

## The tough God (2009)

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First of all, here's a poem for you...

I'm God  
I swear,  
I'm God  
Vermin

You  
Dust  
My only mistake

I feel awkward, because words are larvae and everything is false and bland. Only I am solid. What to nations are momentous events, generations that are born and die, to me are just a game in my imagination. They last for a second and then vanish. I'm God and I'm telling you a speck of dust like you shouldn't grant itself so much importance; just, at the very most, find its way up someone's nose and make them sneeze.

No, I'm not really God. God is different from me; he's an incompetent, ugly and boring old fart. I, on the contrary, see my reflection in the mirror and admire the most exciting being in creation – which, in fact, is my own doing... No... I wasn't the creator, I gave God his orders, he's a lazy labourer following my instructions: "God, get up now and do whatever I say this instant, create twelve universes and make some of them overlap, make parallel dimensions, dark matter to generate some mystery, fill it all with stars for a bit of light! Manufacture a couple million planets and make a human kind in my image to inhabit one of them! Then we'll make up this fascinating story, we'll pick a small group of them and tell them they're the chosen ones just for a laugh. Better still, we'll make lots of small groups believe that they are the only chosen ones, our favourites. We'll make up a whole lot of names for you, you'll give them daft contradictory instructions and you'll threaten them constantly with the doom of an awful place full of flames and cauldrons. In the meantime, I'll be in hiding, laughing at mankind all along."

One of my funniest occurrences was nobility, and in particular monarchs, monarchs like you. I'm sorry, little speck of dust, I'm, sorry... But there you go, plodding along, unbearable in your crown and your dirty beard, dragging your emine all the way to your wooden throne, surrounded by your court of termites. A speck of dust like you shouldn't feel that important, but rather remain silent and listen carefully, because a trillion years ago I was normal too. I was a child. A shapeless conglomerate of atoms, carbon and what have you, bound together by an obsessive emulsion of ectoplasm. Like a cockroach that scurries around nervously towards a shoe just to be trampled on and gorges on cockroach poison on a daily basis 'til it pops. I got fed up of being trodden on and of the poison they fed me from childhood. If you eat a little poison you die, if you eat lots you get fat. That was my childhood diet, poison for breakfast, lunch and dinner. At night, in bed, I could feel in my gums the throbbing of the cogs of the world, slowly turning, grating against each other. I would look out the window. The city would be in total silence. No one would dare utter the slightest sound so as not to disturb the concert that the world was offering me.

Now I have hardly any thoughts to trouble me. Though there is one childhood memory that fills me with pain. My first fallen idol. I intend to be concise, tell you about it in a nutshell, cutting out the excess. Here goes. One morning I found an octopus on the beach, I took it home and made it comfortable in the washbasin. Little by little I started acknowledging it as a divine being and started to worship it. A couple of days later, while I was in the bath, I saw through the shower curtain that something was dragging itself across the floor. A little slithering chaos crossed the bathroom door and into the corridor. I finished my shower, excited because my god in the making had left its basin. I step out of the bathroom, call him, no answer, I can't see him in the corridor, take a look in the living room. My family is gathered around the TV, eating him. One of my sisters asks me if I want a chunk, eyes glued on the screen and a little tentacle dangling out of her mouth.

I hated him more for having let himself be eaten than my family for eating him. Weren't you meant to be primeval, born of the sect of the seas? How could that come to be? A bunch of amalgamated atoms eating a minor god!

That very night, my sister got out of bed to throw up in the bathroom. She saw a girl in white shoes flying down the corridor. Terrified, she woke up again and saw that the little girl was sitting next to her on the bed and that she was having these weird spasms. She woke up again and crawled into bed with my other sister, who immediately turned soft and blubbery. Once again, she woke up and switched on the light and drank some water, but there was something foggy and ancestral floating in the glass. She dropped the glass, it smashed, the noise woke her up, the veins and the nervous system in the walls pounded and throbbed, she woke up, ran into the living room, the whole family was sitting on the sofa withering fast, she herself was withering, and then she woke up, the furniture was floating in the air, the fish had huge fangs... Get used to it sister. Or do you want me to pull your plug? Slash you open and remove the tentacles of my god that have a stranglehold on your stomach? Do you want a little autopsy...?

