

VINTAGE SARAMAGO

THE DOUBLE

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About the Author

Jose Saramago was born in Portugal in 1922 and has been a full-time writer since 1979. His oeuvre embraces plays, poetry, short stories, non-fiction and ten novels, which have been translated into more than forty languages and have established him as the most influential Portuguese writer of his generation. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1998.

Also by José Saramago in English translation

Fiction

THE MANUAL OF PAINTING AND CALLIGRAPHY

BALTASAR & BLIMUNDA

THE YEAR OF THE DEATH OF RICARDO REIS

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JESUS CHRIST

THE HISTORY OF THE SIEGE OF LISBON

BLINDNESS

ALL THE NAMES

THE TALE OF THE UNKNOWN ISLAND

THE STONE RAFT

THE CAVE

Non-fiction

JOURNEY TO PORTUGAL

For Pilar, until the last moment

For Ray-Gude Mertin

For Pepa Sanchez-Manjavacas

Chaos is merely order waiting to be deciphered.

The Book of Contraries

I believe in my conscience I intercept many a thought which heaven intended for another man.

Laurence Sterne,
The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy

The Double

Translated from the Portuguese by
Margaret Jull Costa

José Saramago



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THE MAN WHO has just come into the shop to rent a video bears on his identity card a most unusual name, a name with a classical flavour that time has staled, neither more nor less than Tertuliano Máximo Afonso. The Máximo and the Afonso, which are in more common usage, he can just about tolerate, depending, of course, on the mood he's in, but the Tertuliano weighs on him like a gravestone and has done ever since he first realised that the wretched name lent itself to being spoken in an ironic, potentially offensive tone. He is a History teacher at a secondary school, and a colleague had suggested the video to him with the warning, It's not exactly a masterpiece of cinema, but it might keep you amused for an hour and a half. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso is greatly in need of stimuli to distract him, he lives alone and gets bored, or, to speak with the clinical exactitude that the present day requires, he has succumbed to the temporary weakness of spirit ordinarily known as depression. To get a clear idea of his situation, suffice it to say that he was married, but can no longer remember what led him into matrimony, that he is divorced and cannot now bring himself to ponder the reasons for the separation. On the other hand, while the ill-fated union produced no children who are now demanding to be handed, gratis, the world on a silver platter, he has, for some time, viewed sweet History, the serious, educational subject which he had felt called upon to teach and which could have been a soothing refuge for him, as a chore without meaning and a beginning without an end. For those of a nostalgic temperament, who tend to be fragile and somewhat inflexible, living alone is the harshest of punishments, but, it must be said, such a situation, however painful, only rarely develops into a cataclysmic drama of the kind to make the skin prick and the hair stand on end. What one mostly sees, indeed it hardly comes as a surprise any more, are people patiently submitting to solitude's meticulous scrutiny, recent

public examples, though not particularly well-known and two of whom even met with a happy ending, being the portrait painter who we only ever knew by his first initial, the GP who returned from exile to die in the arms of the beloved fatherland, the proofreader who drove out a truth in order to plant a lie in its place, the lowly clerk in the Central Registry Office who made off with certain death certificates, all of these, either by chance or coincidence, were members of the male sex, but none of them had the misfortune to be called Tertuliano, and this was doubtless an inestimable advantage to them in their relations with other people. The shop assistant, who had already taken down from the shelf the video requested, entered in the log book the title of the film and the day's date, then indicated to the customer the place where he should sign. Written after a moment's hesitation, the signature revealed only the last two names, Máximo Afonso, without the Tertuliano, but like someone determined to clarify in advance something that might become a cause of controversy, the customer murmured as he signed his name, It's quicker like that. This precautionary explanation proved of little use, for the assistant, as he transferred the information from the customer's ID onto an index card, pronounced the unfortunate, antiquated name out loud, in a tone which even an innocent child would have recognised as deliberate. No-one, we believe, however free of obstacles his or her life may have been, would dare to claim that they had never suffered some similar humiliation. Although, sooner or later, we will all, inevitably, be confronted by one of those hearty types to whom human frailty, especially in its most refined and delicate forms, is the cause of mocking laughter, the truth is that the inarticulate sounds which, quite against our wishes, occasionally emerge from our own mouth, are merely the irrepressible moans from some ancient pain or sorrow, like a scar suddenly making its forgotten presence felt again. As he puts the video away in his battered teacher's briefcase,

Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, with admirable brio, struggles not to reveal the displeasure provoked by the shop assistant's gratuitous sneer, but he cannot help thinking, all the while scolding himself for the vile injustice of the thought, that the fault lay with his colleague and with the mania certain people have for handing out unasked-for advice. Such is our need to shower blame on some distant entity when it is we who lack the courage to face up to what is there before us. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso does not know, cannot imagine or even guess that the assistant already regrets his gross impertinence, indeed, another ear, more finely tuned than his and capable of dissecting the subtle vocal gradations in the assistant's At your service, sir, offered in response to the brusque Good afternoon thrown back at him, would have told him that a great desire for peace had installed itself behind the counter. After all, it is a benevolent commercial principle, laid down in antiquity and tried and tested over the centuries, that the customer is always right, even in the unlikely, but quite possible, eventuality that the customer's name should be Tertuliano.

Sitting now on the bus which will drop him near the building where he has lived for the last six or so years, that is, ever since his divorce, Máximo Afonso, and we use the shortened version of his name here having been, in our view, authorised to do so by its sole lord and master, but mainly because the word Tertuliano, having appeared so recently, only three lines previously, could do a grave disservice to the fluency of the narrative, anyway, as we were saying, Máximo Afonso, found himself wondering, suddenly intrigued, suddenly perplexed, what strange motives, what particular reasons had led his colleague from the Mathematics department, we forgot to mention that his colleague teaches Mathematics, to urge him so insistently to see the film he has just rented, when, up until then, the so-called seventh art had never been a topic of conversation between them. One could understand such a

recommendation had it been an indisputably fine film, in which case the pleasure, satisfaction and enthusiasm of discovering a work of high aesthetic quality might have obliged his colleague, over lunch in the canteen or during a break between classes, to tug anxiously at his sleeve and say, I don't believe we've ever talked about cinema before, but I have to tell you, my friend, that you absolutely must see *The Race is to the Swift*, which is the title of the video Tertuliano Máximo Afonso has in his briefcase, something we also neglected to mention. Then the History teacher would ask, Where's it being shown, to which the Mathematics teacher would respond, explaining, Oh, it's not being shown anywhere at the moment, it was on four or five years ago, I can't understand how I missed it when it first came out, and then, without a pause, concerned as to the possible futility of the advice he was so fervently offering, But maybe you've already seen it, No, I haven't, I hardly ever go to the cinema, I just make do with what they show on TV, and I don't see very much of that, Well, you should make a point of seeing it then, you'll find it in any video store, you can always rent it if you don't want to buy it. That is how the dialogue might have gone if the film had been worthy of praise, but things happened rather more prosaically, I don't want to stick my nose in where it isn't wanted, the Mathematics teacher had said as he peeled an orange, but for a while now you've struck me as being rather down, and Tertuliano Máximo Afonso agreed, You're right, I have been feeling a bit low, Health problems, No, I'm not ill as far as I know, it's just that everything tires me and bores me, the wretched routine, the repetitiveness, the sense of marking time, Go out and have some fun, man, a bit of fun is always the best remedy, If you'll forgive me saying so, having fun is only a remedy for those who don't need one, A good answer, no doubt about it, but meanwhile, you've got to do something to shake off this feeling of apathy, Depression, Depression, apathy, it doesn't really matter, what we call

