

I am writing a book in which I will tell the whole truth. Until now I've told fifty different stories, all of which are false.

—MEHMET ALI AĞCA, *the Turk who shot Pope John Paul II*,

Anno Domini MMVII

Everything has a beginning.

The start, the departure point, the zero, Sunday, the starting gun, the sprouting seed pushing through the earth for light, the splash into water, the earliest heartbeat, the first word, the first stone of a village, villa, city, wall, house, palace, church, building. Of this building in an unnamed city. A luxury restaurant occupies the ground floor and basement, as indicated by the menu displayed at the side of the door. Its status is not openly announced to the world at large, but suggested by the tinted-glass doors, always closed, and by the haughtiness of the doorman, impeccably dressed in a burgundy uniform. The absence of prices on the menu and the many phrases in French are also a sign of its exclusiveness, even if the city is located on French soil, which is neither confirmed nor denied. What is certain is that this restaurant does not need to advertise any of its services, which, in itself, presupposes an exclusive clientele.

Any diner who wishes to enjoy the favors of this establishment must first seek approval; without such authorization he will never pass through the tinted-glass doors. Usually this can be obtained through the recommendation of a frequent client, a member of sorts, who has influence with management, or by a formal request that involves a long process of investigation into the private life of the applicant. A large bank account is useful,

but not enough, since some pretentious newly rich are frequently rejected, although many members of old families are turned down also. Such rejection, and bear in mind the word “rejection” is never used, is communicated by a letter in a white envelope with no return address. Once this decision is made, it can never be revoked. In the case of acceptance there will be a long list of rules. There is, for example, a provision in the statutes for the expulsion of a member in the case of serious offenses, even if such expulsion has never happened.

Acceptance happens differently: a telephone call at home inviting him to dinner. Upon arrival, the uniformed doorman compliments him and opens the tinted-glass doors. Inside, he is treated with a deference that is never excessive. Another employee relieves him of his coat. Immediately he is led to a table that, from that day on, will be his alone, no matter the hour or day of the week. He can bring any guests he desires, as long as he informs the manager of their names five days in advance. The morality of the guests is not important. This is the privilege of the selected clients, who can share whatever with whomever they desire—favors, business negotiations, intrigues, blackmail, purchases, the destiny of others, their own—without anyone pointing a recriminating finger, accompanied by food for the refined palate, breast of chicken stuffed with pâté of bacon and mushroom sauce, wine, and brandy. No financial transactions take place here, except those discussed at the table, which are many. Members pay a monthly fee by bank transfer of 12,000 euros that covers the privileges of having the kitchen available twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Thus this restaurant functions in every city of major political and economic influence in the world, as it does in this unnamed city.

Today, at noon, the restaurant is half empty. The clients of the empty tables are occupied with their personal or professional lives. The table that matters to us is the thirteenth; the two men seated there aren't superstitious. In their opinion the table is as acceptable as any other. What matters is the here and now. Everything else is useless, unproved theory. Above all, these men adapt to time and circumstances. Each case is unique. In a world driven by money, this philosophy has advantages, and the two of them know how to make use of it.

Reasons of security and privacy prevent mentioning the name of the city with this restaurant, its table thirteen, and two men, seated face-to-face. The one with his back to the dining room is the member; he could be the father or even grandfather of the man sitting in front of him. No family ties connect them, except Adam and Eve, who unite us all. They aren't even friends. The younger is an aide to the older, if not a servant, a term no longer used these days. Let's not call what he's receiving "orders," but instructions or suggestions. They're dressed conservatively like any executive or businessman seated at the other tables. They're eating delicious halibut with spinach, mascarpone, and slices of Parma ham, an exception to the rule that one eats little and poorly in exclusive restaurants. They're drinking a Pinot Noir, Kaimira, 1998, chosen by the member without consulting his guest. They're courteous, since they aren't given to excess or speculation. The word "exception" is not part of their vocabulary. Everything is what it is, here and now, always.

"I haven't had the opportunity to ask you how the investigation in the United States is going," the older one asked.

"It's been filed in the archives, of course. Natural causes."