In school I had studied Andreas Vesalius, the famous Renaissance anatomist who, upon opening a young girl's ribcage after her sudden death, in the city of Karmakoma, heard her heartbeat and saw that... systole after diastole after systole after diastole... it was contracting and expanding, healthy and strong. Vesalius was charged with manslaughter by the Holy Inquisition and sentenced to death, but the ruling was finally commuted for a pilgrimage to the city of Mazapaném. Where all sins are forgiven. (Did Vesalius make it there with all his teeth intact after the inquisitors' questioning?) I couldn't wait to go there myself, in the belief that, whatever I had done, it would all be forgiven on arrival at the holy city. As my intention was always to get up to as much mischief as possible, I decided to go to Mazapaném the sooner the better, confident that the pardon would also be retrospective.

Plus, life in my parent's squalid hometown was becoming unbearable. For two years now a tall man with Egyptian features was trying to read my thoughts, which were primitive and chaotic. I would bump into him nearly every day, mostly in the evenings, on the same street in the old town that I had to go down every day on my way home. He used to carry a piece of apparatus in his hand that funnily no one seemed to notice but me. It was full of wires and knobs, and the main section was a basic bellows that allowed the instrument to breathe. An absurd and grubby Oopart that looked totally daft. A mind-reading machine that needed to breathe like a wooden Christ who had jumped off his cross and was running after the burglars who'd just stolen his glass eyes.

So the very day I turned 18 I ran away to Mazapaném.

There lived a man who, as a child, had been displayed in the papers as a fairground monster. He was the topic of everyone's conversations. There were even university departments interested in skinning him in order to observe the phenomenon in detail. Instead of human internal organs, he was born with the innards of a jellyfish. No, it wasn't exactly that. In fact most of his organs were normal. But his intestines and his stomach, due to their peculiar nature, needed to be constantly softened with alcohol in order to stay alive: if they were not subjected to this maceration, they would stiffen and die. He had tried with all sorts of liquids, even water. He even tried injecting them, heating them and breathing in the vapours, bathing in them, rubbing them in as massage ointments. But none of these methods worked, aside from drinking alcohol in any of its varieties. I was keenly interested in getting in touch with him, since a stupid prank by some demiurge has made us complementary beings: my red red blood had a huge alcohol content, far higher than any other high proof liquor. My apprehension towards doubles or any form of symmetry made the prank even crueller and the need to take revenge of the damned demiurge even more pressing. The jellyfish man was well known in a certain part of town, where he would spend his days, always needy and dependant, always drunk and sad, always begging for booze at the local bars, getting softer and softer. And once he'd tasted my blood he never wanted to go back to drinking anything else.

I became his sole supplier. When he got drunk with my blood he would get intimate and tell me he was obsessed over a girl he knew and was extremely attracted to: he would dream he got into bed with her, and that she lifted her skirt and removed her two false legs. What turned him on the most was the woman's bravery in removing her prosthetics. It took some guts to go to bed with someone and not tell them beforehand that you had wooden legs.

He would sink his teeth into my neck and suck my blood until he could take no more, not caring how debilitating the whole operation was to me. Gradually the jellyfish man's selfishness started filling me with a desire for revenge even greater than the one I felt against the dumb god who has connected us, and my hatred turned against him. In all that time that I let him suck my blood, I was feeding my own resentment with an unstoppable force. So I let myself be squeezed only as a long-term investment. One night his hunger overstepped the limit. I pushed him violently away from my neck when he was about to take all my blood. But a single drop left in my body was enough to survive. I felt strong and unforgiving. My hatred gave me peace. I asked him to step outside with me. He refused, he wanted more blood. But he was so weak that I had no trouble dragging him outside, into the darkest and most sinister stretch of the street. Into the toughest stretch. I was going to get something in exchange for all that blood, and the only bit of that bland guy I was remotely interested in was what stuck out of his gums. The only hard bit in him, as my neck well knew.

My idea was to make a necklace and send it, for the good of the world, to the Virgin of Montserrat.