the factors is arbitrary, But the intensity isn't, What do you do when you're not at school, Oh, I read, listen to music, occasionally visit a museum, And what about the cinema, No, I don't go to the cinema much, I make do with what they show on TV, You could buy a few videos, start a collection, a video library if you like, You're right, I could, except that I haven't even got enough space for my books, Well, rent some videos then, that's the best solution, Well, I do own a few videos, science documentaries, nature programmes, archaeology, anthropology, the arts in general, and I'm interested in astronomy too, that sort of thing, That's all very well, but you need to distract yourself with stories that don't take up too much space in your head, I mean, given, for example, that you're interested in astronomy, you might well enjoy science fiction, adventures in outer space, star wars, special effects, As I see it, those so-called special effects are the real enemy of the imagination, that mysterious, enigmatic skill it took us human beings so much hard work to invent, Now you're exaggerating, No, I'm not, the people who are exaggerating are the ones who want me to believe that in less than a second, with a click of the fingers, a spaceship can travel a hundred thousand million kilometres, You have to agree, though, that to create the effects you so despise also takes imagination, Yes, but it's their imagination, not mine, You can always use theirs as a jumping-off point, Oh, I see, two hundred thousand million kilometres instead of one hundred thousand million, Don't forget that what we call reality today was mere imagination yesterday, just look at Jules Verne, Yes, but the reality is that a trip to Mars, for example, and Mars, in astronomical terms, is just around the corner, would take at least nine months, then you'd have to hang around there for another six months until the planet was in the right position to make the return journey, before travelling for another nine months back to Earth, that's two whole years of utter tedium, a film about a trip to Mars that respected the facts would be the

dullest thing ever seen, Yes, I can see why you're bored, Why, Because you're not content with anything, I'd be content with very little if I had it, You must have something to hang onto, your career, your work, it doesn't seem to me that you have much reason for complaint, But it's my career and my work that are hanging on to me, not the other way round, Well, that's a malaise, always assuming it is a malaise, that I suffer from too, I mean, I myself would much rather be known as a mathematical genius than as the long-suffering, mediocre secondary school teacher I have no option but to continue to be, Maybe it's just that I don't really like myself, Now if you came to me with an equation containing two unknown factors, I could give you the benefit of my professional advice, but when it comes to an incompatibility of that sort, all my knowledge would only complicate things still further, that's why I suggested you pass the time watching a few films, as if you were taking a couple of tranquillisers, rather than devoting yourself to mathematics, which would really do your head in, Any suggestions, About what, About what would be an interesting, worthwhile film, There's no shortage of those, just go into a shop, have a look around and choose one, Yes, but you could at least make a suggestion. The Mathematics teacher thought and thought, then said, The Race is to the Swift, What's that, A film, that's what you asked me for, It sounds more like a proverb, Well, it is a proverb, The whole thing or just the title, Wait and see, What sort is it, What, the proverb, No, the film, A comedy, You're sure it's not one of those old-fashioned, crime of passion melodramas, or one of those modern ones, all gunshots and explosions, It's a light, very amusing comedy, All right, I'll make a note of it, what did you say it was called, The Race is to the Swift, Right, I've got it, It's not exactly a masterpiece of cinema, but it might keep you amused for an hour and a half.

Tertuliano Máximo Afonso is at home, he has a hesitant look on his face, not that this means very much, it isn't the

first time it's happened, as he watches his will swing between spending time preparing something to eat, which generally means nothing more strenuous than opening a tin and heating up the contents, or, alternatively, going out to eat in a nearby restaurant, where he is known for his lack of interest in the menu, not because he is a proud, dissatisfied customer, he is merely indifferent, inattentive, reluctant to take the trouble to choose a dish from amongst those set out in the brief and all-too-familiar list. He is confirmed in his belief that it would be easier to eat in by the fact that he has homework to mark, his students' latest efforts, which he must read carefully and correct whenever they offend too extravagantly against the truths they have been taught or are overly free in their interpretations. The History which it is Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's mission to teach is like a bonsai tree the roots of which have to be trimmed now and then to stop it growing, a childish miniature of the gigantic tree of places and time and of all that happens there, we look, we notice the disparity in size and go no further, ignoring other equally obvious differences, the fact, for example, that no bird, no wingèd creature, not even the tiny hummingbird, could make its nest in the branches of a bonsai, and that if a lizard could find shelter in the tiny shadow the bonsai casts, always supposing its leaves were sufficiently luxuriant, there is every likelihood that the tip of the creature's tail would continue to protrude. The History that Tertuliano Máximo Afonso teaches, as he himself recognises and will happily admit if asked, has a vast number of tails protruding, some still twitching, others nothing but wrinkled skin with a little row of loose vertebrae inside. Remembering the conversation with his colleague, he thought, Mathematics comes from another cerebral planet, in Mathematics, those lizard tails would be mere abstractions. He took the homework out of his briefcase and placed it on the desk, he also took out the video of The Race is to the Swift, these were the two tasks to which he could

