

An Invitation to Suicide

FARIS AL-TIMIMI

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An Invitation to Suicide

The lesson of this story cannot be found in the events; rather, it is hidden within the behavior and values of those creating the events.

The best stories do not end—they continue and repeat throughout time.

Faris Al-Timimi

Dedicated to those who have been disenfranchised,
those whose will has been stolen, and those who are
forced to obey the will of others.

The Depressing Morning

In the morning, Bob opened the door of his home to go outside, shuffling hesitantly. This was not how he usually left home to go to work at his company.

Normally he would exit aggressively, stepping vigorously and seriously, but today he came out as if strong hands were preventing him from going any farther. Bob headed toward his car, which was parked in the driveway in front of the garage door.

He opened the car door and sat behind the steering wheel, his mind absent and shattered. He hesitated for a few moments before starting the engine, which was something else he was not used to. He slowed his movements, for he did not really want to go to the office; at the same time, he was driven by a strong desire to explore what was happening outside of his home. Bob wanted to learn more comprehensively about the events.

He turned the key to start the engine. A few seconds later, he pressed the radio button to try to listen to the news. Bob did not

usually listen to the news in his car.

He did not recognize the news frequencies on the radio, so he kept changing stations, trying to find one of the news channels he was familiar with. His attempts did not seem to provide him with what he was looking for.

Then he thought that maybe it was better to turn the radio off again, to enjoy the tranquility of the drive as he set off on his way to his office.

Everything around him that morning seemed bleak. The air seemed heavy and saturated with moisture, although the sky was almost clear. Only a few white clouds were scattered here and there, suspended and swimming in a clear blue sky.

Such a scene would appear like a morning full of promise and happiness to anyone else. That morning Bob did not see it like that, but he realized that it had nothing to do with what he felt right then. The truth was the gloom he was experiencing was internal, caused by what was going on in the news and also perhaps because of the actual events around him. It was nothing more than a coincidence and had nothing to do with the exotic “call”—the invitation to collective suicide.

He was not one of those who believed that nature should respond with gloomy weather when people decide to behave badly or when they committed a crime against themselves or others.

He had frequently experienced times when some transient phenomena might follow a particular event occurring sometime, somewhere. But it turned out that such phenomena were, in

reality, nothing but abstract coincidences.

Men only tended to pay attention to such coincidences when going through difficult times, mentally occupied by shocking events. Hence the mistaken belief that everything happened because of, and related to, said event.

This mistaken belief was also because man had always believed that he was the center of the universe, and everything that happened around him was related to him and meant to be for him.

Bob was always realistic and pragmatic in his way of thinking and living. Since he'd reached maturity, he realized that life was not going to stop or care because of anyone's decision to go left or right. Life would never change its direction, even if millions of people for any reason decided whether to live this life or not.

At the start of his trip to the office, driving the streets of his upscale neighborhood, it seemed to him that today the luxury homes were more silent and rigid than normal and seemed devoid of their usual luster, elegance, and beauty.

The streets of the compound were lifeless, or at least that's how they seemed to him, but that might have been due to his particular depression that day because of the bizarre news.

When he reached the end of the street, he turned right to merge onto the main street, which he took five days every week when driving to his office.

He began to look right and left, driving at a slower speed than his customary speed on that street. It was not teeming with traffic

and people heading to work, like it was last week. The street did not look as clean as it used to, or maybe that was how he'd imagined it.

In fact, nothing was the same as it used to be. Only a few things still looked normal. The early-morning coffee and donut shops and some fast food services seemed to be open, but they did not seem to have as many customers as usual. Maybe they were not fully staffed, or perhaps their owners were serving customers. Some of the gas stations displayed Closed signs.

Bob did not know what life on the street had looked like over the past four days because he hadn't left home for the past four days; he had a cold. He had not left home since last Thursday.

Street scenes and street life seemed to have changed considerably, as far as Bob was concerned or as he perceived them. Many people obviously did not leave their homes, or maybe they stayed in somewhere, somehow.

Some of them might have thought staying indoors was a form of solidarity with the advocates of the call.

Perhaps some of them were waiting for more specific information, more clarity, so they could express their opinions and base their positions on better understanding. And some of them probably decided to pause for a moment of introspection to consider what was going on in their lives and to make up their minds about the call. Finally, some couldn't, or maybe did not dare for other reasons, respond to the call.

But the fact was many despised the invitation and those behind it simply because they enjoyed comfortable, prosperous

lives. They had no objections to the call's way of functioning. It did not cross their minds to give up their lives or to sacrifice any aspect of them while they were enjoying life to the full.

All of these expectations and perceptions conflicted in Bob's mind. His thoughts contributed to his lack of focus on much of what appeared before him and what he saw on the street.

He thought for a moment that it was not wise to leave home today, to go out before it became clearer to him what was happening in this big city where he lived, but he couldn't wait any longer.

He was the kind of person who used to take charge of events and explore the reality of things by himself. He never liked to sit back and wait for others to tell him what was going on or their interpretation of things.

That was how he lived his life. He considered his keenness and interest in his way of living the main factors in his success in work and life.

Many old memories and perceptions inspired his imagination. Many of those images were from his past, his personal life, and family life, Nicola, his wife, and his son Jonathan and daughter Josephine, who lived their own lives independently. He also remembered his three grandchildren, the luxurious lives available to him and his family compared with the lives experienced by others. That might explain why people rejected their lives and called for this collective suicide.

He recalled his younger years, when he began his business operations, struggling to achieve economic and social status

above the level he was living. The success he'd achieved was far more than he'd dreamed of and expected.

Yes, he was a fighter, struggling and patient, but he was also fully aware that what he had achieved in business and work was not due only to his own capabilities. Most of his success was achieved through the creativity and efforts of those who worked with him from the beginning and then later worked under him, including many who were still working for him in his company.

But their lives had never changed or improved from what they been years ago.

He was fully aware that life did not always reward everyone who worked hard, and it might even crush a lot of hard-working, creative people. He was certainly aware and believed that a lot of luck and opportunity were also involved in success.

It was clear that this was not an invitation advocated by a religious group, or at least that was what Bob believed. It did not seem to be based on religious principles or motives promoted and planned by previous religious cults and clans throughout the last four or five decades, which ended in their believers' suicides.

It was not, apparently, a call based on faith or ideology. It was well known that believers and advocates of ideologies would never think of abandoning their permanent quest to earn as many life privileges as possible, even if it prolonged the deprivation of them, no matter how seriously they claimed that they did not pay attention to personal benefits. This was not what they believed in, not what they worked for in their lives.

So who could be making this public invitation, which was perhaps the strangest call in the history of mankind?

These many memories, concerns, misgivings, and perceptions kept circling in his head while Bob drove slowly, trying to identify the variables in the street on his way to his office. Questions continued to spin in his head.

Are they the communists?

Or maybe they consider themselves socialists?

Or are they leftists?

Indirectly, they are calling for it.

There have been a lot of hidden, mysterious, obscure intentions and plans that accompanied calls for communism and maybe even socialism. Could this possibly be one of them?

Or is it a capitalist plan?

Capitalists always manage to get by in the difficult crises.

Is it those who often create crises in order to rebound afterward, with more financial interests and benefits? That happens repeatedly with stock exchange crashes and recoveries that then go to higher levels without anyone really understanding a convincing justification for the decline or the rise!

All this, and much more, continued going on in his mind, to the extent he almost hit a running dog. He was not used to seeing pets running astray, like this dog running loose in the streets in this high-end side of the city, where he had been living for several years, where typically only rich people lived.

In the Office

Finally, Bob reached the building where his office was located. He headed toward the underground gate, toward the parking lot entrance, and soon a new thought entered his mind.

What if the gate does not respond to the remote key? What will happen then?

But this worry quickly dissipated once the door responded and opened as usual.

He sighed with relief, brightening up when he saw it was still working as usual. Then he thought that his fear was excessive and unjustified.

He drove in the underground parking lot until he reached his parking spot. He switched off the engine and sat for a few minutes, contemplating, looking forward through the windshield from inside the car, in the parking lot, where there was actually nothing significant to be seen.

He was a bit reluctant to proceed to the next step, which was heading to the office.

He looked like his mind was shattered, as if he were trying to

focus on what was going to happen after he got out of his car.

He noticed the parking lot was not full. There were still many empty spots, which was rare at this time on a Monday morning.

He wondered where the car owners were who usually used these now-vacant parking spots. He was almost certain the reason was related to the strange call, but that was not his main concern now.

He had to go to the elevator.

He was keen to do that, yet apprehensive at the same time.

He wanted to see who had come to the office as usual and who hadn't.

At the same time, he was worried whether the elevator would work as usual.

If the elevator did not work, he would have to go up the stairs to the fifty-sixth floor of the building, where his office was located, and he didn't think he could.

Bob thought to himself,

My God, we never think about how much time and effort is needed to maintain all the things we live with and use.

How many people are in the background, running many things that we take for granted?

He arrived, his pace unusually slow, reluctant, at the six elevators gates. The first thing he looked at were the elevator lights, which were illuminated as usual. That meant the elevators were likely working as usual, or so he hoped.

He pressed an elevator button, and one of the doors opened quickly, as if the elevator were waiting for him; no one had used

it for at least a few minutes. He entered the elevator and then pressed the button for fifty-six. The door closed. Then the lift started to move up, without stopping at any of the floors on the way. Bob followed the rise of the elevator at its usual speed and hoped it wouldn't suddenly stop for any reason.

It did not take long before the lift reached the fifty-sixth floor. The door opened.

Bob walked out into the corridor in front of the elevator doors and then walked along the corridor that led to the office.

He did not meet any staff from the other companies that shared the floor and did not see any visitors.

Normally he saw many visitors, but it was very quiet today, far more than usual, or that's how it seemed to him. He did not care much for the quietness in the long corridor, and he wished his feet would reach the office quickly.

He reached the outer door and opened it. He went straight to his office, passing the group of small open-plan offices separated by glass barriers. He turned his eyes toward them to see who was there. He saw only two staff members; ten employees normally worked for him at the head office. He greeted them remotely. "Good morning."

Both employees returned the greeting.

He noticed his secretary, who was usually there waiting for him, was not there this morning.

His concerns increased, but he did not show anything when he greeted the two staff who were sitting in their small offices.

He didn't see the cleaners who would normally be cleaning

the offices at this time of day. This morning he saw no one. Could it be just another coincidence?

He entered his room, took off his jacket, threw it on one of the chairs, and went to the desk chair. He sat down, trying to relax. He leaned his arms on the desk, intertwining his fingers, and looked toward the door, his mind obviously far away. He could not focus his mind on any particular thing.

He did not feel the desire to switch on the computer or the TV. He was trying to calm the indescribable feelings and obsessive thoughts he had never experienced before.

It seemed a big problem, or that was what he thought. Maybe other people thought the same, but he had not yet discovered or guessed what a serious impact it could have on society.

What could the call inflict on him and his company and the future of his family?

To what extent could it be real?

And how long would it last?

Was it a local call, or did it cover the entire country?

Or maybe it was an international call, as some media suggested?

He turned to face the wide window and looked out to the distant horizon, obscured by the many high-rise buildings.

He felt that, in spite of their grandeur and prestige, there was no sign of life or activity in them.

In fact, the whole scene did not look normal.

It looked frozen, devoid of any movement at all.

Maybe because it was not easy to identify things from this

towering height, he couldn't easily see any details of people from this altitude, perhaps because he did not pay attention to details. Maybe he had not been concerned about that kind of detail when he had previously observed from this elevated position.

How can a person decide to sacrifice and give up his life, to willingly end himself?

It is really a difficult thing to imagine.

But isn't this what we know as suicide?

Isn't this the same thing we have heard of since time immemorial?

I know that it was probably a sacred act for some people and tribes in the past. People who had been defeated chose to do it of their own free will.

Indeed, they saw it as a matter of honor.

But what had happened to make such a call appear in this day and age?

Bob thought the modern world was remote from such ideals as honor and dignity, which were once held in such high regard.

Indeed, such values received mockery, rejection, and disrespect from most people.

Suddenly, there was a slight knock at the door. It opened quickly.

A confused but serious-looking middle-aged woman quickly apologized for being late.

It was Christine, his secretary and office manager.

Bob quickly responded and stood up, as if he had been eagerly waiting for her arrival. He told her not to worry about being late. He seemed relieved that she had come to work.

He asked her to take a seat. He walked from behind the desk to approach her, waiting eagerly to hear her answer, any answer, to his question.

“What is happening?”

He had been pondering the question for some time, and he had waited for her arrival and the right moment to approach her with it.

It seemed he wanted to hear her answer, any answer.

But she responded by repeating her apology for being late and insisted on mentioning the reason for her delay in detail. She explained that she'd had to take her son and daughter to school by herself, because the school bus had not turned up. When she arrived at the school, she'd found a few parents standing outside the school building, waiting with their children, trying to find out whether the school would open or not, whether the teachers would come in or not.

But in her opinion, it seemed that nothing was guaranteed, so she decided not to wait too long and took her children to her mother's house, at the other end of the big city. This was the reason for her delay.

But it was clear that her confusion was not only because of the delays. Apparently, it was much more than that.

It was evident from her confusion and reluctance and hesitation when she described what had happened that she was

really frightened. There were other more important things on her mind, probably dangerous things.

Bob asked her why she looked so troubled and confused, but she assured him there was nothing wrong.

However, he was almost certain that she was upset and he kept on encouraging her to focus her attention and respond to his question.

So he asked again,

“What is going on outside, I mean in the city?”

He was talking about the call for collective suicide and who could be advocating for it.

He thought he might be able to find out from her something about those people who believed in it and expected it to be carried out.

Were there people who might be prepared to implement it?

It was important for him to know how much she knew about this call for suicide.

That was because he saw her as important in his daily life; she belonged to the middle class, and perhaps also the poor class.

She had a serious and a committed personality. She had worked hard as his office manager for almost eight years, and he knew she was very ambitious for her husband and children. She put up with inconveniences and difficulties in her daily life because of her family's economic situation and their limited financial resources.

Many other unanswered thoughts revolved in his head, some

relatively simple.

“You know I don’t care about or believe what is published in the newspapers and other media, which is why I don’t remember many details about the basis of this call and how seriously it should be taken.

“You know that the week does not end without us reading and hearing many sensational headlines in the newspaper, TV, the Internet about political statements, corporate news, and the stock markets, and I don’t pay it much attention, or even believe 1 percent of it.

“If I believed everything that was said, I don’t think I could’ve built this corporation.” As he said it, he pointed to his office and the other small offices that comprised his company.

Christine replied,

“Yes. Yes, I know that.”

She started stuttering again. She was bewildered and couldn’t continue talking.

He held her, trying to help her focus. It was the first time he had held her, but he felt he had to because she was on the verge of collapse.

She, in turn, did not care and was not surprised that he was holding her, but she asked him to let her sit down to recover.

He took her to one of the chairs and asked if she would like some water.

He seemed confident that her unusual state was because of the call, so he gave her his full attention to see what would she

say.

She hesitated, ashamed to ask her employer for something, but it was clear that she was suffering terribly mentally, and that made it easy for her to ask him for a cup of water. She would not normally dare ask for that; she had always been very content.

Bob rushed to the refrigerator in his office and fetched a small bottle of water. He opened it and gave it to her. She thanked him, took it, and rushed to drink a quick and confused sip. Then she looked in the direction of the big, broad office window, still holding the water bottle.

She muttered quietly,

“I can’t believe it...”

He noticed what she said and anxiously responded,

“What is it that you can’t believe?”

She answered,

“I cannot believe he means what he says, and that he can do it!”

She still gazed into the distance, her face growing paler, her eyes terrified. It was as if she were looking at a fixed target, but there was no target.

Bob repeated his question.

“What is it that you cannot believe? Who you are talking about?”

“John ... John, my husband...”

She stammered her reply and turned her head toward Bob, about to burst into tears.

Then she once again looked through the wide window and

appeared terrified, as if she had lost her mind.

She was clearly terrified of something serious.

“What is it John wants to do?”

Bob asked in a surprised tone.

She replied,

“He wants to go with those people!”

“What people?”

He responded a bit sharper and tougher this time, as if he had discovered an important thread in his attempt to solve the mystery about the cult of people who were following the call.

Then he grabbed her again and shook her as she sat in the chair, in order to get her to pay attention and focus.

He was still keenly awaiting her answers and was expecting her to speak up clearly and promptly, just like she used to do in her job.

Bob was always like this, a practical man who believed that time should not be wasted on stuttering and mumbling, especially when the subject was already ambiguous.

He was desperate to find out as much as possible about this issue.

Then she recovered and said,

“He, I mean John, believes he should support this call. He says there is no point in living and no benefit we can expect from this life ... Can you believe it?”

Bob was shocked to hear this. Terrified, he replied,

“Can I believe what? Which call does John want to follow?”

What life you are talking about? What exactly are you saying?

“Do you mean he wants to go with those people the media are talking about, those who do not want to live any more, those ones who are preparing for suicide, like the stupid and ridiculous ones who lose their minds and commit suicide! The ones who kill themselves with explosives in order to kill other innocent people, believing they are sending a sacred message, a message of delusion, a message of faith, that they will soon go to another world, a better world, a world of delusion and faith, a world which does not exist anywhere, apart from their own imaginations and delusions?”

Bob continued his passionate narrative as if he were actively arguing or debating with one of those people, the ones who were preparing to commit suicide for ideological reasons.

Christine returned to her confused state, again looking at and through the wide windows, while Bob continued his words about what he thought of those people, trying to reassure her that it was just the sick imagination and misconception of those people, that it could not be transformed into reality. He did not know how or why she believed it.

But he suddenly realized that he had not given her the chance to talk so much as he had talked about the deluded people and their call. He noticed that she was agitated again, which told him that she had not really listened to his criticisms of those who were calling for suicide.

He had not given her the opportunity to continue and finish, so he turned to her in order to get her attention back. He realized

that he didn't know much about John, because he had never bothered to ask her about him before.

He remembered that he had met John only briefly on one or two occasions when the company invited the employees and other guests to small receptions to celebrate successful deals or commercial business achievements.

It could be that John was a religious person who believed in such superstitions.

Or maybe he was suffering from an illness or psychological condition?

A lot of people had clearly been affected like that in recent years.

It might also be that Christine had exaggerated the situation in her own mind, and so her reaction was also exaggerated.

It could also be the result of a personal problem between Christine and her husband.

Any of this could be true...

However, he thought back to what he had heard about the call yesterday when he was watching TV news about the people who were calling for the collective suicide. Some TV channels had alerted viewers that they might be short-staffed because a lot of the young staff members and technical workers had announced that they intended to participate in the call, either as observers or perhaps by actually committing suicide.

However, some would just follow the news and maybe meet the people who were actively involved by attending their gathering.

He also remembered what he'd heard last night in a press report—that this audacious call was open to anyone who wanted to accept, adopt, or implement it.

It would be left up to each individual person to choose the time and method of execution, and that was what made him and his wife, Nicola, stay up late last night before they went to bed.

But they had barely managed to sleep because of the horror of what was going to happen and how widespread the call might be.

My God, how could I misunderstand or forget this?

Images started to pass before his eyes, reminding him of how it was when he'd woken up in the morning, how difficult it was to get up because he did not sleep well. He'd seen that his wife, Nicola, had woken first when he went down to the ground floor and found her standing in the kitchen, leaning on the kitchen counter, looking as if she were deep in thought.

She absentmindedly held her coffee mug in her hand when he greeted her and asked if she had had enough sleep.

She didn't answer his question but responded by asking him, or maybe asking herself,

“Could something like this really happen? Is it possible we could see another Oklahoma? Or a new September 11, of our own free will this time? This time, will it be announced in advance on the TV and in the papers? Where are we going?”

And Bob replied,

“It seems we are going to see something new this time. The last few years were eventful, and they are still impacting on us. But now we must consider the unthinkable. All the same, we

must now hope this is just a nightmare!”

Yes, it was really serious, and he knew it, was convinced of it. So how come he tried to appear normal before his secretary, Christine? He'd assumed his usual managerial persona of knowing more than she knew!

