his brother some toast and coffee, Boriz, with his cup in his hand, dragged himself over to the garden door, unlocked it and went outside, walking slowly over to the boundary wall, where there was a gap leading to the meadow and the stream. He went as far as the gravelled edge, sat down, lit a cigarette and started sipping his coffee in a meditative way.

Jon followed him and sat down by his side.

Boriz glanced fleetingly at him.

"Poor Jon," he thought, "still the same." That habit of following him around like a faithful puppy reminded him of the time when his brother, just eleven years old, used to hang on his every word. He remembered the anxiety with which Jon waited for him, and the joy he felt on seeing him again, when he came home from university to spend the weekend at home with his family.

Nothing had changed. Now that he was over forty years old, Jon was still following him around as though he needed his big brother in spite of his years, needed something that had been denied him, and that it was now too late to give.

A sense of infinite sadness came over him. With faraway eyes he stared at the slowly flowing water.

Jon questioned him.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing, nothing at all," Boriz mumbled, recovering from his trance-like state.

"Come on," he said, getting up, "let's go to town, I've got a few things to fix up."

They went back into the house. Boriz gave the cups a quick rinse, tidied up the sofa-bed, and went out to the car, followed by Jon.

Getting in, they set off slowly. As they rounded the curve of the driveway which went down from the house, Jon saw that from this point one could enjoy the panorama of the whole city. The evening before, in the darkness, he had not noticed that.

"How many people live in Exoter?" he asked innocently.

"More than a million;" Boriz responded at once, "and the funny thing is that one-third of the entire population of Invernina lives in Exoter. Invernians don't like living in the country; little by little they're all moving into town."

They drove swiftly along the ring-road leading to the airport, in a dirty and disreputable part of the city. Jon noticed that many houses two or three storeys high along the road were in ruins or burned out. He realised, without having to ask his brother to confirm his impression, how poor this area was. He could see this partly from the beaten-down look of the people walking along the pavements, each going about their own business. They looked to him like vagabonds moving around without any definite goal in mind. They made him think of beings who had never asked to be born and who, once they had come into the world, were condemned against their will to live, dragging themselves along in their shells, like so many snails.

"This area," Boriz said, "is one of the roughest in the city. If you park your car here and leave it, when you come back you'll find it gone."

"So they steal cars here too?" Jon asked.

"Never mind stealing them; they take them away, smash them into a wall or a lamp-post, and then if nobody disturbs them they set fire to them."

This exchange of remarks about petty urban crime was merely a pretext for Jon so that he could avoid speaking and embarrassing his brother by asking questions on the topic which he had barely broached on his arrival in Exoter.

Why was Boriz living alone? Where was his wife, Cleo?

Last night's terrifying dream came back to his mind.

They came to a part of the city which Jon found somewhat more elegant, but still gloomy under the dark, threatening sky. Boriz parked close to the pavement outside a huge building with enormous glass panels.

"Do you mind waiting here in the car for a few minutes?"

"Not at all," Jon replied.

Then Boriz entered the building. Jon could not make out what it was. At first sight it looked like just another cold, faceless government office. Sitting in the car, obedient to his brother's request, he saw people going in and coming out: people of all ages, badly dressed, with a defeated air, troubled, depressed faces, tennis shoes, patched jeans and shapeless pullovers. In their hands they held a kind of pink card and, when they came out of that place, as well as the pink card they were holding pieces of paper which they stopped for a moment to count and then stuffed into their pockets, walking quickly away down narrow side-streets.

He could not make out what was happening, and this made him restless. His brother too had gone into that place. Why?

Leaning out the window, he craned his neck to get a better view into the office. He could see long queues of people in front of counters.

Jon got the message. That place must be some kind of centre for paying out social security benefits.

The scene reminded him of his days of military training in the country, when he was in the army, and the long lines of his fellow soldiers in front of the cook who, one by one, filled their tin bowls with hot soup.