Seconds later, with the beads for my necklace in my pocket, I went to a nightclub to recover some of the blood I'd lost. A few hours later I had gallons flowing through my veins again. My childhood diet based on cockroach poison had made me an addict to MDMA, which I would take daily in huge quantities for as far back as I can remember, and that really caused no other effect on me than a saintly mercilessness. In the club I could not take my eyes off a trannie with Asian features who was dancing to a hypnotically different beat to the music that was playing, which incidentally was atrocious. Black hair and black eyes with heavy black makeup. She was dressed in very short leopard skin. Arm bracelets on her arms and henna tattoos in the shape of a snake. My heart beat to the exact rhythm of that supernatural creature's movements. The strobe lights created an effect whereby her thousands of arms and legs moved in slow motion, dragging thousands of thoughts out of my head to follow the movements of each of her limbs, warping into impossible positions and blending into each other. There was nothing else around me. My thoughts were out of control, they came and went on their own free will, they danced and curled around that disturbing transvestite. Thoughts, memories, arm movements, two more arms, legs, light, thousands of arms lighting up and switching off, up, higher, just the centre. Millions of simultaneous thoughts condensed into a split second; dress, teeth, red, blue,

pentagon, c, h, no, hexagon, burning, copy, star, ufo, mercury, Venus, Vulcan doesn't exist, exists, hollow earth, black sun, five wheels, Ezequiel, pharaoh, eternal flash.....nothing.... I watch her dance without making the slightest effort to focus my attention until the dance itself vanishes. It's just me left... who the fuck am I? I need more time... everything is moving... light... I need to move... I want to get out of here... to another town... to Ojaxaca... Nietzsche... I was thinking... cured... no... to Taronida... no... I also need to move... no... first I'll go to... if I want to break... to Calfragi... yes... superficial... made out of quantic pulp... the weirdest place... Lenta... in the... and ... sensually... world...

My hotel room in the strange city of Calfragi, capital of Sardonía, was ridiculously huge. For a few days now, particularly after my arrival, I was unsettled by the fear of receiving a visit from somebody who, in a moment of weakness, I had invited to spend a few days with me. The very idea threw me into a state of terrible anxiety, so I spent as much time as I could away from the hotel in order not to be tracked down. I tried to leave my room as early as possible and to get back as late as possible to avoid bumping into my terrible guest in the hotel lobby. So I covered the whole town to the point of exhaustion. I visited all the museums. I even went back to the science one a few times, to see the anatomical wax models of human bodies that were pornographically spilt open like ripe fruit. I strolled in quaint silent gardens hung over the city from where you could see the sea, full of opium poppy plants with beautiful flowers. And I found, at the end of a footpath, a near-miniature pagan temple, surrounded by statues of gods, pale gods, immobile, keeping entirely silent, looking at me with fear in their eyes, as if I were the only one who could make a noise and spoil it all.

The city of Calfragi soon lost its excitement. I had sucked out its marrow and chewed on the bone, mashing it down to dust. Soon there was no one or nothing. Literally, the city evaporated. I could only see a pale blank expanse with a neon sign in the distance reading "Karmakoma". As that was the only road to follow, I walked to Karmakoma, where I took a room in a downtown hotel.

I locked myself up in my room for the rest of the day, exhausted. The next day I woke up at eleven and came down for breakfast around noon. They only served breakfast until ten thirty. I was deeply offended that they were not willing to make an exception for me. So I decided to go for breakfast at the café across the street, opposite the hotel. The place was Café Sasafra. The two bartenders and all the clients looked like they were straight out of a painting by Meroviggio. A man who was the spitting image of the portrait of Camaffeo Barbenini was reading the paper next to me at the bar. I noticed he wanted conversation. This guy obviously came to Sasafra every single day of his life and was curious to know who this new patron was. I did my best to ignore him for a while, until he turned towards me and started talking to me.

"Are you here on holiday?"

"No, I'm here on business," I answered.

"But I'm sure you'll have some time to tour the city. Do you travel often?"

"All the time," I retorted dryly.

"Ooooooh, of course you do," he soldiered on, smiling and flaying his hands. "But there's all sorts of things to see in this town, I'm sure you'll be staying for a while. I've never been anywhere else. I have everything I need right here. You only need to take a deep breath and you're breathing in the same air breathed by the creators of civilisation, the popes, the emperors. I know this city like the back of my hand. Far better, in fact, since I spend more time observing the city than the back of my hand. And I know a great many legends and riddles that enclose secret wisdom," he added mysteriously. "If someone needs to know something about this town, they come to me and ask. Even learned academics have come to me to gather material for their writings. I myself have authored a book of riddles on the city of Karmakoma. Look, I'll set you a very easy one: 'Eight columns on the front, many more behind; unless you step inside, the answer you won't find'."