He knew what a serious time it was and believed it would carry on, even more unimaginable now. It was very likely that Christine knew more than he did, but maybe the information she had through her husband was what he needed and would like to know now.

Again he turned to her and pulled his chair closer to her, trying to comfort her and find out what she knew about this thing, particularly through her husband, who was not only listening to the call, like most others, but supporting it.

That meant he must know a lot more about it.

He grabbed her gently this time and tried to regain his composure. But he couldn't hide his keenness and desire to get an answer.

“What does John say? Did you say he wants ... or do you think he was thinking of responding to the call—I mean the invitation of those people?”

He pointed his hand unconsciously toward his office door, and she quickly responded and turned her head toward the door, as if she had been terrified, alarmed about something.

She whispered a soft, scared voice.

“Whom do you mean by ‘those people’? Do we have any of them here in the company?”

He quickly replied,

“No, no, no. I didn’t mean a particular person here. I don’t know any of them. But it’s possible that we might have one or maybe more than one ... I don’t know now ... Did you notice a lot of our employees didn’t show up today as usual?”

Then she said,

“No, I didn’t pay any attention when I entered the office. I just wanted to come and see you and explain why I was late. I didn’t notice whether people were in their offices or not, I mean our staff...”

She stopped for a moment. Before he could interrupt her, she went on.

“Every one of them could have had his own reasons, as I had my reasons for being late. I’ll go out now and see who is in.”

He pushed her shoulder to keep her sitting there.

“Don’t. It doesn’t matter now. Leave it for later.”

She interrupted.

“It will only take a minute. I can see if anyone who did not come in has left a message on the answering machine.”

He wanted to keep her there.

“Don’t. Just leave this matter for now. Let’s go back to what you were saying about John...” Then he was silent for a moment and looked into her eyes, as if he was certain for the first time that he knew someone who believed in the call. He went on to ask her about John.

“Do you really think John means what he says?”

She rushed to interrupt him, even though she was distracted

and unable to control her movements.

“He means what?”

Bob replied,

“I mean, do you think he means what he says about his belief in the summons of those people who want to end their lives?”

This time he avoided pointing toward the door.

She responded quickly and confidently,

“Yes, yes. I think he meant what he said to me.”

Then she added,

“I know John means what he told me, and I know he has his own reasons.”

Bob interrupted her, disapproval in his voice.

“His own reasons?”

“What do you mean ‘he has his own reasons’?”

“What reasons could he have to make him prefer death to life?”

“I mean suicide!”

“How could he leave you and your two beautiful children? I’ve seen their pictures on your desk!”

Christine suddenly broke down in tears.

Bob did not know what to do to calm her so she would continue talking to him, particularly now that they were both getting to the heart of the matter.

He tried to comfort her in any way he could, but it was clear that she was crying because of profound, very sensitive reasons. Seconds later she stuttered, staring at his face in a way he could

not comprehend or explain.

“What have they done wrong? They are innocent children...

“They don’t understand or know good from evil. How can this be fair?”

Bob quickly interrupted.

“What children? Do you mean... ”

He struggled to remember her children’s names. After a few seconds’ delay, he came up with two names that seemed closest to their names.

“Do you mean Sarah and Danny?”

She quickly corrected the names.

“Susan and Tommy, my only two children.”

She knew he did not know their correct names.

“Yes, yes, of course. I’m confused, I’m sorry. “What about your children? What is it to do with them? What will they do with all this chaos going on?”

He finished, waiting for her answer, but she was still distracted, holding her head in her hands, staring at the floor, as if she has just received terrible news.

He asked her the same thing again, saying her name twice to get her to take notice.

“Christine, Christine.”

She responded to his entreaties and turned her head toward him, silently trying to focus her eyes on his face.

He noticed a strange look on her face, which he did not really understand.

However, he calmed down when he thought she was focused

on him. She would probably be able to give more specific answers.

She spent a few moments in abstracted silence before she answered.

Her answer was a terrible shock!

“John believes it would be better for me and the kids to accept this call, like him!”

She started shedding tears again and tried to not to emotionally collapse in front of him. But she couldn't control herself, and he could do nothing this time.

What she said had stunned and overwhelmed him to such an extent that he couldn't respond.

He was speechless and didn't know what to say to her.

Was it possible that she was not serious, or could she be temporarily hallucinating?

Would he ask her first if she was really serious about what John said to her?

But before that he needed to know if she was convinced that John would carry out his threat, and if she believed what he intended to do or not. However, he had definitely discovered from their conversation the fact that, basically, John really believed in the alien, bold call to end life. Otherwise, he would not have invited his wife and their two children to join him on his ill-planned trip into the unknown.

All these questions passed at lightning speed through his mind, just like when thoughts flash through minds during

life-threatening moments, such as when one is about to face death.

Bob had experienced that feeling of helplessness more than once, like the time when he was about to drown in a swimming pool or when he had a horrific traffic accident after he had fallen asleep while driving and the car had crashed and turned.

He couldn't stop himself from following this terrifying train of thought and was distracted for several moments, until Christine broke into his reverie by asking him a question that reached his ears like an echo coming from a far distant place.

“Do you think he is right in what he thinks?” This time she was the one asking a question, and he was the one who was lost in his thoughts.

Her question took him by surprise, as if it had been aimed at and asked of thousands of successful people like him, people to whom life had been kind, always smiling and giving them everything they ever wanted.

Her question was knocking on the doors of every one of those successful people, expecting a response.

He turned to her after a while and responded with a question of his own.

“Whom do you mean?”

“What do you mean by ‘is he right’?”

“What is right, and in what respect? Don't tell me you are asking if John's behavior is right when he is thinking of ending his life.

“You certainly realize that someone like me cannot support this ridiculous, absurd idea of suicide. I cannot endorse or justify any suicidal ideas, whatever the motives and circumstances!”

She interrupted him:

“Even if the alternative is an eternal life of servitude to others?”

Quickly and firmly Bob replied,

“Yes, yes, yes!”

But he soon took account of what she had just said, and he turned toward her, bearing in mind her explanation,

He sharply repeated her words.

“Even if the alternative was an eternal life of servitude to others?”

“What do you mean by that?”

He hesitated a bit, and then went on.

“I think we are talking about a serious subject, and we really have to talk calmly and clearly. I think it’s important to know each other more and to understand what we are talking about.

“I can’t hide that our conversation has confused me.”

She tried to interrupt him by apologizing, but he stopped her, more firmly this time.

“No, you don’t need to apologize. An apology cannot help here, as it won’t change anything. You are not mistaken. You didn’t say anything wrong to me, so you don’t have to apologize.”

She apologized to him again, but out of politeness and in a

more friendly tone, but he continued.

“I think we need to reappraise ourselves from time to time about many things, especially those that we take for granted!

“I definitely think we should do that. I think it’s better to say that I believe in this. We take for granted that parents are devoted to their children, but today I have heard about a father who tried to convince his wife to take their two children into the unknown. What kind of unknown?

“An unknown that can only be attained through the ultimate sacrifice, a willingness to give up life!

“A decision that cannot be changed once it has been made!

“I am sure we always used to believe that it is a natural human instinct to cling to life, whatever difficulties we may face.

“Today, we are contradicting this basic human characteristic by expecting people to willingly sacrifice their lives.

“How many illusions we once believed in do we still accept?

“How many parents have killed their children for imaginary, mythical, and stupid reasons? Although it’s possible that some of them were suffering from psychosis or depression.

“This has happened more than once in our society. I don’t think we have done enough to stop such events.

“I think we’re going to discover lots of things we were dealing with every day without knowing what they are. I think one day soon we’ll find out how much we insist on a lot of things.

“We should admit our ignorance and not forget this when we establish the rules for our lives.”

He spoke as if he were frantically babbling to himself. He was aware of this and tried to speak more normally.

“I think we need to take the opportunity to rest and relax a bit now. Time has passed by very quickly, and it is almost lunchtime.

“What do you think about sneaking out to have lunch at my usual restaurant and look on today as a day off?

“I think we have done a lot of business in the past few weeks, and today I think we have discovered a lot of things which we did not previously know, or so it seems.

“So a day off and a lunch break could help us recuperate and maybe find a solution to the problem John is experiencing. Maybe we can get him to change his mind.”

Although she was listening to him, she did not comment and was clearly still worried.

But she did not hesitate to look at him with a faded smile when she heard that he was interested in what John was going through and hoped he might find a solution to the problem.

Bob was a person with both personal and financial power who could do things she, or any of her family members, could not do.

She also felt somewhat relieved when she heard what he said about helping John, as well as his inviting her to have lunch with him at his favorite restaurant (one of the finest restaurants frequented by businessmen, especially at lunchtime, where they discussed deals).

She knew very well that she would never have another

opportunity to go to such a restaurant. She would not even dare to think about it.

Lunch there would easily cost more than she could earn in two or three working days in her position as director of his office.

Although she was overwhelmed by her worries, she came back to her senses when he told her to get ready to leave for lunch.

She replied,

“I need to go to my desk quickly to check what has happened. I haven’t been in the office for the last three days.”

He replied,

“Yes, take your time, but don’t be late. Anything related to work can wait. I feel tired of everything today. I don’t want to check anything related to work.”

She listened to his words with surprise and amazement, as he had never spoken about work this way before today. He always used to say that work gives life meaning. Of course, he meant the intended course of his own life; if not for his job, he would not have felt that his life had any meaning.

He didn’t know how he would be able to live when he was retired, which was a few years away, when his health was no longer burdened with work and worrying about serious things and decision making.

Christine answered him positively and quickly headed toward the office door. As she reached out to open the door she remembered that she should call the restaurant to book a table for two.

She turned toward Bob and asked him, as she usually did, whether he wanted to book a specific table. But he replied,

“No, don’t call. I don’t need to call to reserve a table this time. I basically want to go out today. If there is no table for us at the restaurant, then lunch in any of the fast food places would not be a bad idea.”

She was shocked by his reply. If she called the restaurant herself to book a table for two without asking him, she was certain she would enjoy lunch in the upscale restaurant *La Paupiette* instead of in a booth at a fast food kiosk.

After he noticed the shock on her face, she heard him say,

“I’m only joking. But I really don’t want you to call them this time, because I want to do things differently today. Anyway I don’t think the restaurant will be fully booked, especially today.”

She agreed and opened the door, heading toward her office. She felt pessimistic because of how she had seen people behaving today, which made her think that perhaps the restaurant would not be as ready today to receive its customers as usual.

Such places usually consist of interactions between two contrasting groups, representing the two sides of social and economic life, living together in what seems to be a very rich city.

It rarely shed light on the other side of the equation, without which life could not carry on in this city, which was represented by the lesser partner in this social contract, those carrying out all the tasks and services necessary for the maintenance of rich people’s lives.

It was probably the first social contract that was agreed upon between the two parties since the dawn of civilized human life, although it had not actually been signed, as was the case with all other contracts.

However, it managed to endure throughout the ages, more than any other contract in the history of mankind.

She went to her office and felt that she had begun to scrutinize the sights and sounds around her, which she would normally take no notice of.

Oh my God, why am I thinking like this now? Why it is only now that these things are crossing my mind? I didn't ever take any notice of them before.

She asked herself these questions as she entered her office.

Christine felt the need to sit on her desk chair for a few minutes to regain her composure; she did not pay attention to anything else in the office.

She didn't even feel the desire to check telephone answering machine or listen to the messages. She just sat awkwardly on the chair. She couldn't relax as she had hoped.

Bob stood at the wide window in his office, gazing into the distance, ignoring the towering skyscrapers that tried to distract him and make the horizon itself seem insignificant and not worth looking at.

Memories and images of his past life started to resurrect and struggle to restore his memory. They were mainly about how he had managed to succeed through his long, difficult journey, struggling and taking risks, devoted only to his work, until he

had reached his current position.

He did not consider it the pinnacle of his achievements and still felt there was more to achieve.

He did not want to risk it all, so he believed that he had to constantly persevere and work hard by pursuing good relationships with people who he would not normally associate with or even want to know. Otherwise he could face ruin!

He found life tiring and boring in many respects because of all the effort, fatigue, and suffering. He reflected that his life could have been much more fun if he had not been so career-oriented.

If a strong person like him, who enjoyed an enviable social position, as well as having great financial resources and work knowhow, still needed to exert himself further just to maintain his strength and prestige, when would he finally be able to feel satisfied and reassured that someone else might not dictate to him?

Was that ever going to be possible?

And what about the billions of vulnerable people who did not have a fraction of what he owned?

How did those people feel?

Bob knew a lot about such feelings.

He went through several very difficult periods early in his life and remembered how often he was forced to make decisions he would never make if he were to face similar situations again today.

He was fully aware that the power he gained then was what

qualified him today to do as he pleased and not feel obliged to do something he did not wish to do.

But it didn't seem to be the same thing now. Now it was becoming increasingly difficult, after all these years, and life was no longer providing reassurances to anyone.

All his individual achievements could be demolished.

This did not just apply to Bob but to anyone who had spent all of their life accomplishing things.

And how much more difficult must it be for others who experienced difficulties achieving things?

Apparently, it was like the deadly gladiator contests created by the Romans in the days of their great civilized empire when tyranny was its main feature. At festivals and important celebrations, slaves were forced to fight each other to the death for the amusement of their leaders. Yet the winner did not necessarily survive for long.

Yes, the winner would enjoy life for a short while, maybe a few days, but, ultimately, he was dragged away to die a slow and painful death through brutal, inhumane crucifixion.

Wasn't it ironic, Bob thought, beyond ridiculous, an irony we still live with today, after more than two thousand years—even though we pretend that we have advanced on our long humanitarian journey nothing has changed.

It was undoubtedly ironic that the state we built cannot prevent, or, rather, does not want to care about the demise of big elephants. So why would it be interested in caring for small mice?

Isn't the suffering we endure in order to maintain what we have achieved and our well-being a modern form of crucifixion?

A crucifixion of the victors, who would eventually remain hanging between earth and sky and don't know when they'll fall.

Christine did not sit for long on her office chair.

She sat tensely, not relaxed, because she was overwhelmed by the incursion of sad, melancholy thoughts that had been monopolizing her consciousness because of what John had been talking about.

However, she switched her attention to looking forward to the coming hours, when she was hoping to escape from the horror of her nightmares. She was going to have lunch with her employer for the first time at that upscale restaurant.

She had never thought she would one day become one of its customers.

At the same time, she felt that she would not be capable of fully enjoying it as much as she should because her mind was full of the terrifying thoughts going around in her head that she could not forget, even for a few minutes. She didn't feel like she wanted to get up, return to Bob's office, and then set off for the restaurant, even though she very much liked the idea of going there for lunch.

She turned the answering machine on, which seemed to have recorded a number of interrupted calls. Many callers had not left any messages, which she interpreted as meaning nothing was serious or urgent. But some of the company's employees who

were unable to get into work had left messages saying they might be a bit late, for the same reason as she had given.

She turned off the machine, glad that no one had left an important message, as she did not want to have to deal with anything urgent at this time.

Then she remembered that she should look round the office to see who was at work and who was not. She saw only four, and she did not know or care to know if there were others who might be on lunch break.

She waved her hand to greet the four, who were sitting at their desks, facing their computer monitors. She smiled a slight, shallow, and fleeting smile, which might not have been observed behind the glass separating the offices from the corridor. Those who saw her responded in the same way; those who didn't see her continued focusing on their computer screens and seemed indifferent to their surroundings.

She took no notice because she was busy thinking of what was most important to her. Nor did she care who was in his office and who wasn't, as she didn't know exactly what kind of work they did or whether they were supposed to be in the office or working in the field.

The company's business, which was financial, economic, and investment studies, allowed the employees the freedom to decide where and how they carried out their assigned studies.

Each of them was given a certain time period to do their work. The employee could spend hours or maybe even days working from home rather than in the office. When they completed their

project, they normally received an additional bonus on top of their usual monthly salary. This policy had been adopted by many big companies in the fields of finance and economics. However, despite the fact that she was not concerned about that, only out of curiosity she still wanted to know who had and who hadn't responded to the ill-fated call.

On the Way to the Restaurant

Bob and Christine exited from the parking lot. The street was not as crowded as usual on a weekday. She sat beside him; he was driving, as planned. He did not say a thing. He still seemed to be in a state of disbelief about what he had heard from Christine—not that he thought she was lying, but he was troubled by what her husband wanted to do because of his beliefs about suicide and also over what it took to do that.

It obviously needed great strength to overcome the barrier of fear and stick to life. At the same time, a person must have greatly deteriorated psychologically and be experiencing a sense of defeat and frustration to contemplate suicide.

He would have never believed it, if it were not Christine who had told him about it. Even though the thing had not yet happened and John was only in the initial stages of thinking about it, it was an explicit declaration of the rejection of life.

It was a total rejection of life when life did not respond to the basic needs, wishes, and aspirations of the individual.

But what were those ambitions?

Would people really be ready to sacrifice their lives without achieving them?

Wasn't this full of meanings that mixed and blended together material values with moral values?

But isn't life the most important thing man possesses?

Christine had been quiet since they had entered the elevator and descended from the office to the car park in the basement.

After he had driven the car a short distance down the street, she decided to break her silence by asking him a question, which caught him by surprise.

Her entirely surprising and unexpected question was, "Bob, do you believe in God?"

He had never been asked this question before, at least not as far as he could remember.

People generally assumed that the vast majority believe in the existence of God, in spite of the fact that people disagree with each other in terms of the importance of this "God" and his place in their lives, their careers, and personal behavior.

But faith was a big title that encapsulated and painted the atmosphere of society from the outside.

It was a surprise question, and he pushed his back against the car seat, as if he wanted to feel stronger by supporting his back in order to be able to absorb the impact of this surprise.

Before he could answer her unexpected question, he realized

that his office manager was thinking deeply about the events. He had thought she was only concerned about general everyday matters, as most people are.

Bob was not a simple-minded person, and he had an idea what she was hinting at with her unexpected question.

He remained silent for a few moments, as if he were searching his mind to come up with an appropriate answer to the sudden question. He exhaled from the depths of his chest before answering, keeping his eyes on the road ahead of him.

“I thought I was a believer, but now I’m not so sure...”

He turned his head to the right to look at her for a moment and then continued.

“Perhaps I should add this issue to the many other issues I need to reexamine, to make sure that I feel sure about what I really think.

“I know it will not be easy, and probably it would have been easier if it happened twenty years ago, or maybe longer.”

She asked,

“Why are you not sure now?”

“I don’t know. Maybe because I’m not sure of many things right now! It seems to me that everything has to be reexamined in order to make sure of its truth.”

Christine answered,

“Maybe you’re right. We may have inherited a lot of things

that we accept every day in our lives. We did not create them, nor did we choose them or discover which is better when we compare them and ask which one would have been better for us.

“Isn’t that right?”

“In fact, we only choose a few of the things which we live by in our daily life.”

He answered with a nod of his head, clearly admiring her remarks while trying to focus on the road in front of him.

He thought to himself,

It seems Christine has the ability to think outside the box, which is something that many people cannot achieve, although I was not aware of this before. Is this because of the strange times we are living in, or does it always exist, waiting for the opportunity for it to appear? It is not easy to find out, at least at this time. The answer to this will have to be added to the many other unanswered questions around us at the moment.

Then she said,

“If we say we really believe in God, why do you think he created us?”

Christine still looked confused and distracted.

He answered her after a short period of silence.

“I thought I knew that, but now I’m not so sure.

“I really don’t know much about this. I don’t know anything.

Maybe we have to ask ourselves this question on a daily basis, until we find a satisfying answer, if that is possible, although I'm confused now."

"Why do you doubt it now?"

"Because I think we should be ready to accept the results, whatever those results may be. The answer we get might not be palatable or might be something we do not like to face.

"Or, maybe, powerful people, the elephants of this world, might not like to face the answer, although weak people obviously cannot change anything in the equation of their daily lives.

