

THE FOLLOWING DAY, NO ONE DIED. THIS FACT, BEING absolutely contrary to life's rules, provoked enormous and, in the circumstances, perfectly justifiable anxiety in people's minds, for we have only to consider that in the entire forty volumes of universal history there is no mention, not even one exemplary case, of such a phenomenon ever having occurred, for a whole day to go by, with its generous allowance of twenty-four hours, diurnal and nocturnal, matutinal and vespertine, without one death from an illness, a fatal fall, or a successful suicide, not one, not a single one. Not even from a car accident, so frequent on festive occasions, when blithe irresponsibility and an excess of alcohol jockey for position on the roads to decide who will reach death first. New year's eve had failed to leave behind it the usual calamitous trail of fatalities, as if old atropos with her great bared teeth had decided to put aside her shears for a day. There was, however, no shortage of blood. Bewildered, confused, distraught, struggling to control their feelings of nausea, the firemen extracted from the mangled remains wretched human

bodies that, according to the mathematical logic of the collisions, should have been well and truly dead, but which, despite the seriousness of the injuries and lesions suffered, remained alive and were carried off to hospital, accompanied by the shrill sound of the ambulance sirens. None of these people would die along the way and all would disprove the most pessimistic of medical prognoses, There's nothing to be done for the poor man, it's not even worth operating, a complete waste of time, said the surgeon to the nurse as she was adjusting his mask. And the day before, there would probably have been no salvation for this particular patient, but one thing was clear, today, the victim refused to die. And what was happening here was happening throughout the country. Up until the very dot of midnight on the last day of the year there were people who died in full compliance with the rules, both those relating to the nub of the matter, i.e. the termination of life, and those relating to the many ways in which the aforementioned nub, with varying degrees of pomp and solemnity, chooses to mark the fatal moment. One particularly interesting case, interesting because of the person involved, was that of the very ancient and venerable queen mother. At one minute to midnight on the thirty-first of december, no one would have been so ingenuous as to bet a spent match on the life of the royal lady. With all hope lost, with the doctors helpless in the face of the implacable medical evidence, the royal family, hierarchically arranged around the bed, waited with resignation for the matriarch's last breath, perhaps a few words, a final edifying comment regarding the moral ed-

ucation of the beloved princes, her grandsons, perhaps a beautiful, well-turned phrase addressed to the ever ungrateful memory of future subjects. And then, as if time had stopped, nothing happened. The queen mother neither improved nor deteriorated, she remained there in suspension, her frail body hovering on the very edge of life, threatening at any moment to tip over onto the other side, yet bound to this side by a tenuous thread to which, out of some strange caprice, death, because it could only have been death, continued to keep hold. We had passed over to the next day, and on that day, as we said at the beginning of this tale, no one would die.

It was already late afternoon when the rumor began to spread that, since the beginning of the new year, or more precisely since zero hour on this first day of january, there was no record in the whole country of anyone dying. You might think, for example, that the rumor had its origins in the queen mother's surprising resistance to giving up the little life that was left to her, but the truth is that the usual medical bulletin issued to the media by the palace's press office not only stated that the general state of the royal patient had shown visible signs of improvement during the night, it even suggested, indeed implied, choosing its words very carefully, that there was a chance that her royal highness might be restored to full health. In its initial form, the rumor might also have sprung, naturally enough, from an undertaker's, No one seems to want to die on this first day of the new year, or from a hospital, That fellow in bed twenty-seven can't seem to make up his mind one way or the