"Let me think it over," I replied, just to get rid of the dull wanker. I paid my bill, said goodbye and left the café.

My idea was not to devote a single second of my thoughts to his riddle. But the more I wanted to forget, the more I caught myself searching in the city's architecture for something that might match those eight columns that became many more if you stepped in between them. I came across a number of things that might solve the riddle. The premise was too generic. I started hating the guy who had set the riddle; he had spoiled my day making me live in a world of eight columns. By evening I really resented him, furiously. I remembered him as a bag of flesh holding a bunch of misplaced organs. I walked back to my hotel, fuming and thinking I would go back to the café in the morning and beat him up. Or that I'd wait for him on his way out in the evening and smash his head in with a baseball bat from behind. Walking down the empty street, I saw a group of people at a distance, all very tall, perfectly still, backlit, standing right in my way. I counted them. There were eight of them, naturally. I kept walking faster and faster towards them, then I saw there were more, many more of them. A car drove up next to one of the figures, who got in. The car drove off. Now I could see in detail. They were women on huge heels. I walked towards them, you girls are going to get beaten up...

The following morning, ecstatic, I headed for the café to tell that miserable guy with the pot belly that I had solved his riddle. But he answered no, I was wrong, that the right answer was the Amica Paniron, the famous ancient temple. The man, excited and spurred on by my mistake, set me another riddle. "Three scary ladies and an agreement fall into tedium". My rage against him grew even greater. Not only had I not taken revenge, but I suddenly found myself with another riddle on my shoulders. Again I tried to forget, again to no avail. That day, in the afternoon, ten ancient and decrepit countesses attempted to sacrifice me in the black mass we were sharing.

The next day, I strode back into the bar, truly determined not to let him dump another riddle on me. But the minute he saw me, he said with a smile,

"Under three columns and two pilasters, don't tell me you're dragging yourself".

By the time I got up to where he was standing, I could already feel the riddle spilling over me as if he had tipped a barrel of honey over me. Sticky and sweet. I took a slug of strong coffee and I dashed off to an appointment. I tripped and fell on a jutting curb stone right under the three columns and two pilasters of the Mason Lodge.

I decided never to go back to Sasafra. But, upon leaving the hotel the following morning, I found the bugger standing there, on the pavement opposite. He shouted out: "The good men laugh, standing in a pair, another says amen." A couple of hours later I was stopped by two plain-clothes policemen in high spirits who dragged me before the sheriff and the judge, I said amen so as not to betray the truth of the prophecy.

Day in, day out, for as long as I was in town, he managed to set me one of his sticky riddles. They exerted such an influence that they shaped my whole day irremissibly. But his interpretation of the riddles was always different to my own. "There are two arms open in an embrace at the end of the avenue; there our father still awaits you" according to him, was the Vataniri Basilica! But to me it became a priest intent on raping me in the public toilets.

The moment I decided I finally had to put an end to this business with the riddles was the day he suggested "In the little square the gods stand tall; you must give gold if you wish to return at all". That afternoon I was taking a nap and a yellow stain the colour of honey and very bright entered my room. Two beings stepped in next: one small and quiet, who left immediately; the other taller, muscular and all black, who announced that I was mortal but that, in exchange for the revelation, I should pay him a certain sum of gold. One second later, the tall muscular black man turned white, short and soft. There was a strong smell in the room; nasty, sour, unbearably unbreathable, that seemed familiar. I knew that smell, but I couldn't trace it in my memory. So I ordered my subconscious to make me remember when the time was right.

During all this time in Karmakoma, whatever situation I found myself in, I felt an immense sense of calm that served to fuel a huge and authentic power welling up inside me. I don't mean a metaphoric or poetic power. My power was perfectly measurable, weighable, definable, Satanic.