It was not long before Boriz re-emerged. As the others had done, he too stopped to count some pieces of paper that looked very much like banknotes; he put them quickly into his pocket before coming back to the car.

"Sorry if I kept you waiting a long time," he said, climbing in.

"Where have you been?" Jon asked innocently.

Boriz looked at him while he started the car, then shrugged his shoulders with a heavy sigh.

"Oh, I didn't mention that I'm unemployed. I was collecting my dole. I go every Tuesday. Here in Invernia they pay you if you have no job." He said nothing more.

Jon gave his brother a tender glance, then turned to look out the other window, towards the street, so as to conceal the feeling of suffering which suddenly gripped him.

"Poor Boriz," he thought, "unemployed! Boriz, of all people, after all that studying and even getting a degree! Now that he should be feeling well-established, with a secure position, with no problems – unemployed! What on earth can have happened to him?"

He knew that in his youth Boriz had been an unquiet and dissatisfied person, somebody who had no patience with rigid rules or conventions, who always saw grey where others saw just black and white. Now, however, he was a mature man, who should have harvested the fruits of all that study, all that experience. But no. He was unemployed, a displaced person among so many other displaced persons, with no future prospects. His mind flashed back to the moment when he had met his brother at the airport. After so many years without seeing him, he had been faced with an unrecognisable man, visibly marked by a cruel fate to which he seemed resigned, with no way out. In the context of the people whom he was now meeting in that foreign land and had been since he had set foot there, Boriz seemed to him like an alien creature, groping through the darkness of his own alienation. He saw him acting like an automaton, moving by inertia, driven by an unconscious internal force which was gradually consuming itself and was ill-suited to the physical situation around him.

Jon could no longer stand the torment weighing him down. Covering his face with his hands, he burst into sobs.

"Why, why?..." he said in a voice filled with tears.

Boriz, deeply disturbed and at the same time surprised by his brother's unexpected outburst, felt as though he were paralysed. With a sigh of dismay, he gave Jon a half-embrace.

"What's come over you? Are you crying over me?"

Jon made no reply; he put his hand in his right-hand trouser pocket and pulled out a handkerchief to dry his tears. Then he forced a half-smile onto his lips, to cheer up his brother.

"Nothing, I'm sorry; it's just that it hurts me to see you in this state."

"In what state?"

"After so many years, I've come to Invernia... I was expecting to find you happy... and now!..."

"But Jon, don't take it that way, come on! You're worried about me? I assure you I'm not worth worrying about."

"What do you mean, you're not worth worrying about? You're my brother, aren't you? It makes me sad to see you this way. Since coming to Exoter I no longer recognise you. You're not the man you used to be. What's happened during all these years that I know nothing about?"

"What should I have told you?" Boriz asked, his eyes glistening for a moment with tears. "I've made so many mistakes in my life, including the mistake of leaving Farland and abandoning you. But you know, I've paid for all that."

Jon looked at him in disbelief.

"But that happened ages ago. Everybody's forgotten about it. And then you got married so soon, you set up house."

Boriz did not answer. He accelerated, changed direction, and drove towards the southern edge of the city.

"Tell you what, Jon, I'll take you to see Exoter Bay. We'll go to the beach. We'll take a walk there."

They turned onto a coast road with a view over the sea, passing houses painted in many colours and well maintained, conveying an ostentatious sense of prosperity. Jon observed all this with considerable interest.

"This must be a wealthy part of town. Am I right?"

Boriz felt relieved that he had managed to divert his brother's mind away from gloomy thoughts.

"Yes, it's a reasonably well-to-do area; the people who live here are mostly professionals." He said "professionals" in a tone of obviously disenchanted sarcasm.

"How strange," Jon said, "here the sea has no sea smell like at home."

Boriz looked at the sky under its mantle of grey clouds and shrugged his shoulders with a long-drawn-out sigh.