"Perfect. May I deduce that no trace of evidence was left at the location?" The older man revealed his calculating mind. He's not given to imponderables or last-minute surprises.

"Complete security. I collected everything before the authorities arrived. His age also helped to close the case rapidly," the younger man explained in a cold, professional tone.

"Perfect."

They continued eating in silence. Anyone noticing the tone of the conversation wouldn't characterize it as an interrogation, at least at this stage, although this wasn't a friendly dinner, either, but a meeting with an agenda planned by the older one. Both ate slowly, taking small forkfuls and pausing to chew without hurry.

"The second part of the plan begins immediately," the older man began. "It's going to be more and more demanding. There can be no mistakes."

"There won't be," the younger man, quite confident, assured him.

"How's the team?"

“Already in place for several weeks, as you directed. All the subjects are under constant surveillance, except one.”

“Good, very good.” He would’ve rubbed his hands with pleasure if he were a man given to expressing himself with gestures. He guarded his emotions and never shared them. “And in London?”

“Our man has privileged access to the subject,” the younger one explained. “As soon as I give the okay, the way is open.”

“These are the hardest parts of the plan to implement. London and JC,” the man with his back to the dining room said firmly.

“Hasn’t he shown his face yet?” the younger man wanted to know.

“No, he’s an old fox, like me. But we have to make him appear; otherwise the plan is compromised.”

“We’ll make him appear. London will bring him out.”

“Yes. As soon as he emerges, don’t think, act. If you give yourself the luxury of thinking, even for only a second, by the time you’re ready to move, he’ll have already won.”

The young man couldn’t imagine such a situation. He was prepared for everything. The idea that they were up against such fast-thinking people seemed unlikely to him. Besides, we’re talking about an old man more than seventy years old. What danger could he represent? He didn’t reveal such thoughts to the old man seated at the table, or rather, his table.

“I know what you’re thinking,” the old man warned. “All humans have weaknesses. Mine is the Church, yours is self-confidence. It’s a flaw. Take your ego out of the equation. That’s the only way to guarantee you won’t fail.”

“I will.”

“You must. If things don’t work out, you won’t be the one looking at *their* corpses. In London, honestly, it won’t be easy.”

“I have a very efficient man there who’ll clear the way for me to do my work.”

“Let me clarify something before we continue. At the moment I have no reason to criticize or censure your work. One hundred percent efficient, but you haven’t yet dealt with what you’ll have to contend with this time.”

“The plan is practically infallible,” the young man dared to answer back.

“There’s no such thing,” the other argued. “You have a plan where everything has to come together precisely and you can’t make a mistake. Infallible? Not even the pope.”

“Of course, but—”

“To finish my point,” he interrupted, “just a little warning.” He waited for the young man to look him in the eye, holding his complete attention. “JC is the man who murdered John Paul the First in 1978, and, even so, he was unable to kill the pope in London. He, too, had never failed.”

The young man took in his words and thought about them for a few moments. The old man was right. Overconfidence was the enemy of avoiding mistakes. That was the message the other man wanted him to get.

“I understand. I won’t give anyone a chance to try something.” He also realized that if he failed, he wouldn’t survive. Whether through the intervention of JC or through this frequent client of the restaurant located in the unnamed city, he wouldn’t live to see the next day. It was time to change the subject.

“What about Mitrokhin?”

“I’m on that,” the old man replied. “My contacts in Moscow are taking care of it at this very moment.”

“What about the Turk?”

“Let him stay a prisoner. He won’t be hurting anyone. Don’t forget, we won’t communicate again until the plan is concluded.”

“Yes, I understand. I won’t forget. Only one thing is missing—”

“The Vatican,” the older man interrupted. “I’ll take care of them personally.” For the first time the old man smiled faintly.

Everything has a beginning.