You're a hero when you do what you please and not when you pride yourself on your sacrifice for others, striving for applause and social recognition. Don't doubt it one second. A hero, a saint, a benefactor, only became what they are after a decisive moment in their lives, a moment when they made a choice. They had to choose between being a hero or a dictator, a saint or a serial killer, a benefactor or an exterminator. Having reached this point, I'm going to ruin your momentary glorious thought. The one you're thinking right now. You feel praised by me. You find justification for your actions. You always do what you want and trample over anyone who gets between you and your prize. But here comes the crux: doing what you feel like doing and screwing over everybody else in something far, far more mediocre still. You just never get it right, oh Lord, just never right...

What is really impressive is what I was about to achieve that very instant in my story. Something that, a priori, appeared as distant as the void between two atoms: that the will of the universe and my own were IDENTICAL.

But keep reading this fascinating story about how I became a god.

I devoted my months in Karmakoma nearly entirely to terrorism, manufacturing immensely moving explosives using sulphur, tablets, empty cans and peeled wires. With them, I nearly razed the entire city to dust, and with it the riddle café and its patrons, the whole lot of them. Café Sasafra went up in smoke as I was leaving the town, due north.

At Torazo I booked into Hotel Des Macistes. I was childishly happy for two reasons. The first was how close the hotel was, barely two blocks, to the home of Fiedrick Nietscher, the famous protector of ill-treated horses. And the second and more important reason, was the torrential rain that fell nearly throughout my entire stay. I thoroughly enjoyed the worried faces on the people who can't cope with the rain and the clouds and pray every day for a mediocre ray of sunlight.

But there was one thing dampening my joy. I'd been suffering from a headache nearly every day for a few months. I was starting to worry, it kept obstructing my thoughts and making them lazy and forlorn. One night, while I was drifting through the city grid, the cold ceased and the rain gave way to snow. Marvellously, my headache began to recede. The fuzzy contours of Cangcanno Square started coming into focus. I could see snowflakes gently coming down, proudly displaying the beauty of each of their crystals. The cowardly statues in the square shivered under the damp. I looked down to the floor and saw a number of red stains in the snow. It was raining blood, my life's dream was happening there and then, in Torazo, it was finally raining blood on the snow! I laughed out loud at all the poets, conjuring up their poor metaphors and yet unable to turn them into flesh and blood. All the lousy saints hassling the world day and night, desperately seeking attention with their trances and their threats. It was raining blood at my feet. Screw you, mystics! Screw you, St. Juman, St. Marquise, St. Panciscus! Screw you artists, screw you Riviera, Prubens! Screw you Meroviggio! You've created nothing but simulacra.

After a few hours' euphoria, playing in the snow, I made my way back to the hotel. The guy at the front desk was dumbstruck, greeted me, sternly handed me my key, keeping his chin up very high, then immediately grabbed for the phone and dialled a number. He was clearly calling someone to tell them he'd seen me. Fine! They were starting to recognise me!

The key was huge, connected to a lead key ring shaped like a spinning top with the room number engraved on the widest side. I hadn't previously noticed the shape and weight of the key ring. I reached my door, opened it, stepped inside, switched the lights on and when I raised my head I saw my reflection in the wardrobe mirror. I had a huge bloodstain on my coat, coming from my nose. Things were just getting better, the blood shower had come from me! It was my alcoholic blood!

In the morning I accidentally cut my finger with the breakfast knife. I headed out into the city with a bandage on. I visited a bookshop run by a Jewish rabbi who refused to sell me the books I asked him for. In the afternoon I attended mass. Out of all those present, the priest appeared to be the least engaged in the ceremony, which he was managing to make stultifying. I walked out half way through the first reading and stepped into another church just opposite. The two churches, which are identical, face each other symmetrically on a grand square. Youvarra, you're a Satanist bastard! In that other church there was also a ceremony under way, which I joined at the precise same point as the other. At once fascinated and horrified by the symmetry of the ceremonies, I sat on a bench in the last row and rejoined the liturgy. It was cold outside and the church was crowded with people snoozing. The priest was also laying down all the possible obstacles for any of those present to pay attention to what he was saying for over a minute. He could well have said: "Brothers, all of you here are going straight to heaven because you're an unbearable bunch of filthy rats," and no one would have batted an eyelid. I was making a huge effort to listen because I felt an increasing probability that he was creating a mental mist in order to mock me, to insult me, to induce a deep sleep in order to defile me.