"How could it smell? There's no sun. It's the sun that heats up the sea water and causes it to evaporate. That's why you get the smell of salt in the air."

Boriz satisfied his brother's curiosity by providing the obvious scientific explanation for his query, but he did so without much conviction, as though he wanted to avoid saying what he privately felt about that sea.

They reached the car-park beside the beach. Turning off the engine, Boriz got out and motioned to Jon to do the same.

They went onto the beach after passing through the cordon of rocks that marked it off.

The sky, meanwhile, was growing ever darker; a blanket of threatening clouds was thickening on the horizon. The booming siren of a distant ferry echoed in the air like the raucous lament of someone dying. It was the sound of detachment, of oblivion, that same sound that Boriz had come to know all too well. The two brothers set out with slow steps along the strand. The tide, now receding, had just deposited the wrack of primeval conflicts.

An awkward light illuminated the faces of the two brothers, who now walked in silence, the only measure of time being the rhythmic breaking of the waves.

Jon glanced at Boriz, who was moving forward slowly on his right-hand side with his head down. For a moment he seemed to see him enveloped in a dim circle of light, as though this were an integral part of his physical dimension. Then, suddenly, silence fell even among the few wailing gulls wandering on the beach. He felt ice in his veins and recalled the strange sensation he had had the night before.

Recovering, he pressed on with a question on the matter uppermost in his mind.

"When will we be able to see Cleo?"

Boriz looked at him with an impatient air.

"You'll see her, you'll see her, don't worry. Meanwhile I'm here with you; isn't that good enough? Didn't you come to Invernia mostly to see me?"

He said this with an almost dismissive air.

"Just another way of deflecting my questions," Jon thought to himself.

Boriz looked at his watch, which showed the time as one o'clock.

"Shall we go and get something to eat, Jon?"

"Why not? Where shall we go?"

Boriz made no reply.

They walked quickly on towards the car-park. When they had gone a hundred metres, the sky, already swollen and angry, broke into torrential rain which soaked them from head to toe.

"Damnation! Something else we could have done without," Boriz said, quite crossly.

Jon said nothing. Somewhat amused, he tried to restrain an involuntary smile of surprise at the fact that Boriz, having lived in that country for so many years, could get annoyed with the weather, as though he were still unused to it.

Before the two brothers reached the car, a gust of wind swept everything up into the air, including a sheet of newsprint which, after an ungainly aerial pirouette, came to land just in front of Jon's feet. He could not help looking at it. It was the front page of a local daily paper, and although he did not know Invernian, its enormous headline seemed to be reporting a stunning item of local news. He drew Boriz's attention to it, and before the rain-soaked sheet of newsprint could melt away, Boriz managed to read the headline: Strange Solar Phenomenon.

"What's it about?" Jon asked anxiously.

"I don't know," Boriz replied, his curiosity stirred. "Come on, there's a newsagent near here. Let's buy a newspaper."

They got into the car and drove along the seafront. Then, turning right, they came after a few minutes to a little square containing three shops, one of them a newsagent's. Boriz went in and bought the newspaper. Coming back to the car with short steps, he took a look at the front page. Jon saw his brother's face turn pale.

Sitting at the wheel, Boriz started reading with great excitement.

"What's it about?" Jon asked once again, rather alarmed.

Boriz, still absorbed in reading, silently gestured to his brother to hold on for a moment. Then, coming to the end of the news item, he gave him a concise translation of it.

"They've discovered an unexpected and alarming increase in the level of solar activity, and scientists are saying this could have a disastrous effect on planet Earth."

Obviously well informed on this topic, he went on: "As you know, sun spots and cyclonic explosions on the surface of the sun have always influenced the climate here on Earth. These phenomena recur regularly every seven or eleven years. Now the radio telescopes have registered an extraordinarily high level of intensity in the radiation emanating from the explosions."

Jon could see that this was a serious matter, and in order to show his interest he put in a question.

