

JORGE LUIS BORGES, THE ALEPH (1949),  
(tr. Andrew Hurley, 1998)

## The Wait

The coach left him at number 4004 on that street in the northwest part of the city. It was not yet 9:00 A.M.; the man noted with approval the mottled plane trees, the square of dirt at the foot of each, the decent houses with their little balconies, the pharmacy next door, the faded diamonds of the paint store and the hardware store. A long windowless hospital wall abutted the sidewalk across the street; farther down, the sun reflected off some greenhouses. It occurred to the man that those things (now arbitrary, coincidental, and in no particular order, like things seen in dreams) would in time, God willing, become unchanging, necessary, and familiar. In the pharmacy window, porcelain letters spelled out "Breslauer": the Jews were crowding out the Italians, who had crowded out the native-born. All the better: the man preferred not to mix with people of his own blood.

The coachman helped him lift down his trunk; a distracted- or weary-looking woman finally opened the door. From the driver's seat, the coachman handed the man back one of the coins, a Uruguayan two-centavo piece that had been in the man's pocket since that night in the hotel in Melo. The man gave him forty centavos, and instantly regretted it: "I must act so that everyone will forget me. I've made two mistakes: I've paid with a coin from another country and I've let this man see that the mistake matters."

Preceded by the woman, the man walked through the long entryway and on through the first patio; the room he'd reserved was, as good luck would have it, off the second patio, in the rear. There was a bed of ironwork that art had distorted into fantastic curves suggesting vines and branches; there were also a tall pine chifforobe, a night table, a bookcase with books on the bottommost shelf, two mismatched chairs, and a washstand with its bowl, pitcher, and soap dish and a carafe of cloudy glass. A crucifix and a

map of Buenos Aires province adorned the walls; the wallpaper was crimson, with a pattern of large peacocks, tails outspread. The room's only door opened onto the patio. The chairs had to be rearranged to make room for the trunk. The tenant gave his nod to everything; when the woman asked him what his name was, he said Villari—not as a secret act of defiance, not to mitigate a humiliation that quite honestly he didn't feel, but rather because that name haunted him, he couldn't come up with another one. Certainly he was not seduced by the literary error of imagining that adopting the name of his enemy would be the astute thing to do.

At first Sr. Villari never left the house, but after a few weeks had passed he started going out for a while at nightfall. In the evening he would occasionally go into the motion-picture theater three blocks away. He never sat nearer the screen than the last row; he always got up a little before the picture was over. He saw tragic stories of the underworld; no doubt they had their errors; no doubt they included certain images that were also a part of Sr. Villari's previous life, but he didn't notice the errors, because the notion that there might be parallels between art and life never occurred to him. He docilely tried to like things; he tried to take things in the spirit they were offered. Unlike people who had read novels, he never saw himself as a character in a book.

He never received a letter, or even a circular, but with vague hopefulness he read one of the sections of the newspaper. In the afternoon, he would draw one of the chairs over to the door and sit and sip gravely at his *mate*, his eyes fixed on the ivy that climbed the wall of the two-story house next door. Years of solitude had taught him that although in one's memory days all tend to be the same, there wasn't a day, even when a man was in jail or hospital, that didn't have its surprises. During other periods of isolation he had given in to the temptation to count the days (and even the hours), but this isolation was different, because there was no end to it—unless the newspaper should bring him news one morning of the death of Alejandro Villari. It was also possible that Villari *was already dead*, and then his life was a dream. That possibility disturbed him, because he couldn't quite figure out whether it felt like a relief or a misfortune; he told himself it was absurd, and he discarded it. In now-distant days—distant less because of the lapse of time than because of two or three irrevocable acts—he had desired many things, with a desire that lacked all scruples; that powerful urge to possess, which had inspired the hatred of men and the love of the occasional woman, no longer desired *things*—it wanted only to endure, wanted not to end. The taste of the *mate*, the taste of the black tobacco, the growing

band of shade that slowly crept across the patio—these were reason enough to live.

There was a wolf-dog in the house, now grown quite old; Villari made friends with it. He spoke to it in Spanish, in Italian, and with the few words he still remembered of the rustic dialect of his childhood. Villari tried to live in the mere present, looking neither backward nor ahead; memories mattered less to him than his visions of the future. In some obscure way he thought he could sense that the past is the stuff that time is made of; that was why time became past so quickly. One day his weariness felt for a moment like happiness, at moments such as that, he was not a great deal more complex than the dog.

One night he was left shocked, speechless, and trembling by a burst of pain deep in his mouth, striking almost at the heart of him. Within a few minutes, that horrible miracle returned, and then again toward dawn. The next day Villari sent for a cab, which left him at a dentist's office in the neighborhood of Plaza del Once.\* There, his tooth was pulled. At the "moment of truth," he was neither more cowardly nor more composed than anyone else.

Another night, as he came back from the motion-picture theater, he felt someone shove him. Furious, indignant, and with secret relief, he turned on the insolent culprit; he spit out a filthy insult. The other man, dumbfounded, stammered an apology. He was a tall young man with dark hair; on his arm was a German-looking woman. That night Villari told himself many times that he didn't know them; still, four or five days went by before he went out again.

Among the books in the bookcase was a *Divine Comedy*, with the old commentary by Andreoli. Impelled less by curiosity than by a sense of duty, Villari undertook to read that masterpiece. He would read a canto before dinner, and then, strictly and methodically, the notes. He did not think of the infernal torments as improbable or excessive, nor did it occur to him that Dante would have condemned him, Villari, to the farthest circle of Hell, where Ugolino's teeth gnaw endlessly at Ruggieri's throat.

The peacocks on the crimson wallpaper seemed the perfect thing for feeding persistent nightmares, but Sr. Villari never dreamed of a monstrous gazebo of living birds all intertangled. In the early-morning hours he would dream a dream of unvarying backdrop but varying details. Villari and two other men would come into a room with revolvers drawn, or he would be jumped by them as he came out of the motion-picture theater, or they—all three of them at once—would be the stranger that had shoved him, or they

would wait for him sad-faced out in the courtyard and pretend not to know him. At the end of the dream, he would take the revolver out of the drawer in the nightstand that stood beside the bed (and there *was* a gun in that drawer) and fire it at the men. The noise of the gun would wake him, but it was always a dream—and in another dream the attack would occur again and in another dream he would have to kill them again.

One murky morning in July, the presence of strange people (not the sound of the door when they opened it) woke him. Tall in the shadowy dimness of the room, oddly simplified by the dimness (in the frightening dreams, they had always been brighter), motionless, patient, and watching, their eyes lowered as though the weight of their weapons made them stoop-shouldered, Alejandro Villari and a stranger had at last caught up with him. He gestured at them to wait, and he turned over and faced the wall, as though going back to sleep. Did he do that to awaken the pity of the men that killed him, or because it's easier to endure a terrifying event than to imagine it, wait for it endlessly—or (and this is perhaps the most likely possibility) so that his murderers would become a dream, as they had already been so many times, in that same place, at that same hour?

That was the magic spell he was casting when he was rubbed out by the revolvers' fire.