"Since the dawn of urbanization, mankind has built their lives and laws according to what they believe. These beliefs are what created fear in them. By this I mean faith because of fear, or fear itself, is what people think is the reason for our presence in this world.

"I think this was one of the first principles that mankind believed in. Don't ask me why mankind has prioritized this terrifying matter!

"Even if I was certain, it would be painful to state it frankly.

"This is particularly true if it reveals that the origin was nothing but nonsense based on myths invented by men thousands of years ago to explain their lives and fears. I've heard about ancient civilizations, when people were keener to build houses of worship than building houses for themselves.

"Don't you see how silly, in fact stupid, people would find it if we were to do that now?"

“Personally, I do not think the ‘Lord’ needs houses where he is to be worshiped more than desperate people need homes to live in.”

She did not answer the question; she continued looking ahead, as if preparing to ask him another question.

And soon came, her question.

“Do you think God loves us? I mean, loves all of us? I mean, does he love us equally, just as I love Susan and Tommy?”

“Didn’t they teach us, I mean in church, that we are the children of God? And that he loves us all? I am not very religious, but I know that...”

He liked what he heard in her question, and he took the opportunity to inject some fun into the serious subject they had been discussing for hours.

“I think we should address this question to the agents of the Lord on earth! There are so many of them around. But before we ask them, we’ll have to demand ID and ask them to present proof to verify their agency and to make sure that their agency, if they have any, is still valid and has not been abolished.

“That is, of course, if the Lord had really issued them any agency!

“Aren’t we living in the twenty-first century, when one cannot claim anything without proof? Otherwise he must accept whatever the consequences could be.

“The most likely consequence, first of all, would be to be

indicted and taken to court!”

Then Bob laughed, a light and gloating laugh, which seemed to symbolize his disregard for someone, although it was not clear who it could be. He tried to stifle it by saying,

“It is undoubtedly going to be the issue of this modern age.

“In fact, it is the issue of the whole of history, the fraud, the scam that has been inflicted on billions of people, people of all races, the scam that went on for thousands of years and has claimed the lives of millions of people.

“Illegitimate agencies, based on different theological beliefs, have claimed to have been appointed by the most powerful force in the world!”

As he spoke, his smile grew broader. After warming to his new idea, he realized he could inject some light relief into a dark, serious topic.

His smile had almost turned into laughter, which he tried to stifle more than once, and then he added,

“You know, it will be a lot of fun when we call those agents of the Lord and demand the documents and evidence to be validated to prove their agencies.

“Perhaps we should demand compensation, for all the damage and insanity caused by the internecine religious wars and fighting throughout history, when they formed armies for their wars from people who did not understand the reality of things or the real reasons for those wars.

“But they were only affiliated and driven by naive motives and ignorance!

“Most of those wars were meaningless and corrupt.

“Shouldn’t they be on the same side, if they were honest with themselves, as they claim that they are the agents of the Lord, and reach an understanding in a more civilized way, instead of resorting to wars throughout history that cause the death and destruction of millions of unfortunate human beings?

“Poor, dear humans, we really are the sheep of the Lord.

“The only difference is that when we are slaughtered as a result of those wars, there will be no beneficiary of our deaths except a handful of evil people. The only things that will benefit from our meat are the worms of the earth!”

In the Restaurant

Finally, they reached the restaurant. Things were not they usually were at that time of day. Bob didn't see any valet parking staff, who were usually waiting at the restaurant entrance to take customers' cars to the restaurant parking lot.

He stopped at the restaurant entrance and then got out and went to see what was going on. It was clear the restaurant was open as usual, but none of the valet parking staff were waiting outside.

Christine waited in the car and did not know what to do.

Bob entered the restaurant to meet the maître 'd, Estefan, whom he knew. Estefan actually looked rather confused. Bob asked him why there was no valet parking service.

Estefan apologized, faltering, and said that things were somewhat unusual today. Some of the workers had not shown up. He assured Bob that he himself would take the car to the restaurant parking.

Bob returned to ask Christine to go with him into the restaurant. So joined him, and they headed to the restaurant door.

Inside the restaurant there were many unoccupied tables, and while they were waiting for Estefan, Bob invited Christine to sit at one of them. He liked the location. When Estefan returned and saw they had already chosen a table, he went over and, in the tone and manner of an adroit sycophantic salesman, said,

“Sir, you have done very well with your choice. I hope you like this table ... I was going to suggest it to you!”

As usual, Estefan was carrying the food and drinks menus; he began to detail the particular dishes the restaurant was offering. He normally did this for special customers, whose tastes he knew well.

Bob asked him not to worry about it now, because they would choose something they liked from the menu. Estefan replied,

“Excuse me, sir. Perhaps today is different from other days. That is why I tried to make it easier and clearer. We haven’t got everything on the usual menu. The meat and vegetable suppliers who supply fresh produce every day could not provide our usual order. As you know, sir, we are keen on the quality of the produce that we use for our customers.

“Also two *sous chefs*, who assist our head chef, did not show up today, and therefore, unfortunately, the head chef alone, even with others helping him in the kitchen, will not be able to prepare all the dishes our restaurant is known to offer and which we are famous for providing. I am very sorry, sir, but it is beyond our ability to control.”

Bob replied in a wondering tone,

“What’s going on? Why do you think the *sous chefs* did not

show up today?”

Estefan answered,

“Sir, it is not limited to the *sous chefs*. As you can see, many other workers didn’t show up. We cannot say for sure why they didn’t come in today, but it’s a really serious, dangerous situation. When you consider the reason, I really don’t think I can apologize for it.”

Bob interrupted to ask again,

“Why do you think it’s such a serious and dangerous situation?”

Estefan answered,

“Because they didn’t give us a reason why they didn’t come to work.”

Then Bob asked him,

“Do you think this has anything to do with this call? You know what I mean.”

Estefan answered,

“Yes. Yes, sir. Certainly some know a lot about it, but I am not one of them ... Estefan sighed.

“I know enough about it to be annoyed by it, but I don’t want to be a cause of inconvenience to you, sir, or interfere with your need to have a restful, relaxing time. We will try to do what we can in this difficult time to please you.”

Then he said that they could choose anything from the menu, forgetting, either accidentally or deliberately, that he couldn’t provide all the dishes. He went over to other customers who had been waiting for him to finish with Bob so that they could be

served.

Bob turned to Christine, who had been listening silently to Estefan's words, and he asked her very seriously,

“Did you know it was that worrying?”

“Yes. That's why I suggested we call before we came.”

“Yes, maybe we should have called, but I was not ready to change my plans because of an event like this.”

“Do you mean you think it's just an unimportant thing?”

“No,” said Bob. “It's certainly very serious and important, but I'm still trying to understand how it is going to affect everyday life.”

“You must be kidding. How can you possibly not imagine how much this will affect daily life? I don't believe you're serious. Are you just grilling me for information?”

“No, no. Maybe I didn't choose the correct expression. I myself saw many serious signs of the impact of this thing this morning, but I still think—and I could be wrong—that it won't last long. It will not actually go on to the serious stage where people start carrying out the ultimate demand. What do you think?”

She stayed silent for a few long seconds before her answer came.

“I hope you're right that this call does not last more than a few days, but I personally think that is not accurate. I don't want to say it is wrong, because we could all be wrong when it comes to what will happen in the future. When we talk about the future, we talk about mere expectations. Events are, therefore, receptive

to all possibilities.”

“You’re right, but I often think that such a place cannot be influenced by this kind of event.

“This is a place visited by people who do not complain about injustices in the world because they are the movers and shakers in the world, both in terms of the government and the way in which services are provided for everyone else.

“I think they’re all happy in their jobs here, which is why I don’t believe they’ll contemplate ending their lives.

“I don’t think they would support such an idea.

“You, yourself, saw it in Estefan’s behavior. I’ve known him for many years, since he started his job here—”

She interrupted him with a smile tinged with amazement.

“I don’t know why it has only just occurred to me, but you’re only thinking of one side of this complex issue. You ignore, or perhaps don’t care about, who is representing the other sides.

“I’m sure you’re aware that these people—” and she pointed to those who were sitting at the tables behind them, assuming that he was referring to them when he said they did not complain about injustice in the world—” these are not really the ones who actually affect change in the world.

“I’m sure they do many things, probably more than I can count, but certainly, in order to live the lives they love, they need millions of people to provide services for them, and those are the people we do not openly see.

“They only move behind the scenes.

“Such people could be good or bad when they do things they

feel are important to them or anyone else who might be interested in inviting them or pushing them to do it!”

Bob quickly interrupted her, smiling and trying to improve the atmosphere.

“I believe I have a communist manager in my office!

“But that doesn’t matter, as long as she does not refrain from frequenting places like this restaurant, which communists usually don’t approve of, and she is loyal to the company where she works.”

She replied,

“You know I’m not a communist, or even a socialist. I don’t really understand much about politics or economics.

“I know how to manage the household budget, although balancing our monthly income and our expenses can be difficult. I’m not ashamed to say that I feel helpless sometimes about which things I should prioritize each month, especially if there are sudden bills I need to pay before other ones.

“I don’t think those people—” she gestured slightly at the other diners—” live with the same money worries as me or other less well-off people—”

He interrupted her quickly.

“Why do you point at them, when you have one of them in front of you?”

She hastened to apologize.

“I am sorry to have spoken like this. It was a slip of the tongue. It’s not what you think...”

“I didn’t take it badly. You’ve spoken the truth. I needed to

hear it from you.”

And then he suddenly snapped at her.

“Do you want to be like them? I mean, do you want to live their life?”

“Of course, I would like to be like them. How could I be honest if I said otherwise? I think everyone like me, or maybe even people who have a bit more than me, would love to live like them.

“I can only explain it by saying how difficult I find it to cope with life’s problems and the compromises I have to make to survive!

“We sacrifice a lot—a lot of what we would rather keep. Perhaps, sometimes, we may even sacrifice our feelings...

“And we always have to be happy about the sacrifice. In fact, we have to consider the sacrifice and service we offer to others as our inevitable destiny.”

Bob asked,

“Do you mean, in other words, you would like to swap places with me?”

This question surprised her, and she replied with a shy smile that revealed boldness and courage at the same time.

“Yes, but not exactly—I want to remain a woman!”

She laughed louder than normal, and he laughed with her. It was the first time they had laughed together since the morning.

But then she suddenly remembered her husband and two children, and she quickly calmed calm down.

She was also brought back to her senses by a question from

Estefan; the *maitre'd*, wondering if they had opted for something from the menu.

He directed the question to both of them, and they realized that they had not even looked at the menu.

Bob quickly responded,

“Estefan, as you have said that not everything on the menu is available today, why don’t you suggest the best of what the chef can prepare for us?”

“Also, please could you select a bottle of your finest red wine for us.”

Happy with Bob’s response, Estefan said,

“I hope we will meet your high expectations, sir.

“I’ll tell the chef to prepare his best dish. It will not take more than twenty minutes, perhaps half an hour at most, due to today’s special circumstances.

“The fine wine will be on your table within minutes.”

There wasn’t anything about this day which Bob could consider regular.

In fact, things had not been normal since last night.

The streets were almost empty.

The hours he had spent at the company had not been usual.

The restaurant was not the same as he’d expected to find at a time like this.

And, most of all, Christine was not the same person at all today.

He had known her since she had started working for him more

than eight years ago. She was approaching her thirties when she started the job she held as his personal secretary and office manager. She carried out her work seriously and consistently and well deserved her job.

But today, she seemed as if she had been hiding a great ability to scrutinize things.

She did not seem to take things at face value, and she was trying to make the right choice.

These ideas kept going round in his mind while he was taking his first few sips of wine, which had been brought to the table by the waiter without him even noticing who brought it. His mind wandered, occupied with his thoughts rather than caring about the concerns of those around him.

Christine took advantage of Bob being distracted to look around the restaurant lounge.

She gazed at various things, trying to enjoy her time as best she could, and examined her surroundings even though she was still feeling terribly stressed, which prevented her from fully enjoying the distinctive sophistication and luxury of the restaurant.

She peeked at the diners sitting at the other tables whenever she could. There were not many women among them, and those who were there seemed older than her.

She thought,

They have never had to think or worry about anything serious.

None of them have suffered any of the problems that my family has had to face.

They definitely didn't have to face the financial hardship I did when my husband was out of work for months.

But, at the same time, she was not so superficial as to imagine that these ladies did not have problems of their own, although they might seem trivial compared to her own problems.

Her feminine intuition told her that women would always be concerned about beauty and age, no matter how much money they had at their disposal.

Many questions swirled round in her mind, one after another.

That lady who is sitting alone at her table in that far corner, she looks as if she's in her mid sixties, maybe older.

Could she be waiting for someone to join her?

I don't know, but she doesn't look like she's waiting for anyone.

She's always looking at the other tables, like someone who isn't busy with anything. And she takes very small sips of her glass of wine, which has been in front of her since we arrived, without any noticeable change.

We've talked about many issues. We talked with Estefan, and she's still sitting alone. It's not difficult to see how bored she looks. Could she be a businesswoman, or she is just a rich woman who is passing her time here?

If how much this lunch must cost doesn't mean much to her, then her time must also be of no value to her!

How must life taste to a lady like that?

If I had some of her financial power, what would I rather be doing?

What am I saying?

How am I supposed to know how much money she has or what her financial capabilities are?

How can I think about that when I don't even know her?

But why shouldn't I?

Isn't her wealth obvious in the elegant, expensive clothes she is wearing, as well as the brilliant diamond ring on her finger, which is reflecting the light of the candle in front of her on the table?

She must be one of the regular customers of this restaurant, which is why everything seems so familiar to her.

Hold on—stop it, Christine.

You've been carried away. You don't even know how your family is going to be today or tomorrow!

Bob interrupted her musings by suddenly asking her,

“Then I can assume, based on what you said, that all those who work for me would like to be in my position if they could, at least with respect to the company and its proprietors. Because it's true what you said—it's clear that it doesn't need a reason. They would be stupid if they didn't want to be in my place ... Isn't that true?”

“Isn't that what you meant?”

Christine replied,

“That’s not exactly what I meant ...

“Maybe I wasn’t clear or didn’t choose the right words.

“I think it varies from person to person. Probably there are some who would like, right now, to take over your position, or maybe even take it from you by force if they could.

“But there are also others who are grateful to you because you gave them a job at a time when there was high unemployment.

“However, the most important part of all this for you is that you will probably not be able to distinguish between these two groups.

“I think that this was what was probably on your mind, maybe not explicitly. I’d say *probably*.”

“I don’t know what I can say about that. It really isn’t the most important thing on my mind right now.”

“Do you really think that?”

“I mean, I believe I help my employees by giving them work. Isn’t having a job a good reason not to envy me my position? At least that must be true for some of them, if not all of them!

“I cannot imagine that they all harbor feelings of envy or hatred toward me! There’s no reason...

“Maybe some of them believe they are better at my job than I am and might think they can replace me if they get the chance!”

Christine replied,

“What you are doing by giving good jobs to your employees is certainly more than enough for some people, but even if you doubled what you do to help, it would not be enough for some people!

“They hate to see anyone who is enjoying a position better than theirs, in every sense of the word.”

Bob agreed.

“So this means solving the problem is not only up to me.

“It obviously needs a response from me, but others should get involved in order to help everybody.”

She interrupted him.

“I don’t think it will be as easy as we might imagine.

“You are talking about a situation that is more akin to the situation in *Plato’s Republic*, a fictional republic, as far as I know. According to the simple information I understand, this republic, which did not exist, maybe, most probably, will not exist!”

Then he interrupted.

“Why do you imagine that?”

“I am only talking about cooperation between myself and the employees of the company in order to work together honestly in a genuine, friendly way for the common good.”

“If we are to speak frankly, we must say that the company is *you!* And the employees are working for you and your best interests, first and foremost.

“The company provides them with nothing but an opportunity to work with features and advantages that differ from one to another. I hope you will forgive me for my candor. I am not one of those we meant by those who represent the side of rejection or dissatisfaction.

“I believe you know that I am content with what I have, and it

has never occurred to me to occupy your position.

“Yes, it is true and undeniable that I envy you your position and your potential, but I don’t want, and never thought I should try to take over, any of your responsibilities. Maybe another woman who has a personality and character different from mine might do that.

“I am being honest when I said that, and not just as a joke, I wanted to stay a woman.”

And she smiled a broad smile.

But this time he did not share a smile with her. He seemed to be seriously thinking about what she had said.

“What do you think I can do to change the way people look at me, and how can I develop and increase their cooperation with me?”

Christine replied,

“I’m sorry to have brought up subject you’ve found so difficult. I am also sorry to say that you probably can’t change anything.

“I don’t think you should try to do anything to change the way people think about you. This hasn’t been caused by these people, or because you can’t change them. It’s because of who they are.

“They cannot provide you with any better service than they are now.

“I’m pretty confident that they are working to the best of their abilities, as far as they can. This is not based on their love for helping you but because they want to strengthen their positions in the company to achieve the rewards they anticipate.

“I personally think that the way things are progressing is right and fair. Maybe not the fairness and justice that many of them see as true justice, but it is the best you can actually reach with them.

“I’m sorry I brought up this annoying issue, but you didn’t really seem to be accepting it.”

Bob replied,

“No, it had occurred to me, but not so clearly. I’m glad you mentioned it. I don’t know why we didn’t talk about this before.

“Do you think I should alter my approach and try another way of dealing with the situation in the company? I don’t mean my personal behavior but administratively, so that I can deal in good faith with the employees’ concerns. Do you think that could be possible?”

Christine thought for a moment.

“I don’t know exactly, because I don’t think people are equal, whether you look at their thoughts, their abilities, their feelings—everything.

“I’m sure you feel the same. You can see that means I’m definitely not a communist, or even a socialist!

“I actually believe that people are born good or evil, and there isn’t much you can change. Yes, you can probably change some things superficially, but you certainly can’t change human genes.

“Aren’t scientists now saying that all human features, emotions, and even susceptibility to diseases, like obesity, which afflicts people in rich nations, is genetically determined? Do you think your words or a change in management style can alter the

genes of the company's employees?"

"I only wish I could change some of my genes, to make myself feel less anxious and less responsible for others!"

At last the waiter brought two large plates, each of them containing what looks like a piece of fish surrounded by a decorous mixture of neatly coordinated vegetables.

Christine smiled when she saw it and kept looking. Estefan stood by the waiter to provide the name and nature of the dish, together with all the details related to it.

He picked up the bottle of wine to refill Bob's glass, which was almost empty. But Christine's glass was still more than half full; Bob noticed that she had not drunk much. She said that she was not used to drinking wine at lunch and only normally drank wine in small quantities with the evening meal, when she was at home.

Bob had already drunk more than half the bottle but still managed to retain his focus.

"All right. Let's see what Estefan has chosen for us. "Far from the literal description of this dish, let's taste what might be behind this piece of salmon and what might be special about it. I don't think I've had salmon for lunch for at least two or three years.

"But what's wrong with it today?"

"Everything that is happening around us today is new or, at the very least, something I've never been used to before."

He then turned to talk directly to Christine. She was listening

to his commentary on the fish dish, holding her knife and fork in her hands. She took some of the vegetable garnish, beginning her exciting adventure with the salmon.

As usual, she felt that she had to assign a certain budget in case she wanted to buy it from the market. It was far more expensive than other food items.

She also knew a plate of this kind in a distinctive restaurant like this one was beyond the boundaries and limits of her daily expenses.

It might even exceed the pockets of all the rest of the staff who worked with her.

Then Bob said,

“It looks very attractive and delicious. We know what salmon tastes like, but I won’t know before I taste it what new characteristic the head chef has added to its taste.

“Do you think those celebrity chefs who work in the high-end dining establishments will be able to continue to offer more dishes that provide different tastes? Or will they would stop someday because they can no longer continually innovate new dishes?”

“Maybe they will just change the garnish or presentation without actually changing the taste...”

She replied in an infinitely simple way, without hesitation.

“I don’t know ... I must say that I am completely ignorant of the subject of cooking and the skills of these chefs in inventing new forms of cuisine.