other, or from a spokesman for the traffic police, It's really odd, you know, despite all the accidents on the road, there hasn't been a single death we can hold up as a warning to others. The rumor, whose original source was never discovered, although, of course, this hardly mattered in the light of what came afterward, soon reached the newspapers, the radio and the television, and immediately caused the ears of directors, assistant directors and editors-in-chief to prick up, for these are people not only primed to sniff out from afar the major events of world history, they're also trained in the ability, when it suits, to make those events seem even more major than they really are. In a matter of minutes, dozens of investigative journalists were out on the street asking questions of any joe schmo who happened by, while the ranks of telephones in the throbbing editorial offices stirred and trembled in an identical investigatory frenzy. Calls were made to hospitals, to the red cross, to the morgue, to funeral directors, to the police, yes, all of them, with the understandable exception of the secret branch, but the replies given could be summed up in the same laconic words, There have been no deaths. A young female television reporter had more luck when she interviewed a passer-by, who kept glancing alternately at her and at the camera, and who described his personal experience, which was identical to what had happened to the queen mother, The church clock was striking midnight, he said, when, just before the last stroke, my grandfather, who seemed on the very point of expiring, suddenly opened his eyes as if he'd changed his mind about the step he was about to take, and didn't die.

The reporter was so excited by what she'd heard that, ignoring all his pleas and protests, No, *senhora*, I can't, I have to go to the chemist's, my grandfather's waiting for his prescription, she bundled him into the news car, Come with me, your grandfather doesn't need prescriptions any more, she yelled, and ordered the driver to go straight to the television studio, where, at that precise moment, everything was being set up for a debate between three experts on paranormal phenomena, namely, two highly regarded wizards and a celebrated clairvoyant, hastily summoned to analyze and give their views on what certain wags, the kind who have no respect for anything, were already beginning to refer to as a death strike. The bold reporter was, however, laboring under the gravest of illusions, for she had interpreted the words of her interviewee as meaning that the dying man had, quite literally, changed his mind about the step he was about to take, namely, to die, cash in his chips, kick the bucket, and so had decided to turn back. Now, the words that the happy grandson had pronounced, As if he'd changed his mind, were radically different from a blunt, He changed his mind. An elementary knowledge of syntax and a greater familiarity with the elastic subtleties of tenses would have avoided this blunder, as well as the subsequent dressing-down that the poor girl, scarlet with shame and humiliation, received from her immediate superior. Little could they, either he or she, have imagined that these words, repeated live by the interviewee and heard again in recorded form on that evening's news bulletin, would be interpreted in exactly the same mistaken way by millions of people,

and that an immediate and disconcerting consequence of this would be the creation of a group firmly convinced that with the simple application of will-power they, too, could conquer death and that the undeserved disappearance of so many people in the past could be put down solely to a deplorable weakness of will on the part of previous generations. But things would not stop there. People, without having to make any perceptible effort, continued not to die, and so another popular mass movement, endowed with a more ambitious vision of the future, would declare that humanity's greatest dream since the beginning of time, the happy enjoyment of eternal life here on earth, had become a gift within the grasp of everyone, like the sun that rises every day and the air that we breathe. Although the two movements were both competing, so to speak, for the same electorate, there was one point on which they were able to agree, and that was on the nomination as honorary president, given his eminent status as pioneer, of the courageous veteran who, at the final moment, had defied and defeated death. As far as anyone knows, no particular importance would be given to the fact that grandpa remained in a state of profound coma, which everything seems to indicate is irreversible.

Although the word crisis is clearly not the most appropriate one to describe these extraordinary events, for it would be absurd, incongruous and an affront to the most basic logic to speak of a crisis in an existential situation that has been privileged by the absence of death, one can understand why some citizens, zealous of their right to know the truth, are asking

themselves, and each other, what the hell is going on with the government, who have so far given not the slightest sign of life. When asked in passing during a brief interval between two meetings, the minister for health had, it is true, explained to journalists that, bearing in mind that they lacked sufficient information to form a judgment, any official statement would, inevitably, be premature, We are collating data being sent to us from all over the country, he added, and it's true to say that no deaths have been reported, but, as you can imagine, we have been as surprised as everyone else by this turn of events and are not as yet ready to formulate an initial theory about the origins of the phenomenon or about its immediate and future implications. He could have left the matter there, which, considering the difficulties of the situation, would have been a cause for gratitude, but the well-known impulse to urge people to keep calm about everything and nothing and to remain quietly in the fold whatever happens, this tropism which, among politicians, especially if they're in government, has become second nature, not to say automatic or mechanical, led him to conclude the conversation in the worst possible way, As minister responsible for health, I can assure everyone listening that there is absolutely no reason for alarm, If I understand you correctly, remarked the journalist in a tone that tried hard not to appear too ironic, the fact that no one is dying is, in your view, not in the least alarming, Exactly, well, those may not have been my precise words, but, yes, that, essentially, is what I said, May I remind you, minister, that people were dying even yesterday and it would never