"Is there imminent danger to the Earth?"

"Nobody knows," Boriz replied, "the article has nothing to say about that. It only says that atmospheric conditions will certainly be the first to suffer the effects, and this could happen at once."

Starting up the engine, Boriz set the car in motion, merging into the traffic that flowed slowly in the rush-hour. The wind was still sweeping black clouds westward, while in the east the sky was brightening.

Suddenly there was a sound like the murmur of a huge swirling crowd; the traffic came to a halt, people got out of their cars and set off almost at a run towards the low boundary wall of the seafront.

Everybody, seized by an inexpressible agitation, was pointing at a spot in the sky. It was the sun, its shining outline visible despite a thin veil of mist, but now there was in its centre an ugly, dark, irregularly shaped stain of considerable proportions.

Boriz and Jon too got out of their car and joined the throng of stunned bystanders.

At that same instant there fell over everything, the road, the cars, the trees, people's faces, a mysterious rose-coloured light which then vanished, yielding to a brilliant glare that brightened the sky.

When everything seemed to have returned to normal, Jon was deathly pale; in a split second, borne on his own mind, he must have flown back home to his family in Farland, to hug them close and be with them during that terrible moment. Not even his brother, his own flesh and blood, was more important.

Boriz, however, had remained unperturbed in the face of that uncanny phenomenon. The expression on his face had betrayed an unusual serenity. If only for a few moments, all his three-dimensional worries had vanished, while he reflected that nothing less than a solar explosion could silence the selfishness and wickedness of man.

He had behaved, during that critical moment, as though he were not of this world, as though he were used to cataclysms among the stars, or as though nobody was more aware of them than he. For he seemed to have crossed the boundaries of the knowable some time before, living now in an inner life which had little to do with the physical life of the senses.

III

At lunch that afternoon, in the small Farlandic restaurant, the two brothers talked about nothing but sun spots.

A friend of Boriz's came and sat at their table. From the way in which Boriz introduced him, Jon could see that he was someone who did not appeal to his brother. His name was Rogan and he was one of those self-centred people whose only achievement in life is to get rich quick, and that gave him the right to brag.

In greeting him, Boriz appeared cold although he was not disdainful; and so Rogan decided to speak to Jon.

"You see," he said with a smirk, "your brother is still living the life of a tramp because he wouldn't listen to me. I've been telling him for ages that he should chuck it all in and go into business and..."

Before he could finish his sentence Boriz jumped up with his eyes blazing and, grabbing him by the lapel, made as if to punch him in the face, but Jon held him back. Then his feelings poured forth in words:

"What do you know about what I should have done or what I shouldn't have done with my life? You understand nothing but money, you were born with dollar signs in your eyes, like Donald Duck, and what's more, you were born with a silver spoon in your mouth, and the spoon was dollar-shaped too! Apart from money, you know nothing. But I'll tell you something, I wouldn't swap a crumb of my poverty for a hundred bags of your money."

Rogan, who did not expect that reaction, blushed and, covered with embarrassment, tried to answer back as best he could, with a timid glance of complicity at Jon.

"What a sensitive chap you are! I didn't mean to hurt your feelings, honest!"

"There's a time and place for your jokes," Boriz said after simmering down a bit, "and some jokes, especially among friends, are out of place even if they're said as a joke. Because behind the joke there's always a real opinion, a personal belief which, in your case, is mistaken. I can understand that everybody has a personal opinion about things in general, about life, about reality, and to each of us this may seem correct, perhaps the most correct. But I said 'seem', because what seems to be isn't what really is. So if you express your opinion about somebody, you must simply hope that this person's opinion of himself or herself is the same as yours, or similar to yours. And in this particular case, which got my goat a minute ago, your opinion of me is a thousand light-years away from my own opinion of myself. Do I need to explain what a light-year is?"

Rogan took all this without a word, then, looking at his watch, he left with a cold goodbye.