“Actually, the basic raw ingredients have not changed, and,

as far as I know, nobody has managed to add a new material to the list of substances that people eat.

“It’s true there are people living in different parts of the world who eat substances we don’t eat, or, should I say, we don’t eat now, but, perhaps we will need to eat them one day in the future!”

Bob was listening to her with great attention, as if he were meeting and speaking to her for the first time. This woman, who was middle-aged, entered his service about eight years ago, and it was becoming clear to him that he was discovering new things about her that he hadn’t imagined. Her knowledge was general and no more than average, and what she knew had probably been picked up from watching TV. It might not have been the intention of those programs—shallow entertainment shows to provide general, simple, scientific information—to educate people, but they were.

However, if someone wanted to seriously use his mind, he could easily analyze the information and form a convincing and logical argument that no one could contradict or refute. She said that one day we might run out of food resources and that we would actually have to eat things that we don’t eat now.

It’s true that we already eat food from all around the world that a hundred years ago we would never have thought of eating.

Aren’t we now eating strange things in exclusive Japanese sushi restaurants?

These dishes include parts of creatures that we never ate before that perhaps we never imagined we were ever going to eat

one day.

This was the meeting of cultures and different civilizations and what they brought with them.

Suddenly he heard her voice directing a question at him.

“Is it true what I heard a year ago, I’m not sure when, but not long ago—that a passenger plane crashed in a mountainous area covered with snow and the passengers who survived had to eat the flesh of the passengers who died in the accident in order to survive? Did that really happen, or was it made up? Was it exaggerated and fabricated by the media?”

He replied,

“Yes, it really happened, but I don’t remember when or where either. I’m pretty sure that the incident happened somewhere in the mountains of South America. Maybe we could find out the details on Google, but I personally would rather not know about such barbaric behavior so I retain a more dignified image for mankind.

“This whole event was absolutely disgusting, and I can’t imagine that people would enjoy reading about a tragic event like that. We have become accustomed to reading about wars and killings in history, as well as these days.

“We have heard about the killing of millions of people but not about humans eating the flesh of other human beings. Apparently we’re used to reading or listening to news of murders, whether in ordinary crimes that happen anywhere or the mass killings that happen in wars.

“This is mostly because we have opened our eyes, and we know that wars are facts and that the murders are also facts.

“Murder is what necessitates fear.

“We have created a lot of fear inside the human soul—fear of what might happen in our lives and, perhaps, even more fear of what might happen after this life.

“This is what we see in a baby when he is afraid of strangers, even though they do not want to hurt him. He is naturally afraid of them just because he is not used to seeing them.

“He is never afraid of his parents and the family members he is familiar with. I think it’s very similar to animal behavior. Ultimately, fear is the main determinant of human and animal behavior.

“But we have added another layer to it because of our constant fear and uncertainty about the future and fear of what might happen after the end of this life.

“Of course, animals never have to think of this!

“Did you know that man might be the only creature in this world who kills creatures of his own species for reasons unrelated to survival? Some of the reasons might be banal and have nothing to do with having committed a crime or offense. This occurred in historical times in many countries, including in the West. It still occurs now in countries around us when one man kills another one because of disagreements about beliefs or ideas. There are many countries that have established tough laws to severely punish those who disagree with the principles and beliefs of those who run the state, and most of those punishments

are death penalties. They pronounce them without hesitation. These countries are still members in the United Nations, which is supposed to be sponsoring the principles of basic human rights. It is said that Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights ensures the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion.”

He stopped talking for a few moments and then continued, full of irony and sarcasm.

“What is this conclusion I have come to? It seems as if I have let my thoughts run away with me today. This is the first time it has happened to me and confirms that today is a different day from all other days.

“But you did not tell me what John thinks will happen to the world if he actually carries out his threat, along with everybody else who thinks it is better for them to finish their lives in collective suicide.

“Oh—as well as that, what are his beliefs? Does he believe in an afterlife that is better than this life?”

She interrupted him, as if she had not heard.

“Do you think it is easy for the people to eat the flesh of other people? I have heard that some of remote tribes in Africa are commonly still doing, just like some people in Asia eat monkeys and dogs! Even though I know it’s really happening, I can hardly believe that people can eat dog meat, as we consider dogs to be almost like family members. And monkeys are very close to human beings, whether you believe in the theory of evolution, or not.”

Bob noticed that she had avoided answering his question about John by returning to her former topic. He didn't push her to answer and continued with the thread.

“I think it is a cultural issue linked to time and place. If we were born in a country where its people were accustomed to cannibalism, we would certainly do the same; if we were born in countries where people ate monkeys and dogs, we would also do the same. We are always influenced by our predecessors.

“It would be very unusual for someone not to inherit cultural morals from their parents, even though they might reject them later in life. Some may believe their ways are best, however, and insist on trying to make others believe in them.

“People always imitate each other. Very few of them are able to innovate new ways and methods of doing things. Hence, people often admire and are very interested in anything new, even if they are not really worth admiration. The simplest examples I can suggest would be Elvis Presley or Michael Jackson. They were from two different music and dance genres and were not preceded by anyone performing in the same style. There was about a quarter of a century between them, and all those who came after who have tried to imitate either one of them failed to provide anything worth watching. This is my personal opinion, though other people may not agree with me.”

He chose his words carefully and quietly. He was aware that he was suddenly able to talk logically and philosophically. He had not been aware of this ability before. He was at the top of his game in business and trade. He understood profit and loss and

was an expert on every issue to do with money and what was happening in the world of commerce, locally and globally. He had forgotten that he had previously taken time out of his normally dedicated days at work, although maybe there was only a little time to relax a bit at home. He was always working hard, juggling his attention, like an army fighting on different fronts in order to build his world, represented by his business and his main company, as well as the branches affiliated with it.

He had only today discovered this about himself. However, he had also discovered that Christine was not only his personal secretary who took care of his personal affairs and work connections. He now knew about the other side of her personality, which revealed a lot of more information about her character and feelings, which he had not expected to discover, considering that Christine was very busy with everyday commitments and difficulties.

So what about the remaining staff who worked for him who he spoke to at some time every day, when they had a short break and gathered in the main hall of the office to discuss business matters? He could not remember a day without talking about work and business with his staff.

Of course, sometimes important events would take priority, such as when President Bill Clinton was questioned about his relationship with Monica Lewinski, a White House intern, or what happened on September 11 and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. Most frequently, sporting events were the most important social events that people talked about, following

the news. He felt that it was necessary in the coming days to devote some time to address the issues that he and Christine had been talking about today with his other employees. That would certainly bring him closer to them, and, most importantly of all, he would learn more and maybe discover if they had other new ideas he didn't know.

He could also identify if any of them might harbor a grudge against him. It would not be as easy as it was with Christine, as he had had a long, frank, open talk with her. Even now, he couldn't say for sure what her attitude toward him was.

So how long would it take him to know his staff? They would certainly be more wary than Christine. However, he knew he must have a starting point, today, tomorrow or the day after tomorrow. He had to start from the beginning in order to get to know them better.

Perhaps there could be some of them who might get along with him intellectually, which would help him understand what was going on the other side of the world, which he'd left behind more than a quarter of a century ago.

Since he'd achieved business success, which had provided him with his life of luxury, which made him better off than the bottom 90 percent of people who lived their lives with various disadvantages and economic problems, he had lost touch with poor working-class people.

It made him feel strange from time to time. He was still linked to those lower classes, as he himself was once one of them, but he felt disconnected from them.

He was in contact with them basically because he'd needed them when he was living with them in that part of the world. But he became disconnected from them because he wanted to be part of the upper classes that dominate public life.

His mind was occupied with both how he wanted to develop and improve at work, as well as what he wanted to achieve as a man.

He believed he should be positive with all sectors and classes of people.

He believed that he had never been one of those people who carry a lot of selfishness and was careful not to trample on the heads and necks of others to reach his goals.

Maybe that was what he was claiming in front of the others, and maybe even in front of himself!

He noticed once again that his thoughts had drifted far away.

His thoughts returned to Christine, and he again asked her about John.

“You didn't tell me anything about John. What do you think he expects to achieve from carrying out this thing he believes in?”

“I'm sorry to say this, because I still don't think he is actually serious about committing suicide, although you think he means it.”

She remained silent for a few moments before she answered.

“I didn't avoid answering your question about John whether he believes in life after death or not. I never avoid questions, but you surprised me, and it made me realize that I don't really remember how much I really do know about it.

“John! Yes, John, my husband who has been living with me for more than ten years. Could this happen?”

“Is this normal or believable?”

“It was me who asked you, ‘Do you believe in God?’”

“Is it possible that life’s distractions and difficulties, as well as our concerns about our children, could keep us so busy that we have stopped taking notice of each other? Could it be that I don’t really know what is in his mind about this issue, even though the daily news talks about different events related to it?”

“Is this based on the faith of those who believe in this issue? Can their belief be described as a certain faith? Or does their faith bring about and dictate their behavior?”

“You are right to ask your question. I need to find out more about what he believes. It is like when he came to me, believing in such a dumb call.

“I need to ask him for more information about it and about other things.

“How could a person give up something he owns now for the hope of something beyond imagination that might come later?”

“Isn’t there a great possibility that success could come in the future of our children, if we acknowledge that we have failed to achieve what we want to have in our lives?”

“Do we have the right to get ahead of the future with a stupid metaphysic prophecy suggesting that they will not be happy in their current life?”

“Whatever the foundations of this unhappy life, how could we judge their future just because of a silly idea we suddenly

became believers in—in a particular circumstance which has no basis and cannot be sustained?

“I don’t know why I didn’t reply to him in this way or why I didn’t ask him to give me a convincing answer that could convince me of the futility of our life, just because it does not mean anything to him at the moment. As you know, he has been unemployed for more than a year, and he no longer has any hope of getting a job since the company has sacked hundreds of skilled workers like him, in many of its plants, to cope with their financial crisis.

“Yes, I have to be firm with him about this issue, and I shouldn’t be weak. I must fight for my children, and for him as well. He needs my help now more than ever.”

Then Bob interrupted her in a clear, satisfied tone.

“Here is my other daughter, Christine, my older daughter, who has managed to regain her courage and strength.”

Christine noticed that he had called her “my daughter.”

She pushed her back against the chair more firmly. She heard him say it for the first time and suddenly realized that his real daughter, Josephine, was only three years younger than her. He looked at her and noticed her surprise.

He went on.

“Yes, I look on you like my daughter, Josephine. I see you more than I see her, but you don’t argue with me like she does. She always contradicts me whenever I give her advice, and she doesn’t seem to approve of anything her mother and I do.

“I see that as one of your generation’s worst features,

especially when life has always been comfortable and given them everything. Everything has always been achieved easily, without effort, and this life of leisure reduces their desire to be creative. As a result, they are weak and cannot adapt to the challenges that they might face.”

Christine replied,

“I don’t think it is really fair to ask her to volunteer to face difficulties in life without needing to. Other people have achieved their goals because they have faced challenges. But what is the value of any success that Josephine, or even Jonathan, might achieve?”

“I might be wrong, but I understand the significance of what success when facing a challenge means. A person’s life will change when they have succeeded after facing a challenge. Without this change, success will have no meaning.”

Bob disagreed.

“Certainly not! No, I definitely don’t agree with you at all. Success after facing challenges is character-forming. It’s good for the soul and strengthens self-determination, as well as feelings of self-respect.”

She quickly interrupted him.

“What about when failure is the result of the challenge?”

What About When Failure is the Result of the Challenge?

On his way home, Bob continued thinking deeply about Christine's sentence: "*What about when failure is the result of the challenge?*"

He hadn't known how to analyze this sentence or how to respond. She forced him to keep his silence; he didn't know how to reply to her, really and truly.

Had he forgotten how frightened he was whenever he was about to embark on a new experience?

Yes, he had overcome a lot of that fear when he became more important and achieved the power to allow him to challenge the powerful and to deal with them as equals.

But he could certainly remember how frightened he felt in those years when he smoked too much, one cigarette after another, whenever he was going through a difficult period. He used to wake up at midnight and couldn't get back to sleep.

How could he forget those dark days?

His personal features, which were partly genetically determined, had been affected by his experiences. He had always sympathized with those who were vulnerable—maybe not everyone who was vulnerable but at least those who were close to him in his everyday life and in his work. If he were to count, to look back and relive those days, they would have been enough to transform his present pleasant days back into nightmares!

Oh my God, what bad memories do we have to live with and the nightmares they cause?

We can't overcome the grief, pain, and dark memories embodied in them that keep appearing in front of us, preventing us from measuring ourselves on a more neutral scale and eventually reaching the conclusion that we have committed a lot of mistakes, both against ourselves and against others—maybe much, much more than that.

My goodness, could there be someone who is satisfied with what he has and satisfied both with his past and present?

Is it possible to be assured of the future?

How difficult—in fact, how extremely difficult—it is to satisfy the souls of people who have these ... feelings!

While driving, he tried to recall how many times in the past he had abandoned his values and principles.

He'd done things in the past that today, now he'd become powerful, he might consider dishonorable. Now he had the power that allowed him to choose what behavior pleased him. He

wasn't forced to abandon the values and principles he claimed to believe in and was committed to.

Yes, he could claim that he believed in these values. But it couldn't be more than a claim, a claim he couldn't uphold in the past, when he was weak and in need. However, now he could translate his ethical beliefs into action and confront others with these values, which he believed were almost inherent or might be genetic.

Now, one might wonder how far this behavior could stand up to a temptation of another kind. Some temptations might get him to abandon his moral principles more easily than others that seemed more irresistible.

Principles might be set aside for the chance of attaining that ultimate goal, which nobody can resist and everyone desires...

The strings of power and authority!

The strings of life—life, where we all want it all, not just scattered parts strewn here and there.

He tried to avoid those memories, which he had not recalled for years, ever since he had stripped himself from that world—the world of poor and middle-class working people.

He tried to focus on the road in front of him as he drove home. The road had become very familiar to him; he had been using it for more than eight years since he relocated his office to its current address.

The streets were more crowded than they had been in the

morning. He tried to keep himself focused on the traffic in front of him. But this time, some of the hints Christine had alluded to when she spoke about the people who were suffering and were organizing the uprisings that were occurring in the world invaded his mind.

“We rely on these people because of the many different jobs they do.”

He thought again about the people who intended to commit mass suicide just to spite those who did not appreciate their sacrifices and needs.

By “those,” he meant the founders and members of the upper classes, who profit from the labors of the working class. They were the owners of the foundations, big companies, and establishments who enjoyed their lives in the light of such services.

Wasn't it a fact that this world was devoid of justice?

Christine and Herself

Christine went home after she left the restaurant with Bob, leaving him to ponder her question about what would be if difficult circumstances in this life were defied.

What about when failure is the result of the challenge?

She was unhappy with a lot of what she had said during her discussion with Bob. She thought that it had been inappropriate to say some of it.

It might have given him the impression that she was trying to hide feelings of envy toward him. During the eight years she had spent in her work relationship with him as director of his office, she had always been extremely cautious, careful not to give him the least impression that she was anything but his most dedicated employee.

She always carried out her work responsibilities to the highest level, both to serve him and the interests of the company.

She knew that all employers want their staff to be relaxed, and that they make every effort to make it so. Furthermore, it was also normal for them not to interfere with what was bothering their employees and what might be causing them problems in their everyday lives. In this way, they avoided being asked for help to solve their problems.

However, to be fair to Bob, she thought that he had really seemed to care about this call for collective suicide, even before he knew that John was a supporter and intended to participate. She was also amazed to learn about, and was still surprised by, the intensity of his interest in the invitation to suicide.

This meant that his interest in the topic of John was not only to please her, as might have been expected. He would have had the same attitude if it were the case of another employee, rather than John, who believed in this ridiculous, frightening idea.

Her discussion with Bob revealed something she didn't know about the extent of his humanity. She didn't think that employers, especially powerful ones, could be like that.

She also reflected on what she had said during their chat and decided that she had been quite brave. For a very long time she had seen herself as someone who was nonconfrontational, someone who wouldn't dare to say what she felt and believed in. She always did as she was told, particularly when the person giving the instructions was higher than her.

But today she had discovered something about herself that she didn't know before.

In the car, she'd listened to excerpts from the latest news

about what had happened and what was happening regarding the call for suicide. Most of the news consisted of talks from analysts with contradictory views, leading to nothing but conflicting ideas.

Eventually, it was clear from everything that had been said that they really didn't understand anything.

A lot of big events occurred, their impact remaining for varying periods; they passed into oblivion before the general public understood what the facts were. People went back to their lives again as if nothing had ever happened.

She switched off the car radio; the sound wasn't very clear anyway.

What she understood from the news was that the general assembly or meeting scheduled to be held today in the largest amusement park in the city had dispersed quickly. It was to be held at another time, to be determined, probably tomorrow.

She didn't understand why it had been postponed. People had seemed determined that it would go ahead.

After all the commentators had given their conflicting understandings of the situation, the result was that not one listener received a sip of water to quench their thirst for reliable information.

Of course, those commentators were the same people who made comments about every event. How could anyone know if they were actually qualified to analyze these events? How much did they really know about the foundations of the events that qualified them to step forward to explain them?

The commentators were the mouthpieces of the channels employing them. The amount of misinformation and intentional disinformation they broadcast to their listeners and viewers must be huge, Christine thought.

Intentionally or unintentionally, consciously or unconsciously, the audience had probably been misled as a result of ignorance and indifference. Also, no one knew how much the opinions and analyses might change from one hour to the next.

That was what happened when events and the media confronted each other. They often played suspicious roles with motives that remain buried and secret for periods that might stretch on for a long time.

Christine at Home

With the Media

Christine arrived home. She chose to leave the children with her mother because she wanted to take advantage of the time to talk to John about the issue of this call without her children present. She didn't want them to hear their conversation, which wasn't suitable for children their age.

She had to use her key to open the front door. That meant John was not yet home. She thought he would be late because he used public transport; their only car was with her. He spent most of his time with acquaintances who had inspired him to take part in this stupid suicide craze.

When she entered the house, the ideas about the call were still going round in her head, knocking at the doors of her thoughts and life. She felt obliged to follow developments, because she knew she had to save herself and the children, and even John, her husband, from it.

But she felt exhausted, a bundle of nerves, because of the conversation she'd had for the first time with Bob.

She did not know at first what to do to keep herself busy and stop thinking about the call until John got home. She thought about preparing some food, using what was available in the fridge to make a meal for two for when he got home. It would be appropriate to talk about the subject while having dinner, no matter what it was. She knew that her mother would take care of feeding Susan and Tommy and that she need not worry about that. She opened the refrigerator to take out what was in there, planning to make a vegetable salad with cold meat, which needed little preparation to be ready for the table.

She felt the silence hanging heavily over the house. There was no one with her. She was used to hearing the sounds of her two children, who usually filled the house with noise. So she turned on the TV to fill the silence and find out what was going on outside, specifically looking for news about the suicides.

The TV channel she always chose to listen to the news was broadcasting a debate between a group of commentators about the event. This included the views of different organizations and representatives of various religions, who were always invited as guests to reveal their religious viewpoints about the designated event.

The fake harmony between the representatives of these religions was clear, not surprisingly, as it was very easy to agree with others when everyone was keen to retain the higher ground of hypocrisy in their dealings with each other. They fully agreed about the position they took with regards to the call, viewing it as absolutely inexcusable behavior by any religion and not

approved of in the dogma of any religion.

They said that the possible, likely reason behind the call was not even related to religion. Religion, any religion, could offer a solution for any problem man might face!

No problem could be solved with suicide!

They also agreed with each other to overlook their own differences. They were all such hypocrites!

They all agreed that their religions and their representatives, who Bob called “agents of the Lord,” could quickly return everything back to normal. They also agreed that they could make people happy again, creating a positive outlook on life for these desperate people.

They continued to share their theological theories in a very friendly, loving, compassionate, yet hypocritical way.

They forgot that they themselves normally clashed with each other and had been campaigning against each other for so many centuries.