2

WOJTYLA

May 13, 1981

Among those twenty thousand people, not one would be able to say with certainty if it rained or the sky was clear on that thirteenth day of the fifth month of the year of Our Lord 1981. Perhaps if they made an effort, they could say with some degree of certainty that it was a day of brilliant sun, pleasant spring warmth, in spite of its having rained a little in the middle of the afternoon, not much, barely five minutes. Of those twenty thousand people, more than half wouldn't remember the pleasant spring warmth or the sun, but they would not forget the rain. They'd feel it wetting their bodies, soaking into their bones, just as it did on the day in question. Some would even doubt it had rained only five minutes. No. Five minutes doesn't soak you like that. But those twenty thousand people wouldn't remember the rain or sun. They would feel the tears running down their faces, and the sharp sound of each shot still vivid in their minds, one, two, three, four, five, six. And the impact that tore the flesh and made twenty thousand people scream with sorrow, as much as the victim himself. That they would remember. What does the sun or the rain matter in a calvary like that? What does the exact hour matter, if the pope could have died?

Twenty thousand people waited for him that day in the majestic plaza

of Saint Peter's Square, the reception hall for the Catholic world. Of the large number of a billion Catholic believers who, according to statistics, are spread over the globe, only a few million can say they have seen the pope. Of these even fewer can swear they saw the pope at an identifiable distance. And only a very small number of these thousands can prove they touched the pope or exchanged some words with him. For most, the pope is never more than an image on television or in a photo. For the young man of twenty-three who waited in the crowd, with his hands in the pockets of his jacket, the Supreme Pontiff, Karol Wojtyla, was only a job.

He'd been in Rome for three days and expected to leave the country that same thirteenth of May, after completing the job entrusted to him. It wasn't easy to pull off, but the challenge thrilled his young heart. If he overcame these obstacles, everyone would look at him differently, with respect and admiration, even some envy—well, those within his own circle would, obviously. Society, however, would never know of his existence or his central role in the act that would change the Catholic world forever. Killing a pope was not really new; others had done it in the past. The former pope, Albino Luciani, was proof of that, as he well knew, but never had anyone done it before the eyes of the world in plain daylight, without waiting for the silence of the night to later blame a weak heart. This murder was much more daring: killing and escaping, in the middle of twenty thousand people in broad daylight at five in the afternoon.

The afternoon rain gave way to the sun that shone on the city and the small Papal State with pleasant spring warmth. The rain might be a good ally. He could hide his movements behind the open umbrellas. On the other hand, John Paul would have to have an assistant holding an umbrella over him. Worse, he might have to ride around in a closed vehicle. With sun, the universe conspired in his favor. The perfect crime is not one that doesn't look like a crime, but one for which no one is caught.

His orders had been precise, kill and leave, shoot and flee. If he was captured, they could do nothing for him. But everything was going to go well. Full of faith in himself, he squeezed the handle of the revolver in his jacket pocket. Fifteen more minutes . . .

. . .

A FEW BLOCKS from Saint Peter's Square there is another admirable temple of Christianity, the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore, the most ancient place of worship on earth dedicated to the Virgin. It is also known as Santa Maria della Neve, or Liberiana, in honor of Liberius, a fourth-century pope, to whom the Virgin appeared in dreams and whom she asked to build a chapel in Rome in a place where it would snow in a few days. Such a climatic miracle happened in fact in full summer on the night of the fourth or fifth of August in the year 358 on the Esquiline Hill. As pope, Liberius forgot the Virgin's humble request and sketched out a plan in the snow for what would be an enormous sanctuary. It would not be until a century later, during the papacy of Sixtus III—immediately after the Council of Ephesus, which confirmed the divine maternity of Mary and made official what had been known for five centuries, the existence of the Son of God, conceived without sin—that the basilica was constructed. It was even larger than had been planned in the initial project of Liberius's sanctuary, to whom it was consecrated. This same sacred edifice, restored above and below, stands today over the Esquiline Hill and every fifth of August is flooded with white petals symbolizing the snow that never again fell in full summer.

At five in the afternoon that thirteenth day of May, a man in purple entered this domain and walked with slow steps around the portentous apse, ignoring the faithful and the tourists, as well as the dazzling mosaics of the Franciscan friar Jacopo Torriti, dating from the thirteenth century, which depict the Coronation of the Virgin. Nor did he pay attention to the ancient columns of Athenian marble that support the nave and have served as a model for many other, similar structures in the Catholic world, or to the tomb where Gian Lorenzo Bernini rests for eternity. Nothing disturbed the concentration of the bishop, who continued toward the altar.