"and that man shall be cut off from among his people to the end that the children of Israel may bring their sacrifices, which they offer in the open field, even that they may bring them unto the Lord, unto the door of the tabernacle of the congregation, unto the priest, and offer them or peace offerings unto the Lord..."

A fuzzy black parcel fell to the ground up near the altar, making a noise not unlike the sound of a giant walnut cracking open. The congregation needed a few moments to wake up. A woman in mourning was lying on the ground in a foetal position, in the middle of the central aisle. She had fallen asleep at the end of the bench and had fallen over. Two people lifted her and helped her outside. A large puddle of blood was left in the aisle, reflecting the priest's face back like a red mirror. A bucket and a mop appeared, pushed along by an extremely old white-bearded brother. A woman insisted on cleaning up herself, clearly in sign of sacrifice, but the old brother, who was under an oath of silence, gestured her away. If anyone was about to do something for the community that would be taken into account in heaven, that was him. In the meantime, the priest did not move a step away from the altar, nor did he say a word. With the floor finally clean and the red mirror removed, the priest, who had a finger down on the book pointing to the place where he had stopped his reading, resumed exactly where he had left it.

"and the priest shall sprinkle the blood upon the altar of the Lord at the door of the tabernacle of the..."

A loud peal of laughter ensued. Undoubtedly it was a miracle, sophisticated and theatrical, produced in order to liven up the ceremony.

That night at the hotel, I removed the bandage covering the wound on my finger. It was very clean, though still completely open. Opening up the cut, I could see all the way to the bone. But there wasn't a drop of blood. Obviously it was about to seal over. I left through the window and, like a black shadow, I flew down the streets. The entire city was transparent.

I woke up at exactly eight a.m. The sheets were stained with blood. The cut on my finger had bled profusely while I slept. I dressed and rushed outside. I couldn't wait to get back to the place where two nights before I had mistaken a bleeding nose for one of the seven plagues. There were no traces of blood or snow. I had bled from two different places for unconnected reasons. Though I found the situation exciting, I went to a pharmacy and bought a bandage that I wrapped tight around my finger. That night I dreamt that I was flying through the city like a ghost again. Eating it up, taking my nourishment from it... A savoury flavour woke me up at exactly three in the morning. I sat up violently with blood gushing out of my nose all over the sheets. I groped for the light, knocked over the bedside lamp, got out of bed barefoot and felt a terrible pain in my foot. Probing along the walls I got to the bathroom. The blood flowing from my nose was covering nearly half my body, and a splinter of glass from the lamp had cut my foot. The wall and floor were covered in my bloodied traces. The room looked like an utter catastrophe. A sorry epiphany that was served up to me.

Should I perhaps eat myself?

The next morning I hurried out of the hotel door headed for the temple of the Great Mother. I felt the urgent need to piss on its walls. I wanted to blow my nose on the Holy Mantle, sniff out the funeral pyres, laugh at the saints, interrupt a speech by the Pope, pretend to be the Count Saint Termain and seduce a convent full of nuns, rape an abductee, eat steak at the table of King Sauloron, drink beer out of the Holy Grail, use the head of Baphomet the Baptist as a flowerpot, and the Planks of the Law as splinters for the fire. Savouring these desires, the day went by in a jiffy. I returned to the hotel in the evening. The manager greeted me with a forced smile; he was expecting me. After a few minutes' petty conversation, he asked me bluntly and without losing his smile if I wouldn't like to move to a different hotel. The idiot must have thought I was holding black masses every night in my room at the Hotel des Macistes. With a perfectly serious face, I formed a triangle putting my hands together at the thumbs and placed my eye in the angle, fixing my stare on him.

"Do you understand?" I asked. The manager stretched his smile even wider. Wanker... I'm heading south in the morning.

I arrive at Minervo well into the night. I've taken enough morphine to put a giant pig to sleep. I've grown my finger nails, sharpened them and painted them black. I ask at the hotel for a decent restaurant. The guy at the counter is a B-rate specimen. He's been abducted and hasn't remembered yet. He feels self-assured and dominant, but one day he will begin to feel a huge sense of insecurity that will transform him into a slave of fear. He gives me some daft directions. He's offended because I don't want to have dinner at the hotel restaurant. I walk out on him half way through a sentence. I walk down the street in a slumber. There's no one out. The fountains are making an awful noise, gods in an ongoing orgy. I show them my middle finger in a hugely powerful mudra and they shut up for a while. I spot a restaurant. Cagliastro's Hideaway. I like the name. I step inside, I order two beef carpaccios and fall asleep on the table.