No one would ever believe that one day they would completely change and stop campaigning against their religious opponents, causing each other trouble. Nor would they believe that they would come to a peaceful understanding of life and that they would recognize each other’s right to existence, acknowledging their entitlement to live and maintain their own religious point of view.

Yet each one of them thought that the other was inevitably going to hell!

Each of them, in fact, represented a state of fascism and

totalitarianism that was just waiting for the right time to reflex its muscles and restore the historical practices that had darkened many pages of history.

Christine followed the discussion while she was cutting the vegetables, preparing the salad.

She realized that, for the first time, she could differentiate between the falsehoods and deceit in the interview between these “agents of the Lord.”

She saw through the fallacy of their arguments. This subject had now become very relevant to her because John might join this group of suicides, believing in their cause.

Maybe if her husband weren't involved in the call, she might have let the TV discussion pass by unnoticed, as she usually had when important events had happened before. But this time she started to pay attention and also realized something else. She realized that the participants, the analysts and experts, journalists and politicians, who had come together under a common banner of secularism actually paid hypocritical lip service to and greatly exaggerated their respect for the views of the agents of the Lord.

Despite the ridiculousness of the agents' arguments and their insignificant, meaningless responses and interpretations of the events, they attributed the reason for the call from the advocates of suicide to the fact that they did not believe in a God who intervened in the minutiae of everything that happened in this life.

The Lord wanted life to be lived this way, made up of people

who were suffering while others are celebrating, people who serve while others were served.

She noticed that these politicians and journalists did not declare outright which side they supported. Their viewers and listeners could not learn anything beneficial from their discussion. However, it was a chance for the media to show that they could bring people together and almost revel in events as they unfolded, dancing to the beat of laments and the pain of the poor.

Despite this, Christine did not understand why politicians who called themselves secular, as well as the journalists, analysts, and experts, tended to be hypocrites when they spoke with the agents of the Lord. Why were they terrified of them, yet clearly respected their feelings?

In contrast, the agents of the Lord did not show any obvious respect for any of them, nor for their opinions!

It was a difficult equation to solve.

Christine couldn't really understand one part of the sum total of these people's interpretations. They came from different starting points, and everyone was trying to provide an explanation that stemmed from his actual beliefs. This was just like the agents of the Lord, who were attributing the reason for phenomena like the call to weakness of faith.

Similarly, opposition politicians believed that the reasons were due to the government's mistakes, while the ruling party's politicians claimed it was because the opposition party had been standing in the face of government reform while they were

attempting to address the economic situation and correct it.

The same thing applied to the journalists who had to follow the will of the institutions they worked for and their political subordination, which was directly linked to their financiers.

Christine noticed that her new-found ability to criticize and discover the strengths and weaknesses of opposing points of view was not limited to the fields of politics or journalism, or even limited to the agents of the Lord.

This ability, in fact worked best when the critic was immersed in the situation in all its reality, rather than seeing it from outside the circle of suffering. This could not be a substitute for suffering.

Wisdom, knowledge, and distinguishing right from wrong were not exclusive to the professions of living. They were open to anyone who actually lived this life.

Oh my God!

What is going on?

Suffering actually has creative abilities.

It only needs someone who can pull the trigger to set it off.

It is clear that there is a big difference between practicing and acting in life—actually living it.

Suffering is what “Wisdom” needs in order to be honest and authentic, not fake.

John at Home

Christine heard the sound of the door opening and knew that John had arrived. She called out, “Hello John... ”

She heard no clear reply from John, who closed the door and came inside slowly, toward the open kitchen door to the living room. Only then did he respond, greeting her clearly.

“Hello ... I don’t see the kids. Where are they?”

Christine replied,

“I’ve left them with Mom. I think they need to spend some time with their grandparents. And we need to talk. I’d rather be on our own, without the kids interrupting.”

John didn’t answer her directly. He took off his jacket and threw it down on one of the chairs.

His answer was a nod of the head and a contraction of his lips, grinding his teeth, as if he were contemplating what she had said. He agreed with her carefully.

His anxiety, confusion, and lack of concentration seemed very clear. He did not seem willing to talk. He was looking for someone who would talk to him, and for him to listen, more than saying anything himself. Christine realized this and thought it was encouraging. She felt that there was a chance she might be

able to start to remove the idea, the nightmare, of suicide from his mind.

It was as if he was looking for a way out of the psychological crisis that surrounded him and prevented him from enjoying anything to the slightest degree.

He was like someone who had just discovered a sad, painful, devastating, disheartening fact, something which suffocated any desire to carry on living, despite any love for life or attachment to it. Life had finally turned its back on him, and overnight he started to feel he had failed at everything at every level.

It was a really devastating, killing feeling.

It was no surprise, then, that all of this would start to make him feel like responding when he heard the call.

Christine said,

“Dinner will be ready in minutes. I’m sure you’re hungry. Did you eat something before you left this morning?”

John responded,

“I only had my usual coffee. I didn’t feel like eating anything else.”

Christine said,

“I took the kids to school this morning, and I didn’t find any members of staff there to let the children in, so I thought I’d take them to my mom. There were many other parents waiting in front of the school door in a quandary, not knowing what to do. If Mom had not been available or if she’d had other plans, I would have been in the same situation. I couldn’t have gone to work.”

While she was placing the dishes on the dining table, she then

recounted some of the things that had happened to her that morning.

She watched his face to see how her words were affecting him. As he listened to her, he sat in a chair in the living room, trying to relax. He listened to what she was saying without looking at her, but, apparently, he was still concerned about the kids as much as he had been before this ill-fated call that had come between them.

He said,

“Then you managed to go to the office today. How did things turn out there?”

“Things weren’t the same as usual. I didn’t feel the same in the morning as I do now.”

She wanted to turn his attention to the second part of her answer, to the fact that the way she was in the morning had changed and that she felt differently now. She was waiting to see whether he was paying attention to what she had just said and how much he was focusing his thoughts on her, how much her words meant to him.

He waited for a few moments after she had finished her answer to reply in a questioning tone,

“I understand that things were not the same as usual. That’s what I would expect. But I don’t understand what could change you between the morning and now?”

She was pleased to hear him inquire about this. She finished putting the food on the table and answered after she invited him to sit at the table

“You’re right. Maybe I can’t clearly say what’s changed between the morning and now. The right words don’t come easily to me. I might not be describing it accurately, but I think I’ve started to see a lot of things that I didn’t see or notice before, both in myself and in others... ”

“And what was it that led you to see things today that you couldn’t see before? I don’t understand what you mean. How did this happen?

“Why today in particular?”

He stopped his rapid questions, waiting for her answers, looking at the food in the dish in front of him and slowly tasting it but not showing much interest in it.

She stopped and looked at him for a few moments and then answered,

“Today was unusual, both in the office and outside. Everything was unusual. In fact, today wasn’t really an actual working day. I could say it was a day of getting to know myself and other people as well.”

She stopped again, waiting for his reaction to what she had said.

John stopped looking at his plate and turned to look at her, asking her in a wondering tone, “Getting to know others? Who are the others?”

He waited for her answer which was slow in coming. After a few moments, which felt like a long time to him, she answered him.

“Not many—in fact, only one. Bob. You know Bob, my

employer.”

John stayed silent waiting for more clarification. She continued.

“I learned something about him today. He has qualities I didn’t expect him to have. I used to see him as a person who didn’t know, or care, about anything apart from being serious and controlling his life, both his work life and his home life. It doesn’t matter which, because it seemed to me as if they were the same thing and had the same value for him. One wasn’t worth anything without the other. They stand side by side. Today I learned a lot about feelings he had never revealed before. Maybe I’m the only one who works for him who knows this about him.”

John remained silent, waiting for Christine to reach the heart of the subject, because he knew that what she had said about Bob was not what she meant by, “I didn’t feel the same in the morning as I do now.”

However, she deliberately went silent for a few moments. Perhaps John would say something or ask her to finish what she was saying. But he didn’t and remained silent, waiting for her to carry on talking about what had happened to her that day. When the silence became uncomfortable, she felt she had to keep talking to stop John from losing interest and changing the subject. She felt it was better for her to talk about what had happened between her and Bob and try to get John involved as much as possible in the talk, even if through his questions.

So she carried on.

“When I got to the office today, I was, as you would expect,

extremely agitated and upset after everything we'd been talking about last night, as well as the conditions in the morning with the children's school and having to take them to my mother's home.

“When I got to the office, I found Bob waiting for me eagerly, not because I was late, which is what I thought to start with, but because he was apparently busy thinking about the call, even though it doesn't concern him as much.

“However, he was very interested in finding out everything about it and was thinking deeply about the reasons that might be behind it, as well as the people who are calling for it.”

John listened to Christine attentively, furrowing his eyebrows, expressing a level of focus and interest in her words. But he was surprised, at the same time, about how interested Bob was in this mass suicide. So he interrupted her.

“Does he know anyone who intends to participate in the call?”

She quickly answered him.

“No, certainly not. He was surprised that the call had gone out and how serious it was. All he knows is what he has heard from television news channels. He was trying to find out more information than what is on the TV from what he could see around him and through questioning me.”

“Questioning you? What did he ask you? Why is he asking you anything?”

“Actually, he was not asking me. But he noticed how upset and confused I was this morning. That was why he kept on asking me to explain why I was so upset. There was no escape. I

had to talk to him about why you are determined to follow the call. And I needed to talk about it with anyone who would give me a chance.

“I think I talked to the best person I could have. The result was that, in the end, I felt I had made remarkable progress in my ability to notice things around me, or at least that’s what I thought.

“It was very useful to help me explain different things. Perhaps this call for suicide is one of them. I say ‘perhaps’ because I still don’t understand this call. I’m waiting for you to explain it to me, if you have any information you trust and believe.”

“Yes. Perhaps you could say what you learned about Bob today that you didn’t know before?”

Christine answered,

“I know he is a man who cares about the people around him, not based on how much use they can be to him financially. I know he is interested in the conditions of the people and wants what is best for them, even if that does not have a positive effect on his life.

I know he is happy not just because he is strong financially. It was important for me to know this, to be convinced and believe him, because you hear a lot about the impact of money on people and how they behave. Maybe I just learned that from stories, from fiction.

“But, actually, I also discovered something about myself. I’ve realized that I can reach convincing conclusions, or at least fairly

reasonable conclusions, when I seriously think about a particular subject.

“In the past, I thought I didn’t have the mental ability to explore serious issues that require uncompromising thinking and challenge commonly held beliefs.”

“Like what?”

John spoke sharply. He wanted an answer. He stared at her, waiting for her to say something. But she bowed her head and turned to eat something from her plate in order to give herself breathing space.

After a few seconds of silence, she answered, “I’ve learned that I have the ability to analyze things independently and that I’m not a follower of what other people want. I don’t believe in what they believe in. I have learned that I can rely on my own convictions and not those of other people, like my parents and grandparents. I don’t think I could have known that without talking to Bob.

“My talk with him was not only the most important, unusual thing to happen to me today—it was the most important thing that has ever happened to me.

“He invited me to have lunch with him at his favorite restaurant, because he wanted to find out more about how he could help us in our present situation.

“He invited you to lunch? How did that happen? What was the reason?”

“Yes, he wanted to find out about the call to suicide, especially when I told him that you are committed to it. He

wanted to know more, because he only heard about it for the first time two days ago from the television and newspapers.

“I saw he was very different from the person I thought he was. I learned that not everything we view as bad is actually bad.”

John replied,

“It seems like your day was really unusual. It was busy, and certainly useful to you. It certainly wasn’t like my day. My day was as if it was wrapped in darkness. I couldn’t see anything through it.

“That darkness increased my confusion and hatred for life, and everything that is going on in it. I particularly hate those figures of great importance and anyone who represents them, who control life. I even hate myself.

“I’m not prepared to think about it anymore, not the old life, which I loved, or the new one, which I have tried to be an active part of.

“At least that’s what I imagined, and believed in, in my naivety and superficial understanding of the issues.

“I can’t pretend that I am able to resist this desperate obsession that is knocking on my door. It is as if all my doors and windows have been thrown wide open to a foul, cold wind and then a flame from hell at another time. I don’t even know what hell is!

“What I’m talking about?”

“I don’t understand these questions and beliefs. I don’t know if they really exist or if we are used to them having a role as the ultimate absurdity in our lives, which, in turn, is the most

ridiculous part of absurdity. I'm absolutely exhausted.

"I'm desperate.

"I've collapsed.

"I don't want to hear anything. I don't want to know anything.

"Everything I was sure of in my life for more than thirty years of conscious existence has not helped me in any way at this desperate time...

"Where is the Lord they are talking about?

"Where is his fairness and justice?

"Where is his mercy?

"Everything is a fantasy, an illusion, published and distributed by the powerful among the powerless...

"Those who have the power know what to do, and those who are powerless don't know what they are doing...

"They don't know what kind of illusion and absurdity they are living in. They are nothing more than puppets in the hands of powerful.

"Life is just a game, and there is a gang of powerful, arrogant men who play it the way they like.

"There is no reason to participate in this game just to delight the powerful, to entertain them...

"This is what I have to say to you and Bob. I don't know what topic you discussed. It might have interested me if it had happened two weeks ago, or maybe even a week!

"But it's no longer significant now...

"Things have become clear to me, things of another kind—not what you think you have learned about today."

Bob and the Family Gathering

Bob's return to his home was not on the usual schedule, and his wife Nicola was waiting for him. He called her on his way, and she told him that their children, Jonathan and Josephine, were coming today for dinner with them. They had planned this date a few days ago, but Bob had forgotten about it in the midst of these unusual events. Jonathan had been traveling on business to several other states, and now that he was coming home, dinner was going to be family gathering.

Bob arrived before Jonathan and Josephine and seemed eager to see his three grandchildren: Jonathan's son Steve, who was four years old, and Josephine's son Ted and daughter Carol, who were eight and five years of age.

Nicola received him with a joyful smile and a kiss. She was busy preparing food, assisted by two housemaids who were of South American origin. Thousands of people were infiltrating the southern states, mostly illegal migrants seeking work for low wages.

Bob knew that the extraordinary welcome Nicola gave was also due to the fact that she was preparing dinner for their son, daughter, and grandchildren. It's only natural. Maybe it would be enough to overcome the pain and bitterness that both Bob and Nicola had been feeling while they listened to the depressing news, feeling submerged under the suffocating atmosphere that had been around for the last three days. The few hours with their children and grandchildren would give them a short break.

Oh my God, how selfish man can be!

He is selfish in himself and all of his feelings, Could it be that one day man will overcome his selfishness, or is it an animal trait that cannot and will never change?

Man will never overcome it ... never!

Josephine came in with Carol and Ted. Her husband, Ernie, worked evening shifts, so he wasn't there. He was a technician with a waste recycling firm.

Bob embraced Carol, his granddaughter, who always threw herself into his lap to get his attention. She did this to stop him from embracing her brother, to keep all his interest. Bob didn't like to interfere with her attempts and tried to reassure her by keeping her in his arms while reaching out to his little grandson, Ted, to encourage him and pull him gently to him and cuddle Ted with his sister. After a few minutes, he released them to devote himself to his daughter. Josephine hugged her mother when she first came in and then came over to hug and kiss her father.

Bob asked Josephine about her life and how things were going on with her husband and children. She took her children by the hand to the family room so that she could show them where their toys were kept in their grandparents' house.

Bob did not expect his daughter to know much about what was going on with the call for suicide, so he didn't ask her about it in particular. He thought that perhaps her husband knew a lot about the call but didn't discuss such topics with her. She was always busy with her children and didn't appear to care for anything outside of that little cocoon. She was not interested in what was going on in the world, or even around her, unless it related directly to her.

She was like millions of people who didn't have any interest in anything outside of their personal lives if it didn't touch them directly. Those people didn't feel the flames before they began to burn their clothes.

That was why when he talked about Josephine to Christine he didn't show his feelings when he mentioned the way she behaved with him and her mother.

Jonathan arrived with his wife, Liz, and his son, Steve, shortly after Josephine. It was clear from the warm, eager way that Bob welcomed his son that their relationship was very close, which was a big contrast with how he'd behaved when Josephine arrived.

Nicola hugged Liz affectionately and then picked her grandson up in her arms, giving him a warm, loving hug. She embraced her son and asked him about his trip while Bob hugged

his son's wife in greeting and then went on to embrace his grandson, who hugged him in return, clearly showing how much he loved his grandfather.

Jonathan went over to greet his father and embrace him. Bob asked him about his trip and whether the results were feasible. Jonathan answered that it wasn't bad, but it didn't bring the results he was hoping for.

Before sitting down, Jonathan surprised Bob with a question about the subject with which his father's mind had been busy—the call for suicide—as if he knew that his father must have been thinking about this subject. He knew that his father was always greatly interested in things like this and always considered such matters from all sides, comprehensively. He was never narrow-minded in his thinking.

John's questions showed that he wanted to understand his father's point of view about the call.

He wanted to know what good it might do and what impact it would have on the future. It was not like other calls that had preceded it, which were limited to narrow, sectarian, religious groups that had emerged between very restricted groups of people. Afterwards they committed suicide collectively, in different ways.

Those calls did not create any kind of impact on society, and no one really remembered them after they were over.

Bob approved of Jonathan's question, which clearly revealed his worry and distress about the call. It showed that he treated it as a matter of utmost importance that should concern everyone

living in their country, particularly those who wanted to create own business, whatever the form or nature of that business.

In the beginning Bob wanted to question Jonathan about how much he knew about the call. But Jonathan pushed his father's question away. Bob was momentarily speechless and didn't know how to respond.

Moments later Bob said,

“I think I must say, above all, that this invitation to suicide is very serious. That's how it seems to me. It's very important that the community gives it the attention it deserves.

“This is not like previous calls. I don't think those other calls relied on the same depth and seriousness. More importantly, I don't think any of those calls stemmed directly from the hearts and souls of the people who were really suffering. Anyway, tell me what you know about it.”

Jonathan answered,

“I don't know anything more than what the media are saying and what some people are saying...”

“What are people saying?”

“Not much ... I don't really know any of them personally. But it seems there are probably thousands who support it. I know two of my colleagues at work have relatives and friends who are actually convinced by it. They've reached a state of utmost despair and might participate in it. As you say, it seems to be a serious and unusual invitation.”

Bob replied,

“Yes, but it certainly doesn't seem like the authorities think

the same way. Otherwise, they wouldn't have left it this way, without it being reported properly so that people know the truth behind it. The reasons behind this call will continue to exist as long as human beings live on the earth. Even if their problems are dealt with, something else will reappear after few years and will carry on appearing and disappearing.

“This is proved by the cases of the dictatorial and fascist ideologies which have lived in many incarnations in the past centuries—”

Jonathan interrupted him suddenly.

“Dad, I didn't know you were so interested in politics. What you've said might be true, but, at the same time, I think they either don't want to ascribe too much importance to it so as not to disrupt work and everyday life, or—and this is what really I think—they probably do not know how to handle and resolve this type of situation.

“It's unprecedented, and it doesn't seem to matter who participates in it. We all know that suicide is an individual choice. It's a personal choice. People have the right to choose it, especially in a country that considers itself to be the only true democratic country in the world.”

Bob answered,

“*Mmm ...* I'm really happy to know you're thinking this way. You don't seem to let events in the news pass you by unnoticed. These events have to be dealt with very seriously, particularly by people who want to develop their business.

“Now, tell me how your trip was. What was the purpose?”

Jonathan replied,

“It had two purposes. First, to find a market for the new program we’re preparing and, secondly, to interview some technicians and experts who might be able to participate in our future projects. The trip wasn’t successful, not as productive as we need. But I didn’t expect much better results. The recession is still hitting most aspects of my work hard. There’s a surplus of IT engineers. Everyone wants to develop their designs, but their ideas are very similar, and there is strong competition.

“Other parts of the world are doing a lot of what we do, but at much less cost. The golden age of the giant information technology empires and computer software companies has now passed.”

“Do you think this is going to threaten your future and the work of your company?”

“Yes, to a certain extent. Actually, it will probably have an impact on everyone.”