Jon, who had witnessed this incident, simply listening silently to it, gazed intensely at Boriz who, after Rogan's retreat, had recomposed himself in his measured but mysterious calm. He did not want to raise the topic of Rogan again.

Even though Jon found it increasingly difficult to make sense of his brother, the man now sitting opposite him, at least he could understand his state of mind and comprehend to some extent his outburst at the expense of a friend like Rogan.

After a few minutes' silence, he broke the ice with a hackneyed expedient.

"What time do you make it? My watch must have stopped."

"Half past two," Boriz replied flatly. He had succeeded in putting himself in Jon's shoes and felt some inner discomfort at having exposed himself, through his tirade, to his brother's judgement.

"You must excuse me, Jon, but when people tread on my corns I see red. People, some people, aren't smart enough to avoid treading on other people's corns, so they've got to be prepared to get that kind of response, don't you think?"

"Yes, yes," said Jon approvingly, "I know exactly what you mean."

A long silence followed. Jon's embarrassment blended with Boriz's behaviour, which was at once mysterious and defiant.

"This brother of mine," Jon pondered to himself, "must have his nerves all shot to pieces."

Without warning, from below the ground floor came a kind of heaving which turned into an echoing roar; the walls of the restaurant were shaken by terrifying vibrations, and everything hanging on them was thrown on the floor, while flashes of shuddering brightness awkwardly lit the room. The diners, numbering about twenty men, women and a few children, caught by an indefinable panic, ran howling in all directions, trying to shelter under the tables. Jon did the same in a spirit of self-preservation, after urging his brother to follow him. But Boriz had remained untouched by the extraordinary happening. Sitting with his elbows on the table, he calmly poured wine into his glass. Jon grabbed him by the legs and tried in vain to get him to crawl under the table.

"Come down here, can't you see there's an earthquake outside?"

At the same instant another violent shock made everything shudder.

Boriz sprang to his feet and, without batting an eyelid, moved to the door, opened it and went out. He took a few steps along the street towards the light and stopped at a point where he could still be seen from inside the restaurant.

Slowly, emboldened by what seemed an act of courage on Boriz's part, the customers, including Jon, got out from under the tables and groped their way over to the open door to see what was happening. They saw Boriz from behind: with his arms outstretched and his face upturned, he seemed to be holding a conversation with some invisible being. They looked at the sky which just then was lit up with a dark pink glow. Nobody could see Boriz's face, but from the slight movements of his head it was clear that he was moving his lips, murmuring something.

Jon was beside himself with bafflement. What was he to think of his brother now?

Before the pink glow began to fade, a child seemed to step out of the darkness of a narrow side-street. He was no more than about eighty centimetres in height. He moved close to Boriz and, with his head upraised, shook him, pulling him by the trousers.

Boriz looked at the boy and stretched out his right hand to him. The boy took it in his two hands and smiled at him. Although the glow was fading away to nothing, everybody could see the child's dazzling smile. Then it was dark. A terrible booming noise was heard and the customers still clustered at the entrance to the restaurant scurried off in all directions like frightened animals.

Jon felt lost. He really thought the end of the world had come. His troubled mind flew for a moment to his own family whom he had left behind in Farland. He saw them as though in a momentary vision in which they too, in the grip of panic, seemed to be howling for help with their arms stretched upward, although their voices could not be heard. He wanted to run, to escape, but his legs were paralysed. With his senses trapped in a frightening vortex, he thought the end had really come. He closed his eyes and, just when his worn-out heart seemed about to burst, all at once he found himself sitting in the car beside his brother. Boriz, on seeing him, reproached him for having kept him waiting so long.

"Where did you get to? I've been here in the car waiting for you for half an hour."

Jon looked at his watch. It was half past seven. How could five hours have gone by since they were in the restaurant? He could not believe his senses. He felt disorientated. Then he made up his mind to reply.