have occurred to anyone to think that alarming, Of course not, it's normal to die, and dying only becomes alarming when deaths multiply, during a war or an epidemic, for example, When things depart from the norm, You could put it like that, yes, But in the current situation, when, apparently, no one is prepared to die, you call on us not to be alarmed, would you not agree with me, minister, that such an appeal is, at the very least, somewhat paradoxical, It was mere force of habit, and I recognize that I shouldn't have applied the word alarm to the current situation, So what word would you use, minister, I only ask because, as the conscientious journalist I hope I am, I always try, where possible, to use the exact term. Slightly irritated by the journalist's insistence, the minister replied abruptly, I would use not one word, but six, And what would those be, minister, Let us not foster false hopes. This would doubtless have provided a good, honest headline for the newspaper the following day, but the editor-in-chief, having consulted his managing editor, thought it inadvisable, from the business point of view as well, to throw this bucket of icy water over the prevailing mood of enthusiasm, Let's go for the usual headline, New Year, New Life, he said.

In the official communiqué, broadcast late that night, the prime minister confirmed that no deaths had been recorded anywhere in the country since the beginning of the new year, he called for moderation and a sense of responsibility in any evaluations and interpretations of this strange fact, he reminded people that one could not exclude the hypothesis that this was

merely a fluke, a freak cosmic change that could not possibly last, an exceptional conjunction of coincidences impinging on the space-time equation, but that, just in case, the government had already begun exploratory talks with the relevant international organizations to enable the government, when necessary, to take efficient, coordinated action. Having uttered this pseudoscientific flim-flam, whose very incomprehensibility was intended to calm the commotion gripping the nation, the prime minister ended by stating that the government was prepared for all humanly imaginable eventualities, and determined to face with courage and with the vital support of the population the complex social, economic, political and moral problems that the definitive extinction of death would inevitably provoke, if, as everything seemed to indicate, this situation was confirmed. We will accept the challenge of the body's immortality, he exclaimed in exalted tones, if that is the will of god, to whom we will always offer our grateful prayers for having chosen the good people of this country as his instrument. Which means, thought the prime minister when he finished reading the statement, that the noose is well and truly round our necks. Little did he imagine how tightly that noose would be drawn. Not half an hour had passed when, sitting now in the official car taking him home, he received a call from the cardinal, Good evening, prime minister, Good evening, your eminence, Prime minister, I'm phoning to tell you that I feel profoundly shocked, Oh, so do I, your eminence, it's an extremely grave situation, the gravest situation the country has ever had to confront, That's not what I

mean, What do you mean, your eminence, It is utterly deplorable that when you wrote the statement I have just listened to, you failed to remember what constitutes the foundation, the main beam, the cornerstone, the keystone of our holy religion, Forgive me, your eminence, but I can't quite see what you're driving at, Without death, prime minister, without death there is no resurrection, and without resurrection there is no church, Hell's bells, Sorry, I didn't quite hear what you said, could you say that again, please, Me, no, I said nothing, your eminence, it was probably some interference on the line caused by atmospheric electricity, by static, or even a problem with reception, the satellite does sometimes cut out, but you were saying, your eminence, Yes, I was saying that any catholic, and you are no exception, must know that without resurrection there is no church, more than that, how could it even occur to you that god would ever will his own demise, such an idea is pure sacrilege, possibly the very worst of blasphemies, Your eminence, I didn't say that god had willed his own demise, Not in those exact words, no, but you admitted the possibility that the immortality of the body might be the will of god, and one doesn't need a doctorate in transcendental logic to realize that it comes down to the same thing, Your eminence, believe me, I only said it for effect, to make an impression, it was just a way of rounding off the speech, that's all, you know how important these things are in politics, Such things are just as important in the church, prime minister, but we think hard before we open our mouths, we don't just talk for talking's sake, we calculate the long-term