Bob replied,

“I don’t know of anyone who hasn’t got problems at work. Even those who produce food are complaining about their difficulties and lack of state support. Humans can’t live without food. Indeed, they desperately need more in many countries of the world. Prices have fallen so low that the farmers are unable to cover their costs. I think we pay half as much for food than we used to. Yet half of the world’s population is hungry. Isn’t this a strange equation?

“Sometimes, I would love, if I could, to put myself into the

shoes of one of those who call for suicide, just to know exactly what could make a man ready to decide to end his life. I'd like to know because I feel the world is moving inexorably toward a dangerous destination. Its end will probably be in this destination.

“The world as we know it will end. Many people throughout history have tried their best to make it a safe world and not let it get as dangerous as it is now. But while there are many people serving the interests of humanity, there are just as many others who want to carry out its destruction!

“They want to destroy everything that has been built through the hard work of generations and centuries of determination and struggle.”

Jonathan said quickly,

“You mean the politicians and rulers who are controlling the world?”

Bob agreed.

“Look at that! What a wonderful conclusion.

“I really feel you are my darling son. I don't need to worry about you as I used to.”

Jonathan smiled.

“Don't forget, Dad, I inherited my genes from you. I learned a lot of my ideas from you, directly or indirectly, from my upbringing.

“I think I was a good student.”

Then Nicola could be heard, calling them to come to the table for dinner.

Christine and John

The Second Time

An atmosphere of sadness and melancholy hung like a cloud in the living room where Christine was sitting, devoid of any desire to do anything. She sat in front of John.

He let out a gasp of weakness and collapsed. He still had more to say but was keeping it close to his chest.

He didn't mean to burden Christine, because he still loved her and loved his children too. He just wished he had the chance to vomit his guts into the faces of those who directed and controlled the "game of life."

The game had become boring for anyone who had sympathies with those living on the margins of life. It was a game that directly increased its disgusting routine and misery as much as it increased the happiness of those who controlled and directed it.

His words about his feelings brought Christine back to square one, where she had been in the morning, when she hadn't been able to decide what the right thing to do was.

Is it possible that what John is saying and feeling is the truth that everyone is trying to avoid?

If his feelings are mistaken, how can we explain what is going on in this unjust world?

We see it before our eyes, but we are indifferent to it, as long as it doesn't actually slap us in the face.

It has slapped and crushed thousands, perhaps millions, of people around the world, where the hands of the powers that be reach out without restraint to do whatever they want.

At other times, the hands of the Lord, who seems to agree with the powerful, also seem to do the same work on their behalf.

Could it be that he is only the Lord of the powerful and not the Lord of everybody?

Does he try to clear the air as much as possible for the influential? Could this be what is happening now and has always happened throughout the ages?

Christine slowly regained her senses and concentration after a period of heavy, somber silence, which overshadowed the atmosphere between her and John.

Then she got up and went to the kitchen to make coffee, recovering some of her strength. While preparing the coffee she called out to John, who was in the other room, so he could hear her.

“I think we have to think seriously and unemotionally about what is happening.”

John didn't respond. He remained silent. So Christine carried

on.

“I also believe we should think about our children more than we think about ourselves. We shouldn’t just be negative. We can still look back and remember how much joy we’ve had, and how comfortably we were living.”

John remained silent and didn’t respond to what Christine had said.

“We know nothing about those who are calling on us to die ... to end our lives voluntarily.

“I think I’m entitled to question, and so are you, the significance of this call. We don’t know who’s behind it. Isn’t it possible that those in charge of us could be behind it?”

“Maybe some of the brains behind the investment plans and ideas that influence the government see some benefit in the deaths of working-class people. This somehow echoes the motives of those desperate advocates of the call who think they’ll hurt the influential by killing themselves.

“I don’t know, I don’t know! I would like to hear more about them from you. What do you know about them to feel this trust in them? What do you see in them, to be so confident that you are right to follow their call?”

“Would you have been so sure of yourself if you hadn’t lost your job, the job you loved?”

At last she heard John’s voice quietly answering her.

“It’s not important to know who they are and what their motives might be.

“What is important is that they opened my eyes to the vanity

and futility of this life. I only stay alive, consuming food that has become the business of the people who rule us, who make more profit from food production than the farmers and workers who actually produce it.

“This is enough to keep me thinking for hours about how unjust this life is, and how we, the lower classes, are involved in extending the roots of this injustice, and how much we contribute to fill the bellies of our superiors with our hard work and effort.”

Christine protested.

“But we can’t solve this dilemma by choosing to leave life ourselves. There must be another way to settle this matter and to achieve satisfaction and self-belief.”

John said,

“Yes, yes it’s possible.

“We could continue to deceive ourselves and live in the shadows with our stupid, flimsy hopes and aspirations.”

Christine answered,

“I don’t care about whether it’s deception or not. I just want to be totally pragmatic and realistic. I don’t care for anything apart from you and the children. I’ll do anything, even if that requires me to fight anybody, whether they are the owners of big companies, members of Congress, or national leaders from all over the world.”

John didn’t answer her. He remained silent, looking ahead again without focusing on anything. She believed that he had appreciated what she had said about her promise to do anything to protect him and the children. Perhaps she had inspired him

when she chose to attack those powerful people and refused to acquiesce to their wishes.

She had managed to grab his attention.

There was a chance that he might think of an alternative to suicide.

But ... what was the alternative?

Big TV Meeting

A major media TV channel organized a special discussion to cover this great, unique event. It was the first time there had been an opportunity to cover an event like this and discuss it before it happened, rather than afterward. Actually, no one knew exactly when it might happen or, rather, when it would start happening because, as far as was known, it was supposed to happen consecutively in different states and cities. It might happen in people's homes or public places.

Several media figures and others who called themselves political analysts were participating in the discussion. Also, there were sociologists, psychiatrists, and politicians from different parties and orientations, both conservatives and liberals.

The host of the discussion took the opportunity to invite a number of people who were keen to participate in the audience. Some of them might find the opportunity to raise some general points related to the event and represent the viewpoint of the man in the street.

Representatives of the main religions were also invited to the meeting. There were Christians, Sunni and Shiite Muslims, a Jew, and a well-known astrophysicist, who was joining the discussion via a video link from another studio, representing atheists.

The meeting took place in a large hall. At the beginning, the cameras were focusing on the host, a well-known media figure, who was often the first person to cover important events like this. He started speaking about the call and described it as the first call in history that was asking people to commit suicide collectively, without a clear reason as to why they should do so.

The scheme, which might or might not achieve its objective, was creating chaos and crises among rich, upper-class people who relied on other people to work for them. The middle and lower classes worked for the rich. The upper classes might own the businesses, but they didn't actually do the day-to-day work. They relied on labor from the lower classes to make their businesses and investments thrive. So the scheme was meant to create crises for them and threaten to obstruct the smooth-running of their businesses and other interests. These crises could last for a long time.

Also, he stated that information about the call initially spread through social media. Then the media channels began to pick it up and broadcast it. There were only a few hundred people involved in the discussion on social media at the start. Many of them had waited until now to reveal their position on the call, specifically whether they actually planned to participate in it by

committing suicide or if they only supported it by calling on others to carry it out on their behalf.

Then he raised an important question, namely: does the call represent a protest about living conditions, or are they actually trying to embarrass the rulers of the upper classes when their businesses come to a halt because no one was actually operating and running the business and machinery?

The people who made the call had only just revealed themselves.

There was also the question of where the suicides would take place. People thought the events would take place in central areas of big cities, such as central parks where people went to walk, jog, or cycle.

Although a lot of people had turned up to attend the meeting, it was unknown whether they were actually going to participate in the call or just support it. Or perhaps many of them were just curious, hoping to see what would happen.

Then the host started to present the guests who were taking part in the discussion and announced their names. He didn't personally know all of them and, therefore, had to read their names from a list he carried in his hand. When he had finished reading the list, he returned to talk about the topic of suicide and said he would ask a guest, an expert in psychiatry, to shed light on the suicide process in general and what motives might lead to it.

The psychiatrist explained,

“Suicide is the last resort of a person who feels haunted by

psychiatric disorders, like extreme depression, frustration, or a feeling of total despair. It might also happen if someone takes drugs, prescription or illegal, and suffers from the side effects, which could cause suicidal thoughts.

For there to be a risk of suicide, people would be under the influence of one or more of these factors. However, they might not apply to the situation we have today, where there has been a general call for collective suicide carried out by people who do not otherwise seem to have a health problem or any form of psychosis that might put them at risk. However, it's possible, and this is very likely, that they could be severely frustrated psychologically, and this is a phenomenon that might cause severe depression.”

The host interrupted.

“Does this mean we are facing a new cause for suicide, in addition to the reasons that we are already aware of?”

The psychiatrist responded,

“I can't say that, because we don't have much information about the people who are supporting the call. At the same time, we cannot quickly jump to conclusions. We need to collect data about the reason people are supporting the call, and we need to know a lot of details about it before we can give a correct scientific, psychological explanation.”

The host took over the conversation and said,

“Then let's ask one of the specialists what they know about the call. I would like to direct this question to anyone who has definite, reliable information about it.”

One of the guests who represented the media, which was linked to the ruling party and represented many of the owners of capital and production in the country, said,

“We know very little reliable information about the activists and supporters of this call. It has mainly been driven by young people using social media. They could be driven by many motives. We might see their motives as anarchic and not based in reality.”

One of the guests representing the liberal media interrupted him.

“This is an unfair abstraction of the facts. It’s clear that these people are suffering from difficult economic conditions that have created difficulties in their everyday lives. This has resulted in their feeling frustration, which led them to believe that their only option was to end their lives. This is a very difficult choice. We shouldn’t always underestimate things and fail to examine them carefully just because they don’t directly concern us. It could happen that one day we might get a surprise, when we also find that something has been imposed on our lives that we cannot escape. We should ask ourselves an important question: *Why they did not call for a general strike as an acceptable, a better, alternative to collective suicide?*’

He continued.

“I think I can contribute to the answer without neglecting other people’s theories and opinions. The choice of suicide came because the people who are advocating the call wanted to deliver a stronger message this time. The message is that they do not

want to compromise this time. Increasing wages might not be enough to address the huge rise in the cost of living. Then there would be the need for another strike, and even then they might not achieve a result that will make the working class satisfied and happy.”

The host asked,

“This question is realistic and logical. Many of us didn’t pay enough attention to it, but could you tell us what you know about the call and those who support it? Does the call mean that the culture of suicide is going to become common worldwide?”

The expert replied,

“I know there are students who excel in their studies but are descended from poor families, workers in low-class jobs that everyone else relies on. They are worried that they won’t be able to complete their studies. They can’t afford health insurance for themselves and their families. I know many people who have jobs but cannot save for a down payment for a small simple house. I know some of them have been living on unemployment benefits for a year or more.

“What we now need is to visit the inner city streets we normally avoid. We don’t like to think about what’s going on in them. Maybe someone might say that the roads and fields are open to these aspiring young people to reach better positions in their lives, possibly even making them leaders of the country.

“If anyone argues that, we must not forget that nobody has managed to achieve such success without acknowledging the support, either financial or political, of big companies and

political parties. Actually, nobody could hope for such success without such help, unless they are one of those who develop devices or inventions that whet the appetites of the big investors or authoritarian companies that control and lead the economies of the world.”

One of the politicians from the ruling party took the opportunity to reply.

“This situation, I mean the economic recession, exists throughout the whole world and isn’t confined just to our country. The government has inherited serious problems from its predecessor. The world economy is suffering from all kinds of difficulties, and we are all suffering as a result of the weakness of the economy.”

The host intervened.

“And what do you think has changed between the current government and the government preceded it? Unemployment is still the same, and nothing has changed in health care. Some say it has become more difficult even for those who have health insurance, and those who don’t have it are in real trouble. Health costs, consisting of hospital running costs, staff wages, and the cost of drugs, have increased rapidly. Many people, particularly the old, cannot afford health insurance, and the government cannot fulfill its promises.

“There is a feeling among people that the government spends a lot of money on overseas affairs that do not seem to benefit them in any obvious way. Rather, they seem to favor big

companies. Most major companies invest in other countries while unemployment is growing at home.

“But let’s return to our theme, which is those who are calling for suicide, and ask how we can stop the call. How can we save people’s lives who intend to kill themselves? The question to all of you is—”

At this point, the representative of the media that supported the government intervened.

“It’s certain that this issue has deep roots. We cannot lose sight of them or denounce them, but, at the same time, suicide can’t be a solution to the problems of the working class. Therefore, it’s very important that we don’t assign it too much importance and think that it will be the end, that everyone will choose to end his life this way.”

Then the opposition media spokesperson interrupted him.

“It’s this attitude which is scary! We are afraid that governments never move before disasters strike. And by disasters, I mean the ones we are causing by our impact on the environment through the abuse of all forms of energy.

“This call will also be a disaster and will precede other disasters that are bound to follow if we don’t act now to find out why it’s been caused. Then maybe we might be able to find some solutions.”

At this point, the host interrupted him to ask the Christian preacher about what could be done to attempt to stop the call, especially since religions don’t normally approve of suicide.

The preacher answered,

“This event cannot really be considered unusual, especially when we have transformed our lives so there is an obsession with materialistic needs and a vacuum of spirituality. People have moved away from the Lord and are not following his commandments. The Lord has commanded us to love one another and not to envy others because of what they have. If there is something that we are deprived of, we shouldn’t look at our deprivation as if it is something that will last forever. It will disappear, just like all the suffering, disadvantages, obstacles and difficulties that we face in our lives.”

One of the liberal journalists intervened, clearly condemning him.

“But, hey, Father, these people are not asking for luxury items. They ask for their rights to education and health care. I think you recognize that these are their rights and that they deserve that their children should not be exposed to severe poverty, which leads to sin and crime.

“I must say, I don’t know which are the disadvantages, difficulties, and suffering that must eventually disappear from our lives. But what about those who have been born into a life of disadvantage and poverty and live there right up to their deaths, not to mention those people who are born with disabilities, who will need special care and assistance from others throughout their lives?”

Then the Shiite cleric offered an opinion.

“Yes, much of what you say is true, but the reverend father meant that man should not lose hope. He should know that God can choose through his will whether someone will be rich or poor, so to object to an unfair system by committing suicide is to challenge the will of God.

“If one wants to object to an unfair system, then one should challenge it by peaceful means first. But if that challenge does not work, it can then be challenged by revolution, as our Imam Husain did against the bias and injustice of the State.”

The Sunni cleric decided to participate after the Shiite cleric had spoken so strongly. He interrupted without an introduction, as if he were delivering to the congregation in a mosque a religious jurisprudential lecture.

“There are a lot of lessons where we can get inspiration from Islam. Islam maintains justice, which enables the citizen’s voice to be heard by the Muslim ruler. It does not matter what status or class this Muslim citizen may be. The first caliphate of the State of Islam could maintain justice in the whole world without disobeying the Creator.”

The host spoke.

“Sorry to interrupt you, sir, but we have with us on the phone a professor of astrophysics. We would like him to join the discussion of this issue, as he represents the opposite camp of those with a spiritual faith. Yes, go ahead, professor.”

“Thank you for giving me the opportunity to participate and comment on this issue. I don’t feel I can recommend ways to handle this situation, because I know that it’s not my specialty. The problem does not stem from one source, nor is it an individual problem. It is deeply rooted in society and needs a group of specialists in economics, humanities, and social sciences to investigate it.

“But I have questions for the respected gentlemen who represent faith and the spiritual side about their recommended solutions for such a problem. My first question is to the reverend father. Can spiritual therapy provide health services to the family that does not have health insurance or when its breadwinner has been unemployed for a period of more than one year?

And to the Shiite sheikh, I would like to ask if he wants these people to rise up and revolt like his Imam Husain. As far as I know, the people who are the followers of Imam Husain in the land where Husain was murdered, which is Iraq today, have not been able to revolt against their governments, or even raise their voices to follow in the footsteps of their Imam, imitating what Imam Husain himself did. Furthermore, if I may ask him and the others concerned, where will their revolt take them against the State violence and suppression that we find in many parts of the world?

“News from Iraq reports that Husain’s Shiite followers, who presently rule Iraq, do not care or pay the least attention to looking after their followers, nor did they do any good for anyone but themselves. On the contrary, they seem to have

bankrupted their country as a result of the theft of its wealth, which the politicians shared in one of the biggest robberies in history. And I call on the sheikh to offer his spiritual advice to those who are ruling over his country and guide them to observe the values that Imam Husain represented and which he believes in.

“As for the Sunni sheikh, I say to him—in fact, I beg him—please deliver a lecture to those young people who are called and tempted by his colleague sheikhs through the illusive promise of the women who are waiting for them after their battles and campaigns and the nymphs who are waiting for them in that other imaginary world, in their promised paradise, soon after they kill themselves and take the lives of hundreds of innocent people with them. I repeat my question to him. Why doesn’t he provide a little advice to those who intend to, and insist on, committing suicide in the ugliest way in order to kill hundreds of innocent victims?

“Isn’t this enough public hypocrisy?

“I’m not forgetting to repeat my advice to the reverend father, who needs to give a lecture on ethics to the many church members who have psychologically destroyed the lives of thousands of children who have been sexually interfered with and abused by people who they trusted as God’s representatives on earth.”

At this point, the Sunni cleric replied with a sharp, upset tone.

“Those people you have mentioned do not represent the true

religion of Islam. Islam is known for its mercy and compassion. The claims you have raised are meaningless because you do not believe in the Creator of the universe.”

And the Shiite cleric agreed with a nod of his head, saying that they were nothing but deluded young teenagers who didn't know the truth of Islam.

Then a member of the general public raised his hand, asking for permission to speak. The host welcomed the interruption to ease the tension between the speakers. A man who seemed to be middle-age stood up and said,

“I must apologize in advance before I start, because I know what I say will be hurtful to some people here today. But I really can't avoid saying what I want to say. I don't want to add any more unnecessary words that don't yield any benefit and never achieve any results.

“All that has been discussed and suggested as solutions for such a big problem as this—which I think will be followed by even bigger problems if we cannot nip it in the bud now—all of this talk will actually get us nowhere. First of all, I'd like to ask the reverend father if he thought that these people need lessons in God's love for us, our love for God, and how this love should be expressed.

“May I ask the reverend father what was the good of these lessons when other reverend fathers were, and some probably still are, sexually interfering with children who were unfortunate enough to be placed in their care for a period of their lives?”

And to the Shiite cleric I said, “Where were the Shiites in Iraq

from the revolution of Imam Husain?

“They have been celebrating and remembering his principles for centuries. Why don’t they revolt against the gangs of clerics who took advantage of the conditions intended for political groups in the country who came and claimed power, without having any qualification for it or deserving to be in the position of leading a rich country?

“Then they managed to eventually transform their country into a poor, failed state, begging for help from other countries, after being robbed by both political and religious parties.

“And to the Sunni cleric I say,

“Why don’t you offer religious encouragement to the people of the Islamic State, who enslave women for various reasons and carry out beheadings of anyone who doesn’t approve their behavior or when they don’t like their opinion and way of life?

“And why don’t you preach to those countries that protect such people and provide them with the financial and media support they need?”

He was interrupted by the three clerics, who said that all this was just a mixing of the cards and it was not true to say that here.

The Sunni cleric once again added that they did not represent Islam. At that point, someone from the audience suddenly stood up and, without asking for permission from the host, said in an extremely emotional tone,

“Sorry ... I’m sorry. I have something to say that I feel I must say to everyone and have it highlighted enough to make it clear

to the world.

“You’ve stuffed our heads for so many years with these rumors that those people do not represent Islam. Perhaps the reverend father would say the same thing about the priests and monks, that they do not represent Christ, the Lord. I just want to say something—I have to say it.

“I am a Muslim and have been since I was born. Yet I don’t know yet who represents Islam.

“There are millions like me out there who think the same way as I do, and, probably, millions of Christians feel the same. But their problem is easier than our problem. We Muslims have emigrated from our countries and left everything behind. Today those monsters who you say don’t even represent Islam have followed us to our adopted countries. We were hoping we could stay away from their dirty living and their brutality.