The following day I head for the Caputtano Catacombs. A bunch of skeletons ask me to help them get out of there. They say they're pained by people's looks, they think people are staring at them. A severe case of paranoia. One of them laughs behind my back as I walk past. What are you laughing at, you fucking skeleton...?

In the afternoon I visit an exorcist, Father Bassile Tagrua. He's one hundred years old and he confides it's been a long time since he last practiced an exorcism. To confront the evil one you need a great deal of strength, he says. I say that all I want from him is to take his picture. He poses coquettishly and gives me a book: a drama in three acts by the title of "McCain". I get back to my hotel contented. I've bought a set of weights that I keep unused in my room that is, once again, ridiculously large. A hallway, an anteroom with a sofa, table with six chairs, drinks cabinet, kitchen, two bathrooms, one bedroom and a master bedroom with a double bed. The wall opposite the bed is covered entirely with a mirror where I've been catching glimpses of someone's reflection. But when I look straight at it, I'm on my own. It's probably the bloody man in the mirror. The guy who only pops out when you're not looking.

The anxiety caused by that reflection won't let me get to sleep. I pop a pill, it has no effect whatsoever, two, three, I'll swallow the whole jar if I need to to get to sleep...!

The phone wakes me up. I haven't given anyone this number. So I figure they're calling from reception. Incompetent arseholes. "Hello," says a woman's voice. "It's me."

"Hello," I reply, not knowing who it is.

"Well, how are you?" she asks. I hesitate for a couple of seconds, still doozy and unsure whether to keep talking until I discover who she is. I suddenly feel bad, uncomfortable. I look around for a clock, can't find one. I've been woken up in the middle of the night for a daft chat.

"Who is this?" I ask, truly annoyed.

"Don't you know me? It's..."

A split second before I heard her name I recognised her. And at the same time I remembered the scent of the black man who announced my immortality, the one who I hadn't been able to track down that day. It was this woman who was giving it off. Her back was slightly hunched and I always had the impression that that's where the smell was coming from, from her back. Everything surrounding her was catastrophic, all her acquaintances suffered unlikely accidents, the people around her felt sad and exhausted. I had started off fearing her and ended up hating her.

I suddenly get a sinister feeling. Is she calling from reception?

"I'm calling because I have to tell you about something really important, really, really important, but since you haven't been wanting to talk to me for a while I didn't know if you would answer the phone this time..." She was giving her whole speech a mysterious and pitiful tone. "Shall I tell you?"

"Tell me if you want."

"Then I'll tell you. I was asleep in bed. And since I can't get to sleep if even the slightest light is coming in the room, in addition to using a sleep mask I try to get total darkness in my room. I don't know if I ever told you that I've been scared of sticking my hands out from under the cover since my aunt told me about something that happened during the Civil War: Her brother was executed and his death had left the entire family with a sense of guilt. Had they only insisted that afternoon that he didn't go into town... they knew it was dangerous, those days. But he insisted on checking the state of a house they owned there, and never came back. One night, while she was praying her rosary in bed, in the dark, my aunt sensed an invisible hand holding her own. She cried out in sheer terror. It was her brother's hand holding hers for a few seconds. But in his touch she did not feel hatred or remorse. Rather, it was a warm touch that felt like it was trying to say that everything was ok, that she was not guilty of his death. Ever since she told me that, every time I wake up and feel I have a hand out, I immediately hide it under the cover out of respect. A couple of nights ago, I woke up at an indistinct hour. I was well covered up, so everything was OK. But my mask had moved slightly. When I turned to adjust it I saw a tiny spot in the dark. I couldn't make out the shape, but it appeared to be moving. I thought I was dreaming or imagining things. I was very tired, I turned around, pulled my mask into place and put my head under the covers, taking care not to expose a single toe. But I couldn't get back to sleep; in my mind that thing was still there, mysterious. I looked again, slowly lifting my mask. Now it was bigger, but was still no larger than a walnut. It was moving in hypnotic undulations, as if it were breathing. I was mesmerised, staring for a long while. I wasn't scared, but I