"Does Your Eminence need anything?" one of the Redemptorists asked ingratiatingly. He had placed himself in the path of the prelate, not discourteously, but rather wishing to be of service.

The man in purple stopped a moment on seeing his way blocked and,

after some thought, avoided the brother responsible for the confessions that day.

“Out of the way,” he muttered, almost pushing him, something he probably would have done had the brother not stepped aside. “All I needed was a Dominican getting in my way.”

His destination was a few feet farther, next to a bronze baldachin, where he descended the steps that led to the crypt.

The Crypt of Bethlehem, also called that of the Nativity, is a sacred place with great religious and historical significance. It holds, according to tradition, the relics of the Holy Land, including the wooden boards belonging to the cradle Jesus slept in. All these can be seen in this crypt where Ignacio de Loyola celebrated his first Mass on the twenty-fifth of December, 1538, before founding the celebrated Company of Jesus. The man in purple descended to the holy place, got down on his knees, and crossed himself.

“Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned,” he prayed, lowering his head in submission and genuine repentance. “The flesh is weak, I am weak. The devil tempts me daily, and I don’t have the strength to resist.”

Tears sprang from his eyes like springs opening new furrows. His suffering was not insignificant, nor the load on his shoulders, making him implore God the Father Omnipotent for His sacred divine mercy. Let him who is without sin cast the first stone at this sorrowful bishop of the Roman Catholic Church, since not even the saints were able to live lives immune to evil temptations, although they resisted more than common mortals. Popes and doctors of the Church are buried in this crypt. The bishop came to ask clemency and strength from them, since the weight of the load was too much for one man alone.

“Help me, Saint Jerome, intercede for me with the Infant Jesus,” he prayed, asking favors from the saint buried there, since a bishop should be attended to before the other faithful, one of the privileges of serving God. “For the sake of all the most sacred, take this weight off my shoulders. Let me breathe.” He got up and took out a key hanging on a gold chain around his neck. He inserted it in the lock of the door and turned it. It wasn’t opened often, but it showed no deterioration, perhaps because gold is immune to the ravages of climate, history, and the madness of men.

The key turned the interconnected mechanisms that opened the ark. From within his cassock, the prelate took out a large yellow envelope, which he placed inside. His pensive expression lasted a few moments. Sweat mixed with tears—the same salt for different sensations. He closed his eyes as he turned the key, closing the ark that guarded the secret until history decides to judge it in another time, neither better nor worse, but different from this age, far off, when no one with ties to such a secret would remain in this earthly city.

Calmer now, he backed up a few steps with his head lowered, submissive but not humble.

“Our Father, forgive me for what I have done,” he said in a grave, sorrowful voice. He opened his eyes, still damp, and crossed himself before leaving the crypt. “And for what I have ordered done.”

AT THE SAME TIME the bishop left the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore, where he had expiated the sins that tormented his conscience, John Paul, the second Shepherd of the Shepherds with that name, made his appearance in Saint Peter’s Square before the twenty thousand people present. A passage, opened up among the faithful by the security forces, indicated the path of his pope-mobile, specially purchased for these occasions. The crowd cheered the Holy Father, creating a deafening clamor that spread over the plaza, adjacent streets, and alleys. He was the pope, the holiest among the holiest, the voice of God on earth. What would one not pay for a moment like this, to be able to see him, two or three steps away, gesturing, smiling gratefully for the attendance and faith of the crowd?

The twenty-three-year-old waited for the right moment. The caravan was still more than a hundred yards away, approaching slowly. The Polish pope truly wanted to be seen by each of his beloved faithful. *Enjoy your last ovation*, the young man thought to himself. *From here you go directly to the tomb*. He breathed the confidence of youth, excessive and stupid, which ends with time, or not, depending on the life each leads and the force with which life bends us to its will, without mercy, without thought.

Fifty yards separated life from the valley of the shadow of death,

misfortune from brief glory, Wojtyla from Mehmet, the latter being the name of the beardless twenty-three-year-old with his hands hidden in his jacket pockets, despite the warm day. Nothing united them in that moment, an assassin disguised as a worshipper and the greatest penitent of them all, unaware that he was the target of a boy, a professional gunman, prepared to add the crowning touch to his career, for which he would never be forgotten.