“We have fallen between the jaws of the pliers—between those who hate us in the communities we turned to seeking refuge and those who followed us here to burn all our hopes in a country where we hoped we could live in peace.

“We went through a long period of vetting by the security authorities in order to be granted immigration or asylum status. They wanted to know about our past histories and previous convictions, if we had any. We waited for years before we were accepted as immigrants or refugees because of these security checks. Yet, today we see thousands of criminals, believers of radical religious ideologies and others who had previously been fighting with terrorists, following us. They have got into

countries easily and been offered all kinds of help, but they insist on playing a role in our destruction.

“And all of this is going on under slogans that hide their true meanings. The Declaration of Human Rights actually protects and helps criminals, but these slogans show no interest in the rights of the innocent people who fall in pain and agony under the aggression of these criminals. So what kind of justice are government representatives and politicians talking about and defending?

“I’m not just talking about myself or my new country. The same thing is going on in all the other countries that are receiving and accepting refugees too. Could we say that the countries that accept refugees, whoever they are, want them as cheap labor? Such cheap labor will push the younger generations to suicide because they will not find work that will provide them with the basic life necessities they have become accustomed to.

“At the same time, it’s obvious that if people are involved in politics, they will always live a life of privilege. They will always be able to earn a good income. And when their political careers are over, they are paid millions of dollars on the lecture circuit—they might be called lectures, but they are of *no* value. They are nothing more than bribes to the lecturer to smooth the path for companies to get favorable contracts to maximize their profits and avoid legislation that might obstruct them.

“I don’t believe that this is limited to our country, but it appears in our country as the most outrageous example. This is the main reason such corruption is justified in other countries of

the world. They are given protection by these corrupt systems. We, the immigrants to this new world, experienced more than enough suffering when we were young, during childhood and youth in our native countries.

“And when we had enough, we decided to emigrate to the new world, hoping to find really advanced world standards that can provide us with a new atmosphere in order to integrate ourselves in this world and give it what we have, at the same time receiving its benefits. But we were surprised when we found ourselves classed the same as those who deliberately came for the purpose of destroying first this country ... and then the world.

“We can’t accept the view that says the countries that have accepted us as newcomers to our new homeland, for which we thank them, cannot distinguish between those who came in all sincerity to integrate in the new world and those who came with the serious intention of destroying civilizations.

“Everything is clear now, even to the most naive and gullible—we have started to live a new type of suffering.”

The host interrupted him.

“Do you believe the government didn’t realize the level of responsibility it has for the people and what they are suffering because of the rising rate of unemployment?”

“We cannot see the light at the end of the tunnel. Some people always defend the government and say that the problem of unemployment is part of the general problem of the global

economy.

“I think the time has come to ask the rabbi this question and learn his opinion on this subject.”

The rabbi answered,

“It’s certainly a problem we all share, from the government and business owners to the common people. This problem is the result of the division between a different understanding of how to manage our lives, given our capabilities and capacities on the one hand and our belief in the government to solve the problem on the other.”

The host asked,

“I didn’t clearly understand your point, Rabbi. Do you think that it’s important or even possible to reach a solution to this issue now or attempt to prevent it happening in the future?”

The rabbi replied,

“There isn’t a problem that doesn’t have a solution if we want to solve it. If we have the will and desire to solve it, it is achievable.

“That’s all I can say in the time we have available.”

The host concluded,

“Good. Let’s hope that we now know more about the details of the call. We hope that its supporters will reconsider and it will just become a bad dream we will never actually have to face.”

John

Review with the Soul

John stayed silent. He did not want to comment on what Christine had just said. She brought him his mug of coffee and asked him again to help her to think calmly and talk about the extremists who had sent out the call. It had not crossed anyone's mind; it had shaken their lives and raised a whirlwind of dangerous ideas they had not experienced before. She said to him,

“John, let us think seriously about ourselves and the children, instead of being affiliated with those who might lead we know not where. Who has given them the right to lead us anyway?”

“You are capable of thinking for yourself better than anyone else who wants to think on your behalf, whoever they might be.”

John replied,

“You know very well I've been living in a state of frustration for nearly a year. How long do you think I can go on like this? Can you even imagine what that is like?”

Christine said,

“You’re not alone in feeling like this. I am going through the same situation with you. Don’t you realize that?”

John answered,

“I know that, but I’m not forcing you to live like this, and I’m not forcing you to abandon it either. What I said to you two days ago was only an opinion. I might have been thinking stupidly. You can accept it or reject it.

“Personally, I can say that I don’t expect a better life for myself than this, and I am rejecting this life because it makes me despise myself. I don’t want to live with this constant feeling of self-hatred. There’s nothing in it for me.

“I don’t think it’s possible for me to have anything.

“There will be a gathering tomorrow of many people who feel like I feel. Some of them, perhaps, might even feel worse than me. I’ll try to make my mind up after that meeting. If you want to accompany me to the meeting, you can. You don’t have to be a supporter to attend.

“I know there will be many reporters from the news media, as well as many people who enjoy watching the pain of others. You’re not one of those, but you are one of those whose ill fortune imposes suffering on them as a result of their love for others. I know that.

“I’m saying I am so grateful to you. I really didn’t want this to be the end for us. It seems to be full of heaviness and darkness.”

Christine listened silently to his words. She bowed her head, supported by her hands, and looked at the floor.

Then the telephone rang. She went to see who was calling. It was her mother.

“Hello, Mom. How are the boys doing with you and Dad? I hope they are not causing you too much trouble.”

Christine’s mom answered,

“No, not at all. Your father and I are enjoying having them stay with us. They are filling the house with activity. You know it’s normally very quiet and boring here.”

Christine was relieved.

“Thank God they haven’t been too much trouble. Do you think they’re happy staying with you? Especially Tommy—does he miss me much?”

Her mom answered,

“Yes of course he’s thinking about you and wishes you could be here with him. I tell him you’ve got some work to do at home for the company. But he knows something’s going on and that things at school weren’t normal today.”

Christine replied,

“Yes, exactly. I think that this will continue for the next two days. But, Mom, I don’t feel very happy. I think it would be better, if possible, for the kids to stay with you for the next two days. I could bring their clothes over tomorrow morning. I’ll be coming with John tomorrow. He also wants to see them.”

Her mom reassured her.

“Don’t worry, Christine. I’d be delighted to have them with me for a few more days. You know I would.”

“Thank you, Mom. I’ll be with you tomorrow morning. I

mean, I'll come over and bring them clothes for the next two days. See you tomorrow, Mom."

Christine's conversation with her mother ended, and she felt relatively comfortable. John asked her, "Why did you ask her to keep the children for two more days? I could have been with them tonight and tomorrow here in the house."

Christine tried to explain.

"You really aren't in any fit state to put up with the children's questions and fuss. I'll be going to the meeting with you tomorrow. It wouldn't be right to ask my mother to take care of the children again tomorrow because I don't want to tell her that we're attending that meeting."

John asked,

"What are you going to say to your mother if she asks why the children don't stay at home with me tomorrow? I'm not working."

Christine explained,

"I've already told her that you're looking for work. I hope that will be enough. She's accepted that excuse. There's no point in changing what we've already told her. We can go to see the kids in the morning for half an hour and then leave them there. I only hope they don't want us to stay with them for too long."

John said, "Let's hope so."

The Street

The busy city streets were different in many ways; both the cars and the pedestrians seemed altered. But most of the shops were open, apart from some of the fast food stalls and some of the ordinary shops in the shopping plazas.

Between one corner and another, news reporters were carrying microphones. Others were working from live-broadcast vehicles with satellite dishes with their cameramen. They were following the live-news reporters, who were searching for people they could stop for a few minutes to ask what they knew about this strange call and how much they were interested in it. As usual, the press had become very interested in the news not for its importance but because it had become an important part of the highly paid work done by the journalists who are well rewarded by their channels when they manage to get a scoop, particularly when it agreed with the political sympathies of the channel for which they worked.

However, often they didn't get anything for all their hard work and reasoning but criticism from their directors, who claim

that their reports were not in line with the channel's policy. The eventual fate of journalists who didn't follow the company line was often dismissal without warning. Some terrible experiences journalists had been witness to were examples of life's misery. They put themselves in such predicaments because of their recklessness and eagerness to report on the latest news. Sometimes their reporting lacked accuracy and missed the truth because they were carried away by the excitement of the situation. That had an effect on the way they wrote the news. Other people just altered the news to suit their political motives.

It was not known which laws governed these journalists. Many celebrity journalists fell victim to criticism, from the government and people in general, because of their risky attitudes and personal styles. As a result, they fell into a trap they were not clever enough to avoid.

The press and the media were both provocative in a way that humanity had not seen before. Since the last quarter of the twentieth century, they had influenced events and actions. Their very bad, indecent role was obvious in the second Gulf War in 1991, when almost all the world decided to punish a nation of innocent people just because their leader was a maniac.

The whole world had been taken in by the media; their objectives were generally without good intent. This led to the belief that the press was actually the Fourth Estate, whose influence was not officially recognized but was as important as the official elected government. If the world managed to reach the second half of the twenty-first century, the press would very

likely become the second authority after the executive authority. There would no longer be any justification for the legislature and the judiciary.

Nothing in this world was hard to believe.

Everything could happen.

In fact, there was no longer anything unbelievable.

At the intersection of two main streets in the busy city center, near the traffic lights and pedestrian crossings, a reporter from one of the news channels was choosing people from the passers-by in front of him. He stopped and spoke to them, holding a transmitting microphone. But it seemed most of those he was trying to stop did not want to talk about the issue or did not know what they could say about it. It was still too early for to discuss an event that had not yet been announced or might simply end up to be rumors.

This situation certainly encouraged some people who chose to offer their point of view, even when they are not asked, even though they might be ignorant of what their suggestions might result in.

People with busy lives do not usually have time to waste talking to reporters, to satisfy the reporters' hunger for what they would classify as "the general opinion from the people in the street," which was what the media channels wanted and was coveted by the sponsors.

An incident that demonstrated how shallow a lot of what the media channels did in their random street interviews happened

with a woman, who must have been in her mid- or early seventies. A reporter walked up very close and asked her,

“Madam, can I talk to you for a minute?”

He surprised the woman when he suddenly stepped too close to her, almost blocking her way. She had been walking as energetically as she could for her age and strength. She had slightly bent her head toward the ground, and she stopped suddenly as she tried to overcome her shock when he surprised her. When she had managed to steady herself, she realized there was a reporter in front of her with a microphone in his hand and a cameraman following behind, carrying a camera on his shoulder, directing the lens in her direction. She replied with a smile, saying,

“Yes?”

And then she fell silent, waiting to hear what he wanted to say to her.

The reporter asked,

“Can I ask you what you know about the people everybody is talking about in the news—I mean those who intend to commit suicide collectively?”

The woman looked confused.

“Aaaaah ... I don't think I have any information that warrants mentioning. I'm sorry to say I heard about it, but I didn't believe it.

“Is it real?”

The reporter replied,

“Yes ... it's certainly true. But do you think they intend to

commit suicide because they belong to a particular religious group, or because they are making a stand against the government's policy? What do you think is the reason for their attitude, and what are their intentions?"

"Aaaaah ... I don't know. I really don't know anything worth saying."

So the reporter tried to drag an attitude or opinion out of the old woman that would fall in line with his channel's point of view. But people are usually sincere and avoid speaking about something they don't understand. This made the woman tell the truth; the reporter didn't like what she said. If his interview with her wasn't broadcast, they would probably delete this part of the report and show interviews with people whose answers were more compatible with the channel's point of view.

Sometimes they might leave room for a few simple statements of which they do not approve so that it didn't look too obvious that they were manipulating the interviews.

Just a few steps from where the reporter and his team were talking to the old lady was a reporter who worked for another channel, its main competitor. The channel supported the party currently in power in the government. The correspondent was doing the same thing as the first reporter. But he was looking for those who would talk about the situation in line with the government's stance, or, at the very least, remove any suspicion that the government had a role in creating the crisis; people were being called to reflect and commit collective suicide as a result of the poor economic situation. The financial emergency had been

caused by bad economic policies and increased by the government's inability to solve problems that should have been given priority and greater importance instead of concentrating on things not directly related to the people that did not affect their lives positively.

Successive governments had looked on society and ordinary people as experimental fields. Nothing could help the public or save them from the negative outcomes of these experiments, unless they were lucky, if the government passed new laws or organized programs that sabotaged the economy and development of the country.

That was how the media continued to take advantage of emergencies like this situation. It didn't like it when there was nothing interesting or exciting going on.

Basically, they are happy when tragedies happen and irritated when they don't happen. That was why reporters were ready to volunteer to report on tragedies and catastrophes, even though travel caused them difficulties and risks. That was how journalism became such a rewarding career for reporters who made their living from the world's tragedies. And the media channels made their profit from those activities.

It was very difficult most of the time to even detect media bias unless someone was very insightful and could see the factionalism that revealed the forces under the surface. The media was nothing more than a profession that depended on deception and forgery to gain an audience of people who they then might push to their doom.

The reporter then took the opportunity to approach a young man. He seemed to be in his thirties. He was smartly dressed, wearing a suit and carrying a briefcase, indicating he was an office worker. The reporter went toward him, carrying the microphone in his hand to show that he wanted to interview him. He greeted the young man.

“Hello ... can I talk to you for a minute?”

The young man answered,

“Aaaah ... yes, that’s okay.”

The reporter asked,

“Do you have any idea what’s been going on around us lately?”

The young man was confused.

“Um ... I don’t understand. What do you mean by ‘what is happening around us’?”

The reporter answered,

“I mean, you must have heard about the group of people who intend to commit suicide collectively to object to all the things they feel are making their lives unbearable.”

The young man said,

“Aaaah ... yes ... What about them? You must know more about them than I do. You’re from a news organization. You get all the news.”

The reporter replied,

“Yes, we know some things, but still it’s the people who have the important information, because they are living the reality and

might know some of the people involved in this protest or others who are against it. That's why we're trying to convey what people know to the general public, who want to know what's going on."

The young man said,

"Yes, I understand that, but what I know, and what other people know, might not be true. It's not really going to contribute to what we know about this issue. I could be wrong. I'm sure you know the best way to deliver information to the public, and I hope that information will contain a great deal of truth."

The reporter tried to reassure him.

"As you know, we always aim at the truth ... always."

The young man answered,

"That's what I hope."

The reporter continued to question him.

"Yes, definitely, but may I ask what type of business you're in? Forgive me for asking, but it's important to know. You must be some kind of executive or, maybe, an official in a company, or"

The young man interrupted him.

"No, I'm not ... Actually, I teach economics at the university. My conversation with you is based on the importance of the facts. The truth needs to be ascertained before we teach facts as information and knowledge."

The reporter replied,:

Ah ... I can see you like to debate matters. If I could ask you once again to say what you know about those who intend to

commit suicide ... Could you say anything that you would like people to know?

The young man replied,

“Actually, I’m not up to date with the news. I’m more preoccupied with issues related to my work. I might be wrong, but I believe that the media picks and chooses which issues and events it wants to highlight. There could be more important events going on somewhere else.”

The reporter argued,

“The media does not create events but only seeks to highlight them, and—”

The young man interrupted.

“Yes, I know that, but you clearly know what it’s like when a certain event happens at a location and the media rush over to report it. Everything becomes totally focused on that event, as if nothing is going on anywhere else in the world. Nothing is moving, no one has died ... you know what I mean. Then again, when serious events don’t happen, I’ve noticed the media starts reviewing ancient events, trying to comment on them again and again, to interpret them for the average people, because they need to have everything explained to them.

“However, human history proves the opposite. Mankind does not learn lessons from the tragic events that people went through in the past. People still fight wars, and tragedies from the past are still being repeated.”

The reporter finished with the young man, saying,

“Thank you again for your time. And we wish you all the best

and hope you won't be affected by this situation.”

The reporter concluded his interview with the young man because he couldn't get enough material to broadcast that would support the point of view he was trying to share about this event. After that he had nothing to do but head toward another person. He didn't know what they would say or how he would talk to them.

Bob Past and Present

Bob couldn't avoid surrendering to his suspicions and forebodings, which were focused on the call. It had stirred up unpleasant memories from the past, his own past, and what had happened and what he had thought.

Those memories asked for a frank answer from him ... an honest, frank answer from the heart. He couldn't understand why the memories had surfaced now or why there was a question waiting to be answered,

Would you have supported the call if it had come more than forty years ago?

What if it had appeared when he had been going through all those years of suffering?

In that case, one could ask how he now had the nerve to criticize those who called on others to support them in their call for suicide.

Bob went to sit on a chair in the corner of the family room, having finished eating dinner, while the rest of the family stayed at the dinner table. Nicola, Jonathan and Josephine shared

conversation, but Bob reviewed in his mind all that had happened during the day, including his discussion with Christine, and where that had lead. He also reflected on all the feelings, concerns, and memories that were being unleashed.

He asked himself how a man could ever free himself of his unconscious and subconscious minds, or what might be called feelings disconnected from the soul.

Bob was thinking about the feelings that overwhelmed humans, including everything outside the soul and the ego.

Bob suddenly noticed Jonathan when he brought him a mug of tea and asked Bob if he minded him invading his privacy and sitting with him.

Everyone had noticed that he had seemed pensive; Nicola had commented on it when he left the table. She explained to them that he had been shaken up by the call and shared his concern that its results would not be easy for anyone.

Jonathan sat on the chair opposite his father. After a few moments of silence, Bob blurted a random question, although he wasn't particularly interested in the answer.

“What will the second step of your work project be?”

Jonathan, surprised by the question, answered, “I don't know at the moment. We'll have to wait a bit before we can decide properly. We might need to change or add a new technique for the program. The truth is I don't know.

“The world today responds to developments contrary to logic—the logic of expectations...”

Jonathan trailed off.

Bob said,

“Yes ... the logic of expectations. This is what the new world cannot deal with ... nor even accept! The logic of expectations...”

“Clearly, Dad, you’re thinking about the reasons behind this invitation to suicide. Do you think it could actually happen? And if it does happen, do you really think it will be widespread?”

“I’ll have to answer that tomorrow!”

Jonathan asked, “And why would tomorrow change anything?”

Bob answered, “Tomorrow I’ll be able to see more clearly ... Yes, I’ll be able to answer you, and myself, better tomorrow.”

Christine

Battle of the Last Hope

It was the morning when the meeting of those planning suicide was scheduled to take place. As well as those contemplating suicide, people who were curious and wanted to get to know more about the call would also be present, plus the usual large number of journalists who were there for the media coverage.

Christine woke up feeling energetic and hopeful, which encouraged her to think that she might succeed in distancing the specter of suicidal thinking from her husband, John, and end this nightmare forever.

She found John was awake before her. He had gone down to the ground floor of the house to sit in the living room with a coffee mug in his hand, as usual before breakfast, if he was going to sit down to breakfast.

But when he was working he tended to leave home early in the morning and drop into a coffee shop on the main street, close to home, where he used to have a cup of coffee and a donut.

It was a tradition followed by thousands of others working some distance away from their home when they needed to be in the workplace early in the morning; they had coffee with a donut or cake for breakfast. Some of them ate in their cars if it was a long drive to work or they sat in a morning traffic jam.

Christine came down to the ground floor and called out a greeting to John.

He greeted her the same way.

His feelings weren't showing on his face, and she couldn't predict what he might do. However, he didn't seem to want to talk about anything. He asked Christine when they would set off for her parents' house. She replied that she would be ready to go in an hour.

He turned to ask,

“What about going to the office ... I mean going to work?”

Christine answered,

“It's not really important to go to the office today, or, at least, it's not important to go on time. I'll call the office and leave a message that I won't be in first thing. Later on, if I need to be late, or decide not to go, I can contact the manager, I mean Bob, and let him know when I expect to be in the office and tell him I can't come in today.

“Oh my God, how I wish things could go back to where they were before today. I wish this day could be a decisive day ... so that our life can go back to normal.”