effects, indeed, our specialty, if you'd like me to give you a useful image, is ballistics, Well, I'm very sorry, your eminence, If I was in your shoes, I'd be sorry too. As if estimating how long the grenade would take to fall, the cardinal paused, then, in a gentler, friendlier tone, went on, May I ask if you showed the statement to his majesty before reading it out for the media, Naturally, your eminence, dealing, as the statement did, with such a very ticklish subject, And what did the king say, assuming, of course, that it's not a state secret, He thought it was fine, Did he make any comment after he'd read it, Excellent, What do you mean excellent, That's what his majesty said, excellent, Do you mean that he, too, blasphemed, Your eminence, it is not up to me to make such judgments, living with my own mistakes is quite hard enough, Well, I will have to speak to the king and remind him that in a confusing and delicate situation like this, only faithful, unswerving observance of the proven doctrine of our holy mother church can save the country from the dreadful chaos about to overwhelm us, That is up to you, your eminence, that is your role, Yes, I will ask his majesty which he prefers, to see the queen mother forever dying, prostrate on a bed from which she will never again rise, with her earthly body shamefully clinging to her soul, or to see her, by dying, triumph over death, in the eternal, splendid glory of the heavens, Surely no one would hesitate over which answer to give, Probably not, but, contrary to what you may think, prime minister, I care less about the answers than I do about the questions, notice that our questions have both an obvious objective and a hidden intention,

and when we ask them, it is not only so that the person being questioned gives the answers which, at that moment, we need him to hear himself saying, it is also in order to prepare the way for future answers, A bit like politics, your eminence, Exactly, except that unlikely though it may seem, the advantage the church has is that by managing what is on high, it governs what is down below. There was another pause, which was interrupted by the prime minister, I'm nearly home, your eminence, but if I may, there is one question I would like to ask you, Ask away, What will the church do if no one ever dies again, Never is too long a time, even when one is dealing with death, prime minister, You have not, I feel, answered my question, your eminence, Let me turn the question back on you, what will the state do if no one ever dies again, The state will try to survive, although I very much doubt it will, but the church, The church, prime minister, has grown so accustomed to eternal answers that I can't imagine it giving any other kind, Even if reality contradicts them, We've done nothing but contradict reality from the outset, and yet we're still here, What will the pope say, If I were pope, and god forgive me the ridiculous vanity of imagining such a thing, I would immediately issue a new thesis, that of death postponed, With no further explanations, The church has never been asked to explain anything, our specialty, along with ballistics, has always been the neutralization of the overly curious mind through faith, Goodnight, your eminence, see you tomorrow, God willing, prime minister, god willing, Given the

way things are at the moment, it doesn't look like he has much choice, Don't forget, prime minister, that beyond the frontiers of our country, people continue to die as normal, which is a good sign, That depends on your point of view, your eminence, perhaps they're viewing us as a kind of oasis, a garden, a new paradise, Or a new hell, if they've got any sense, Goodnight, your eminence, I wish you a peaceful, restoring night's sleep, Goodnight, prime minister, and if death does decide to return tonight, I hope she doesn't think to visit you, If justice is anything more than an empty word, the queen mother should go before I do, Well, I promise I won't denounce you to the king tomorrow, That's very good of you, your eminence, Goodnight, Goodnight.

It was three o'clock in the morning when the cardinal had to be rushed into hospital with an attack of acute appendicitis which required immediate surgery. Before he was sucked down the tunnel of anesthesia, in the fleeting moment that precedes a total loss of consciousness, he thought what so many others have thought, that he might die during the operation, then he remembered that this was no longer a possibility, and in one final flash of lucidity, he thought, too, that if, despite everything, he did die, that would mean, paradoxically, that he had vanquished death. Filled by an irresistible desire for sacrifice, he was about to beg god to kill him, but did not have time to formulate the words. Anesthesia saved him from the supreme sacrilege of wanting to transfer the powers of death to a god more generally known as a giver of life.