At forty yards, the people began to crowd together more and more tightly, elbowing one another with the selfish hope of gaining a better position to see the pope. Who knows, maybe they'd even snatch a glance and beneficence from the Holy Father, a personal gesture not to be shared. What greater fortune could happen than to go to Rome, see the pope, and be seen and greeted by him, from two or three steps away. They were perfectly aware the Supreme Pontiff would never remember them in his dreams, conversations, discourses . . . but none of that mattered.

The thirty yards between the pope and the shooter revealed a problem the boy hadn't foreseen and couldn't control: the pressing crowd made movement impossible. Ironically, one of the things that made the plan infallible, a shot coming from the middle of the crowd, fired without anyone's knowing from where or by whom, seemed instantly problematic. It was as if the twenty thousand people, unconsciously of course, wanted to protect their pastor from something they could not foresee, not even in their darkest thoughts. Or perhaps it was their God directing such an outcome from each of those present. Certainly such a thought passed through the shooter's mind, but as soon as it unexpectedly appeared, it left. It was time to act, to focus, and to neutralize his target.

Twenty yards. The euphoria grew with every step, an experience of authentic and sacred faith that filled Saint Peter's Square with commotion. Indifferent to that mystical experience, Mehmet mentally reviewed his own life, feeling recognition and admiration, even glory, approaching. He was jammed between an old, weeping Polish woman who cried out incomprehensible words in her native language, two Germans, an Italian soldier with his medals from a lifetime taking lives in defense of his country, a cripple in a wheelchair from Naples, and five Consolata

missionary sisters. They all added to Mehmet's confusion. He couldn't find, as hard as he looked, the desired clear line of fire. He only needed a few inches of space, even less, and no one would catch him, but he could barely even draw his pistol from his pocket. "Damn," he cursed. His target smiled at the crowd.

Ten yards. Mehmet could make out every feature of Wojtyla's face and body. He could see his benign smile, the gestures of gratitude to the crowd, repeated over and over from the beginning of his route, but appearing always new, captivating, heartfelt. The pope emanated joy, radiance, hope, and all this created a psychological echo in those present, a redoubled encouragement, a hope so strong that everyone desired a little part of the glance and the sacred gestures of John Paul II. Mehmet needed only one second of less crowding to do his job successfully. The rain would have been a better ally, but a good executioner doesn't look for excuses at the moment of truth. He would get out of there one way or another, or not. That was the risk, but the job had to be done.

This was the moment. If the pope moved on, Mehmet would fail. *You escaped once*, he thought, remembering the recent past. *Today you are mine*. He calmed his mind as much as possible and drew the gun from his pocket. He squeezed the trigger once, twice, three, four, five, six times, until he was tackled by the people surrounding him. They disarmed him, and he was lucky not to be lynched as well. The security forces arrested him, while the pope-mobile accelerated away as fast as possible with the wounded pope helped by his assistants toward the protective walls of the Holy See. In booking Mehmet, they found a piece of paper with a phrase written in Turkish. Later someone translated it: "I am killing the pope as a protest against the imperialism of the Soviet Union and the United States of America and against the genocide they are carrying out in El Salvador and in Afghanistan."

Handcuffed and dragged before the police, Mehmet screamed out loud in his native tongue, while people looked on at him incredulously, sorrowfully, impotently, and with hearts filled with sadness and worry for the Holy Father.

The completion of the job resulted in the arrest of a poor, unrepentant

Mehmet and the wounding of three innocent people. Two of the injured were peaceful spectators free of any guilt, and the third was the pope himself, who received four bullets in a body not made to receive any. Stomach, intestine, left arm and hand, they were wounds that might have taken his life.

“I have no respect for human life,” Mehmet shouted, smiling, satisfied by his completed task. It was five-fifteen in the afternoon.

Sixty-four years earlier, the same day and hour, a thousand miles from Rome, the Virgin appeared for the first time to the three Shepherd children at the Cova da Iria in Portugal.