She intended that John should hear what she said. But he

remained silent and didn't respond or make any comment.

When it was time to leave to go her parents' house, Christine took the driver's seat; John sat in the front seat beside her.

He seemed frustrated, showing signs of psychological weakness.

In fact, he felt close to a total collapse. He felt as if he were stepping toward a fate that no one would want. Privately, he felt maybe he had spoken too soon when he had told his wife that he wanted to join those who had announced their intention to commit suicide. And, as he was being truthful with himself, he felt a moral obligation to carry out what he had announced.

He'd felt sure of himself and had called his wife to share it with their two children. But now he felt he had been too fast, unwise in what he had said and in his enthusiasm to support the call. Christine was actually right when she'd said that last night and that she didn't know what this call was and when she asked whether he knew who the people were making the call.

John was living a state where he lacked self-respect, not only because he was unemployed but also because he might not be able to carry out the suicide he said he believed in and wanted to do. Now he seemed to be trying to find a way out for himself.

He still looked on his life as futile.

He was a burden on his wife and didn't know how long he could carry on like this. His wife was supporting and standing by him. But who could guarantee how long she would put up with him, especially if he remained unemployed?

This was very likely to remain the case because of the

economic situation, which was still continuing around him.

Is it fair for a man to live in such a state of conflict with himself?

What can I do to maintain self-respect?

Is there any real way that a man can retain his natural and truthful self-respect?

Christine remained silent while driving toward her parents' house. She was not ready to discuss any subject with John. Her mind was like a prison, chained to what she would see today in the meeting.

What would her position be?

How would her remarks reinforce her view of and position on these people?

She just wanted to distance John from his conviction that suicide was the only way out of the bad situation he lived in for him and his family, as well as his intention of taking them with him.

She had been trying to imagine what the meeting would be like, who would be speaking and how convincing and logical their words might be.

How could a man talk to others in order to convince them to commit suicide?

Could this possibly solve personal, social, and metaphysical problems?

It would not be an easy task.

How would people receive the speakers' words? Would there be an opportunity to question any of the speakers?

More importantly, very importantly, where would be John? Would he be with the speakers calling for collective suicide or would he be with the suicidal?

How, when, and where would the implementation of the call begin? Could it possibly end up being mere words, without anyone daring to carry it out?

A lot of questions were going round in her head before they got to her parents' house. She stopped her car in front of the garage door and noticed her father's car was not there.

They both got out of the car, and she rang the doorbell. Her mother opened the door for them, surrounded by her grandchildren, Susan and Tommy, who looked extremely happy to see their parents. Both were racing to talk about what had happened between them and their grandparents last night and how they had enjoyed staying with them.

John hugged his son and daughter, keen to lengthen the embrace as a reason to keep them with him a little longer. He hugged them longer than he had in the last few days, when dark thoughts about leaving his wife and two children by his own hand had started to haunt him. These were moments when he felt as if he still had some control over his ability to choose and that he felt able to distinguish between things. He could distinguish between good and bad things alike and felt that not all the bad things should be rejected. Similarly, he thought, we don't always need to hang on to good things and insist on keeping them in our

possession.

It was a perplexing equation.

Christine immediately asked her mother where her father was. Her mother said that he liked going out early in the morning with a group of friends to the nearby river to observe the journey of the salmon, which migrated, swimming upstream against the current, until reaching the destination where spawning and then death took place.

The species of fish carried out a long, suicidal trip to reach their final, end-of-life destiny ... that was, if they even managed to reach the locations where they spawned. A lot of the fish would be taken from the water by raptors, hunted by birds of prey when they crossed through the shallow areas of the river. Some of them jumped out of the water in an attempt to pass over the rocky barriers. They might fail after their first attempt and fall on to the rocks or back into a shallow stream of water, where they kept battling their overwhelming desire to return to the water, back to life—or the rest of what was left of life—return to life, to water. These desperate attempts would mostly fail or end up in failure. They would die stranded on the rocks or by being picked up by a bird of prey or one of the carnivores, including bears, waiting for this opportunity on both sides of the river. It was another form of invitation to suicide, but this time it was called for and supported by unmerciful nature!

Yet what was stranger about the call was that it attracted those who had lost interest in their own lives; they might not have been rewarded by life, or they just found life too difficult.

John thought there was still a lot in this life we couldn't fathom to this day.

We can only stand in front of it in the position of an astonished observer!

Christine's mother approached her to whisper in her ear, saying she was happy that her father had found pleasure in recent years to go out for short hiking and fishing trips and to enjoy nature with some of his friends.

Christine was aware that her father had gone through years of depression, but now he had obviously survived that period when the blues and unexplainable thoughts obsessed him. Such thoughts could not have been explained without the advice of a psychiatrist.

Her mother told her she was happy the call for suicide had not occurred thirty or forty years ago. Otherwise, her father would probably have been one of its keenest supporters.

Christine was shocked and said,

"Do you really mean what you are saying? Was my father's condition that bad?"

"I feel really confused and frightened!"

Christine's mother asked,

"Why are you feeling frightened now?"

Christine answered,

"No ... it's nothing important. I just find what you are saying odd, because I didn't realize my father's condition was once so bad."

"It was, but I didn't let you find out how bad it was."

Christine said,

“So I did well when I brought Susan and Tommy to stay with you last night. It was a good thing? I mean, you’ve enjoyed your time with them, although I know they must have caused you some trouble as well.”

Christine tactfully managed to avoid the subject of the similarities between what her mother had done years ago, when she didn’t let her know about her father’s depression during her childhood, and what she herself had just done, when she didn’t want her children to know what was going on in their father’s mind either.

Her mother replied,

“Don’t say that. We’ve lost a lot of enjoyment in life. We’ve nothing left, apart from a few interests we are using to try to bridge the vast space of boring emptiness that is slowly stifling us!”

Christine looked at her watch to see how long they had left. It was about eleven o’clock in the morning.

Suddenly her phone rang. She saw that it was Bob when his name appeared on the phone screen. She realized he was going to ask why she hadn’t come into the office. She knew she should have told him about why she couldn’t go to the office today. But she also knew he wouldn’t be too strict with her, especially when he found out that she was going to accompany her husband to the assembly to try to change his mind and free him from the nightmare of suicide.

She answered,

“Good morning. I know I haven’t behaved professionally—”

Bob interrupted her.

“You don’t need to say that. I just wanted to be sure everything is going well with you and John... ”

She walked out of the living room, where John and her mother were sitting, to continue talking to Bob. She said,

“I’m sorry I didn’t call you to ask for permission not to be in the office today. I’ve got to go with John to this meeting, which I think I told you about it yesterday ... In fact, I don’t recall if I actually did mention it or not ... The meeting will be between those who are calling ... You know what I mean.”

“Yes ... yes, I know that. I am ... as I told you, I called you to check on you and John, not for anything else. Yes ... And the other thing is that I didn’t go to the office today either. I don’t think I’ll go in for the rest of the day. I called the office and learned that you were not there. That’s why I called you. Tell me how things are going with John. What do you think you’re going to do at the meeting?”

Christine replied,

“I don’t know much yet, but I have to go. It’s my personal battle with them! I won’t let them take him from me.

“I have to stand right next to him.

“I can see him gradually falling apart, one minute after the other.”

Bob reassured her,

“You’re my eldest daughter. I’ll always be beside you. I feel it’s my battle too.

“I don’t really know why I feel like this, but it’s certainly my battle, and I have to win it as well.”

Christine said,

“I’ll do what I can. I hope everything will be all right.”

Bob answered,

“Let me know what happens. I will be waiting for your news.”

After the call ended, Christine remained silent, standing still for a few moments, holding the phone close to her lips, trying to recover and regain her focus, getting ready for her next step. She was surprised by the intensity of Bob’s interest in this issue.

Is it just because I am part of the background to the call, because of John’s involvement and his belief in it?

No, no, never. Bob was interested in learning about the call before he knew John was one of the people who were convinced by it.

What does this mean?

Why does he care about, and why is he interested in, his secretary’s husband’s problems?

What a strange and confused situation.

She regained her focus and went back into the room, where her husband and her mother had been talking while she had been on the phone with Bob. The kids were busy with their toys and games. She asked John whether the time had come. She pretended in front of her mother that John had an appointment for a job interview.

John hesitated and responded,

“Aahh, yes. I think we should get going in order to be on time for the interview.”

They managed to get away from their children after promising to take them to the zoo on the weekend.

On the way to the gathering place, John was silent, gloomy, and grim and didn't seem to be interested in anything as they drove along. He was like someone being taken to the execution chamber, but wearing his usual clothes. He looked miserable. As for Christine, she returned to her thoughts about the gathering and what she would do, as well as what Bob had talked about.

Christine didn't know that Bob himself was on his way to the same assembly.

Bob

The Past and the Gathering

Bob was in his car, on his way to the gathering in the largest park in the big city that was a world-famous financial center.

Today, he was not a person who could control his hand movements. He was confused and hesitant and felt slightly claustrophobic inside the car.

He pressed the air conditioner button and felt relatively comfortable, but soon he noticed the air had become colder than he could stand. It was late October, and he really felt the pinch of the cold air. Then he pressed the button again to turn the air conditioner off.

Moments later he felt a desire to open the car windows and inhale fresh, cold air, but the breeze was stronger than he liked. He then closed the car windows. He wished he could find somewhere nearby where he could park the car so he could walk the rest of the way to the gathering place. However, it was farther than he was used to walking. The streets were busy and there was a chance of rain. It was quite cloudy, and he didn't know what

weather forecast was. Finally, he decided to stop his car at the nearest underground parking lot so that he could go to the gathering site on foot.

After he left the parking lot he walked toward the main street, crowded with people.

He knew the city very well. It was where he began his life's struggle. In fact, it was in this big city where he fought his first major battle, the first fight of his life.

He wished it was his first and only fight, the only battle against many, many of those who were fighting for the same purpose for which he was fighting—fighting to attain a high position, which almost every man sought to reach. Or, more correctly, some men, not all men.

Perhaps everyone was ready to crush the others, everyone possessed a readiness to bypass the rights of others, ready to counterfeit, commit fraud and forgery—ready for every bad thing that might help achieve the desired purpose and quest.

Isn't survival only for the fittest?

How can I be the fittest without being able to express all the power and capacity to win in the end?

Don't they say that war is a trick?

Could there be honor standards in wars?

Could there be knighthood and chivalry?

Or is this just nonsense, with no truth in reality?

He kept walking, bowing his head, looking at the ground, trying to avoid looking in people's faces, as if the people who

were walking in the opposite direction knew what was going on in his mind ... know his memories, which were not limited to specific events.

But could this be real and true?

Could it be that Bob had exceeded the rights of others, blocked them, oppressed them, or denied them?

Could it be that Bob had ruthlessly crushed other competitors in his work?

Could it be that Bob had caused the suicide of people who had served him and helped him to reach his position, this position?

What could he do to erase the memories of an unforgettable past?

The Suicide Gathering

Christine and John had nearly reached the gathering place. They had to park their car on a relatively distant side street and walk along the streets to the public park where the gathering would take place. It seemed remarkable to them that there were so many people marching in the same direction, obviously heading toward the same destination.

Police car sirens could be heard from time to time, confirming that something unusual was going on and that there was a greater police presence than usual in the vicinity of the park.

Christine grabbed John's hand, and they both walked, first briskly and then dragging their feet at other times. She wanted to keep her hand in his on the pretext of letting him help her get through the crowds who were trudging along. But really, the truth was that it made her feel safe being closer to him. In fact, both of them felt the need to lift their spirits by being close to each other. Such a feeling was always needed. It didn't matter what else was going on, whether one was feeling happy or sad.

The tall trees surrounding the big park began to appear in the distance. Through the narrow gaps on the horizon, sections

appeared between the short distances separating the high buildings.

The crowds grew in size as they approached the meeting place. She expected to see a podium for the people who were going to make speeches about the call. She also expected loudspeakers, because it was important that the speakers' voices be heard loud and clear. People needed to hear the reason for the call. There should be an open discussion, so that people could learn more details about its basis and reasons. Even if there were hidden reasons, the discussion couldn't be totally mysterious. The talk had to be clear at this mysterious gathering. This was part of what went on Christine's mind about what might she see at the gathering. It was only her imagination.

They arrived the outskirts of the crowd and still couldn't distinguish the people who were participating in the call and supporting it from those who were only spectators, recording the event mentally, looking at their surroundings and wondering who was going to commit suicide and who was just watching.

Only the journalists were easily identifiable because they wore ID badges and carried microphones. The cameramen joined them so they could broadcast directly from the scene. They were the dancers at every ceremony, every funeral, every joy, and every tragedy.

One might wonder if the media had ever been actively involved in any remedial conduct or reconciliation in respect of any of these serious public occasions. Maybe, but it's difficult to remember anyone doing so.

Bob reached the other side of the crowd and began to slow down as he approached the gathering people. Everyone was heading toward the center of the park, expecting and waiting for someone to come out to address the crowd.

Bob was not less motivated than those who were huddled, waiting eagerly to see who was going to be the spokesman.

What would he talk about?

What would motivate the speaker and those affiliated with him to choose to support this call, to choose suicide as a solution to their problems?

Maybe Bob was more motivated than many of the people attending.

There was something about suicide that fascinated him, this call in particular.

Between the masses of the crowd, a group of men began to gather near the podium. It looked like a gathering of football players getting together to plan before they played. One of them split off and headed toward the simple podium, which was nothing more than a collection of small tables arranged together in a line and supporting each other.

He climbed up on the podium; one of those who were with him in the group came over and handed him a microphone. He picked it up and walked in a small circle, his steps short and slow, so that he could have a good view of the crowd around him. Then, after a minute or so, he raised the microphone close to his mouth and started to scream in a strong, loud voice.

“Oh, life, good-bye ... good-bye ... An un-regrettable farewell.

“Good-bye.

“It was an unfortunate event...

“We did not choose...

“In fact, we could not choose.

“We did not have the right to choose.

“We were not asked one day, ‘What is your choice?’

“We were forced to be part of those who made up this arrangement.

“We were told by those who lived it and finished their journey before us to call it by the name *life*.

“We don’t know who gave it this name!

“He could be the one who drew the shape of it, the shape of ... this life.

“Was he an old king, as old as history?

“Or an emperor who imposed his beliefs on those who submit to him?

“Or, perhaps, he is God...

“The God whose shape we do not know.

“We don’t know the truth of his desires and intentions.

“We don’t know if he preferred some of his creatures and scorned others.

“We don’t know if we are here in this life to fill in the blanks. Are we no more than blanks in this miserable, unjust life?

“Yes, it is miserable and unjust.

“It has joined both ends of the extremes.

“This might surprise many who hear me. How can one thing be at the same time both miserable and unjust?”

“It’s something that is difficult to achieve ... difficult to take place.

“But life has achieved it—it has managed to achieve it with us.

“We are its victims.

“It is miserable whenever it faces us.

“It is unjust whenever it imposes its rules on us... ”

And then, in the midst of these emotional, powerful words by the speaker, which were like fireworks, it seemed they lit up the surroundings and corners of the gloomy day. But they also brought the clouds lower, covering most of the sky.

John was shivering from emotion as he tried to focus both on the power of the speaker’s words and his overwhelming feelings.

The words revealed something he had never fully comprehended before.

It was something like when he was sitting alone at home, looking for a job on the Internet or browsing YouTube from time to time to watch documentaries. He tended to watch historical documentaries about events like the Bolshevik revolution, when Lenin and his comrades, Stalin and Trotsky and others, were standing behind him, standing up on platform similar to this.

Lenin spoke to the people without a microphone, talking about the suffering and struggles of the working class and capitalist exploitation. Everyone who was watching that scene expressed their admiration for the power of a man who created a

superpower only a few years after being on that podium, after he led his revolution to success.

But how did the revolution succeed?

And who was really behind its success?

Would it have succeeded without the sacrifice of thousands in the beginning, when the new state was being formed?

Was that revolution all it took to create a superpower?

Could it have happened without Stalin's later decision to end the lives of millions ... millions of those whose bad luck brought them face to face with his violence, tyranny, ruthlessness, his continued paranoia about everyone who was close to him?

John noticed that the speaker swayed while he was talking, using what appeared to be professional body language to achieve a greater impact on the audience, or, at least, on some of them.

Then John experienced a revelation, which came to him as the speaker was calling out from the podium.

This speaker mimicked the tone and appearance of the diatribes of Hitler and Mussolini while they were preparing for war—World War II—when more than sixty million people lost their lives.

Those millions were not objecting to the lives they were living and were probably not supporters, or even opposed to those dictators, but this was how their support was driven, by stirring up their attitudes and beliefs.

That war was long considered as a fight, a struggle, against hidden forces and unknown powers.

One might wonder whether the speaker was suicidal, or whether his role was to push others to believe and have faith ... and then commit suicide.

John, thought,

How many other speakers are living among us and in other corners of the world? How many like him find eager listeners who sympathize and join with the call?

Then John asked himself if it was right for him to be convinced by this call and to be confident in being able to carry it out?

Or had he been taken in?

But ... isn't everything the speaker said true?

Is there anyone who can argue with him?

John did not think anyone could argue with the speaker, especially in a convincing argument. Otherwise, such claims would not have been made or recurred over time.

Aren't calls for war made, in many cases, for very compelling reasons? Wasn't Lenin right in most of what he was saying? Weren't Hitler's complaints about the corrupt state of his people truthful facts witnessed by the world?

But they ignored him and didn't care what it might lead to.

Who actually separates adversaries in this world? Is it people's rights?

What kind of rights? Is it the right that is often imposed on the defeated or the rights of the defeated?

The right not to let innocent people be crushed—the innocent people who didn't have a hand in or any control over whether

they supported the aggressor or the victorious?

All of John's emotional thoughts were clearly written on his face.

Christine was watching him while holding his hand and felt him squeeze her hand tightly, as if he was holding on to her for dear life and maintaining his commitment to it.

He could feel the heartbeats of life, which brought back hope and desire.

He did not want to be fuel for the aspirations of others!

When he'd refused the influence of others in the world, he tried to punish them by abandoning and sacrificing himself, his life, his wife, and his children.

The intensity of John's grip on her hand gave Christine a lot of hope. It seemed clear that the nightmare of the past few days was going to end.

John bowed his head, looking down into the middle of the crowd while the speaker developed his narrative, seeming to become more powerful and more influential as he went on.

Some of the people in the crowd were responding loudly to the speaker, although it was not clear whether they were those people who actually intended to commit suicide or whether they were just members of the media.

The media, which was ubiquitous, seemed to have actually managed to pull the rug out from under the feet of human progress.

The news and the media, the true and the fabricated, became the rulers of the fields—all the fields: rulers of what happened

yesterday, what was happening today, what will happen tomorrow, and the days after tomorrow.

It had become imperative for people to live with what the media publicized and circulated.

At the other end of the gathering, Bob was listening to every word the speaker said, listening to him with a serious and tense expressions on his face.

It was clear from the way he frowned slightly that he was keenly waiting for what the speaker was going to say next.

Yet there was nothing new in the speech—nothing new to his ears. He was only hearing something from a person,

but he didn't know his name ... he didn't know his purpose or his intentions.

He didn't know how far his words would go ... he didn't know how much effect he would have on people.

He had hoped to know him more than he had heard from him so far ...

But ... but ... is there a need to know all that?

Bob knew himself very well!

He knew what he was like forty years ago.

Christine kept on holding John's hand.

She lifted her head to look at him after listening to the speech from the podium. She didn't interact with him positively or negatively but just lifted her head so her eyes met his eyes...

It seemed as if he had just woken up from a deep sleep, as if he had been away from his surroundings, from his mind and his

thoughts.

Her eyes were bright with tears.

She felt they had come perilously close to the end.

She was on the verge of collapse.

She felt a desire to embrace him, to beg him to save her from the nightmare, from the darkness that overshadowed her world.

She didn't feel she could do any more than she had already done.

It had slipped away from her hands...

She had no more control over it.

Then John's words got her attention. He asked, wondering,

“When can *we* take the children to the zoo?”