"Are you serious? Didn't you see?... were you?... and was the sky?..."

"What on earth are you saying?" Boriz replied quietly.

Jon felt he was losing his mind. He raised his hands to his head, then to the back of his neck. What was happening? He wanted to pepper Boriz with questions, but Boriz's manner cowed him into a respectful silence. He had left behind a world of calm, of rationality, with everything in its place, he had got on an aeroplane with inexpressible impatience to see his beloved brother who lived in such a faraway country, and he now found himself in a world which he could not understand, in a pitiless place, an unstable reality, made up of nightmares, knowing no boundary between the comprehensible and the incomprehensible. Even that chill, insidious breeze, which had lashed his face ever since he had arrived in Exoter, was like the breath of a ghostly world. But all in all, where was the ghostly realm and where the reality? The thought struck him that the life he had lived up to that moment was not his real existence and that the image of his brother, as he remembered him, or as he liked to remember him, had never really existed, and the suspicion flashed into his mind that what he was seeing now was the real Boriz, the Boriz who had always existed. But then, who was he, Jon? Did he represent the subjective determination to be what he wanted to be, including the subjective construction of what he wanted other people to be? And if there is no objective reality, where does that leave rationality? Is that too a subjective factor? Some philosophers claim that the beautiful is that which pleases.

Does that mean that objective reality is what one wishes reality to be?

In Jon's mind, a frightening void had opened up. When he surfaced from these thoughts, he realised that the car in which he was travelling, driven by his brother, had almost reached home. During the whole journey, Boriz had not spoken to him at all, leaving him buried in his thoughts.

IV

The second night that Jon spent in his brother's house was, like the first, a troubled one. Boriz had gone to bed, leaving him free to prepare something to eat before settling down on the divan. He did not want to eat, however, because now he was beginning to hunger not so much for food as for knowledge. But he was also aware that Boriz, in an incomprehensible way that he could not yet decipher, held the key to every mystery.

After a night divided between meditation, nightmares and half-sleeping, he was woken at seven o'clock by the strident cawing of a crow.

Boriz had already gone out, leaving the garden door open.

"He must have gone to the stream," Jon thought.

He got dressed quickly and went looking for him. Yes, there he was, sitting on the bank like an Indian, intent on staring at the slow flowing of the clear water and listening to its murmuring, as though that stream were an oracle from which he must await a response to all the questions of his life and a forecast of his destiny, which might come at any moment.

He noticed for the first time that on the opposite side of the stream lay a little meadow bounded by a row of elms.

What could there be beyond those trees?

His curiosity aroused, he crossed the stream at the point where a sequence of rocks laid out like stepping stones allowed him to do so with short jumps.

Then, crossing the meadow, he went over to the trees. From there he had a commanding view of the entire city. But all detail was obscured by a low cowl of smog from which the smoking towers of some industrial plants emerged tall and solitary.

He stood there looking for a few moments. Then, little by little, the thinning smog began to reveal to his horrified sight the view of a city shattered and left as a skeleton. Everything was razed to the ground; of the buildings and the houses nothing was left but fragmented stumps, covered here and there by heaps of rubble and death.

"Boriz, Boriz," he shouted with all the strength he could muster, attracting his brother's attention with agitated gestures.

Boriz rose to his feet but stayed, motionless, in the place where he had been sitting.

Fording the stream, Jon ran to him and threw his arms around him, with unspeakable terror in

his eyes.

"Boriz, Boriz, there's nothing left, the city... the city's been destroyed, come and look!"

Saying this, he pulled him by the arm to get him to go and see for himself, but Boriz did not move.

"I know", he said, "it's the beginning of the end. It was bound to happen sooner or later. Now you'll see the survivors heading up towards the mountain. You will see, many of them will come by here, on the road leading to my house and up to Mount Agor. You will see, they will be like an army of faceless people, guided by a single leader: terror. There will be the ordinary people, the poor who will certainly accept this disaster with resignation, and then the powerful, the arrogant ones, who may perhaps feel remorse for having abused their power, and wonder, too late, if they will ever be able to remedy their misdeeds."