wanted to turn on the light. I hit the switch of the lamp on my bedside table but it didn't come on. I tried the ceiling lamp that I could reach from the bed, but that didn't work either. I didn't find that particularly unsettling, in fact I wasn't scared, but even so I wasn't going to get out of bed for anything in the world. When I looked again, I saw it had grown. Now I could see it far more clearly. It was something... how would I describe it? It looked like it was made out of reflective material. It was no longer doing that breathing movement I had noticed earlier, but was revolving on its own axis. Its shape, the way its shine was projected on the surface, made me think of an organic movement. I couldn't wait for it to get larger, as I was sure it would; I was sure that strange thing was growing bigger for me to see it. And so it did. By this time it was quite large, large enough for me to make out recognisable shapes on the surface. Forms cropping out that reminded me of a spine on a back, followed by flat shapes and... suddenly new protrusions formed like a profile! The profile was a face turned towards the floor, a flat section and, again the face in profile! Now it turned again, and I could clearly see a face looking my way! At that point it was growing even bigger. But at that very moment I realised that in fact the thing wasn't growing, it was actually coming towards me. I dared to pull an arm out from under the blankets and tried to touch it. It already seemed within hand's reach, but it wasn't, in fact it kept getting closer, faster and faster, and the bigger it got, the further away it appeared to be. Now I realised that it was actually huge and that it was a lot further away than I had imagined. I had thought it was within arm's reach and in fact it was probably the size of a planet. I could see it rotating. It looked like it was made out of some hard material, a kind of metal polished like a mirror. It reflected light, though there was none shining on it. In one of its turns I discovered a huge eye reflected on the head planet, then another eye, a nose, a whole face. That's when it all fell into place. It was reflecting your face! The head was your head! Now it was very close, I could hear a faint sound, a vibration every time one of the protrusions swung by, then I realised again that I was wrong. The head wasn't moving towards me; I was moving towards it at full speed! I was about to enter its atmosphere and impact its surface. It felt like I was in a sci-fi film, the typical scene of a space ship approaching a planet at top speed. The vibration was getting stronger, now it was right near me, it was spectacular. A sea of bronze reflecting your face!!! I was about to slam into the surface, one hundred metres, fifty, twenty, ten... now... luckily this must be only a dream... I went through the surface, your extreme hardness only an appearance, I found myself within a myriad reflections of your face... Someone's knocking, I'll just see who that is..."

Her last words really annoyed me. How can she get up to answer the door? You're inside my planetary head! If that's the way you saw it it's only because, I swear, I feel it that way this very instant, gigantic, cold, hard, reflecting... and deformed.....

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..... I'm in my bed, covered up to my neck, looking at the reflection of my head in the mirror in my room, with the phone receiver in my hand, sticking out from under the covers, pushed up against my ear. But all I can hear is an overwhelming silence.

Millions of years have lapsed. Now I feel like an engine made of cold, stiff flesh.

I recall that, at nighttime, as a child, I would lie on the sofa at my parents' watching TV, covered up to my neck in a thick blanket. I felt invulnerable. One of those nights I was gripped by a crazy emotion and, biting hysterically into my index finger, I screamed in my thoughts "monsters, demons, come if you dare, I'm here waiting for you!" A second later, a procession of monsters and demons burst through the door and came straight towards me, taking cover under my blanket, where they grew strong. My protective blanket was full of monsters, I had to get rid of it, burn it. The protection was now outside, in the dark.

I fix my attention on the phone again. I can't hear a thing, there's only a massive vacuum, I can't see a single monster. They're still under the blanket, they've eaten up my body but my head is still sticking out, safe. I obsessively stare at my head reflected in the mirror, just my head. The mirror no longer reflects the bed, my shoulders, the arm holding the phone. Now there is complete darkness all around. The world has vanished, it has finally fallen with all its deceit. Now there's only my head, my thoughts, hard and opaque, that I perceive with full clarity. Huge, universal. This is the only existence that seems valid. The ultimate degree of perfection, and it feels entirely familiar. I'm on a stage where I'm performing and watching all at once. The silence..... I feel a huge need to shout. Paranoids of the world unite! I salute you! I praise you!

What's that beep? What are you laughing at?