He embraced Jon, who had been reduced to a state of complete collapse by the succession of so many terrible events. Supporting him with an arm around his waist, he moved towards the house.

Meanwhile, from the uphill road nearby came a rapid succession of indistinct sounds. Hundreds of Exoterians, with tattered and dusty clothes, carrying bundles or travel bags, were moving in single file with their heads down and with slow paces, towards Mount Agor. Leading them, at the head of the line, was a child who brought a shiver of amazement to Jon. Was this the same child whom he had seen the previous afternoon approaching Boriz on the road outside the restaurant, during that extraordinary occurrence which he had witnessed?

The child was wearing a wheaten-coloured toga which bore on its front, in enormous lettering, the words: *Sic historia facta est.*

The two brothers, standing still on the edge of the road at the turn into the lane leading up to the house, observed the slow progress of the sad procession. There were adults of all ages, with cadaverous faces which lacked identifying features because they were wrapped in a dense mist which was for all in the world like cobwebs.

They walked like robots, taking no heed of anybody looking at them. At a certain point, Jon seemed to see among them the face of Cleo. He looked at Boriz with staring eyes; he wanted to shout something to him to catch his attention, but he could not. Then he moved away from his brother to approach that woman, but when he reached out his hand to touch her he was repulsed by the dense aura of dust which surrounded her, as though it were a magnetic screen.

"No, Jon, no!" shouted Boriz in alarm as, pulling him by the arm, he dragged him away from those tramping creatures.

When he had got some of his voice back, trembling with fear, Jon embraced his brother.

"What is all this, Boriz? Who are these people? Didn't you see that Cleo was among them? Didn't you recognise her?"

Boriz bowed his head; then, heaving a sigh, he cast his eyes up to heaven and tried to explain.

"What you see and what you think you see are two different things."

"What do you mean, 'different'?"

"Reality is not just what our eyes see," said Boriz. *"There is also another reality which our eyes don't see and which is perceived by our unconscious. And our unconscious is like the unending universe which has no limits either in space or in time."*

Although worn out by the confusion of his mind, Jon hazarded a question.

"How can you say the universe is limitless in space and time?"

"But how can you think it's anything else?" Boriz retorted. *"If we set spatial limits on the universe, we could only say that beyond those limits, beyond those boundaries, there's nothing. And after that nothing another nothing, and so on. But nothing is still something."*

"But even if that's true," Jon objected, *"why should the boundless universe have no limits in time?"*

"Because unlimited space," Boriz declared, *"is synonymous with unlimited time, which means eternity."*

"So," Jon deduced, *"if the universe has no time-frame that means it has neither a beginning*

nor an end. But if there never was a beginning and there will never be an end, how can God the creator be explained?"

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Boriz made no reply: he simply looked at his brother, showing more approval than surprise at the conclusions which Jon had reached.

Jon's words were immediately swamped by a chorus of indistinct lamentations coming from the melancholy cortège of untouchable beings who were proceeding before his eyes. They were like the

utterance of condemned prisoners making their way to Calvary, in chains and with slow steps, praying or cursing their condition.

Jon felt himself slipping into unconsciousness. Half-closing his eyes, he felt that he was at the centre of a terrible abyss.

At that precise moment he was woken up by a voice. It was the stewardess on the aeroplane in which he was travelling. She was saying: "Please fasten your safety-belt, sir. We're about to land in Exoter."

Pale, and with rivulets of perspiration pouring down from his temples, he fastened his safety-belt. Then, putting his right hand in his jacket pocket, he pulled out a sheet of paper. It was a telegram which read: BORIZ'S FUNERAL 3 PM – STOP – WILL MEET YOU AIRPORT ARRIVALS CLEO.