devote the evening, marking homework or watching a film, although he suspected that there wouldn't be time for both, especially since he neither liked nor was in the habit of working late into the night. Marking his students' homework was hardly a matter of life and death, and watching the film even less so. It would be best to settle down with the book he was reading, he thought. After a visit to the bathroom, he went into the bedroom to change his clothes, he donned different shoes and trousers, pulled a sweater on over his shirt, but left his tie, because he didn't like to leave his throat exposed, then went into the kitchen. He took three different tins out of the cupboard and, not knowing how else to choose, decided to leave the matter to chance and resorted to a nonsensical, almost forgotten rhyme from childhood which, in those days, had usually got him the result he least wanted, and it went like this, eeny, meeny, miney, moe, catch a tigger by his toe, if he hollers let him go, eeny, meeny, miney, moe. The winner was a meat stew, which wasn't what he most fancied, but he felt it best not to go against fate. He ate in the kitchen, washing the food down with a glass of red wine, and when he finished, he repeated the rhyme, almost without thinking, with three crumbs of bread, the one on the left was the book, the one in the middle was the homework, the one on the right was the film. The Race is to the Swift won, obviously what will be will be, don't quibble with fate over pears, it will eat all the ripe ones and give you the green ones. That's what people usually say, and because it is what people usually say, we accept it without further discussion, when our duty as free people is to argue energetically with a despotic fate that has determined, with who knows what malicious intentions, that the green pear should be the film and not the homework or the book. As a teacher, and a teacher of History, this Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, for one has only to consider the scene we have just witnessed in the kitchen, entrusting his immediate future and possibly what will follow to three

crumbs of bread and some senseless childhood drivel, this teacher, we were saying, is setting a bad example to the adolescents whom fate, whether the same or an entirely different one, has placed in his hands. Unfortunately, we do not have room in this story to anticipate the doubtless pernicious effects of the influence of such a teacher on the young souls of his pupils, so we will leave them here, hoping only that one day they may encounter on life's road a contrary influence which will free them, possibly in extremis, from the irrationalist perdition that currently hangs over them like a threat.

Tertuliano Máximo Afonso carefully washed up the supper dishes, for leaving everything clean and in its place after eating has always constituted for him an inviolable duty, which just goes to show, returning one last time to the young souls mentioned above, to whom such behaviour might, indeed in all probability would, seem laughable and such a duty a mere dead letter, that it is still possible to learn something even from someone with so little to recommend him on all subjects, matters and topics relating to free will. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso took this and other excellent lessons from the sensible customs of the family in which he was brought up, especially from his mother, who we are glad to say is alive and well, and whom he is sure to visit one of these days in the small provincial town where the future teacher first opened his eyes to the world, the cradle of the Máximos on his mother's side and the Afonsos on his father's side, and where he was the first Tertuliano to be born almost forty years ago. He can only visit his father in the cemetery, that's what this bitch of a life is like, it always runs out on us. The vulgar expression came into his mind unbidden, because, as he was leaving the kitchen, he happened to think about his father and to miss him, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso has never been one for using coarse language, so much so that on the rare occasions when he does, he himself is surprised by an awkwardness,

by a lack of conviction in his phonatory organs, his vocal cords, palate, tongue, teeth and lips, as if they were, against their will, articulating a word from a language hitherto unknown to them. In the small room that serves as both study and living room is a two-seater sofa and a coffee table, a rather welcoming armchair, with the television directly in front of it, at the vanishing point, and, placed at an angle to catch the light from the window, the desk where the History homework and the video are waiting to find out who will win. Two of the walls are lined with books, most of them dog-eared from use and wizened with age. On the floor, a carpet bearing a geometric design in subdued or possibly faded colours helps to create the no more than averagely cosy atmosphere, quite without affectation and making no pretence at appearing to be more than what it is, the home of a secondary school teacher who doesn't earn very much, a fact which may be capricious pigheadedness on the part of the teaching profession or the result of an historical penalty still as yet unpaid. The middle breadcrumb, that is, the book that Tertuliano Máximo Afonso has been reading, a weighty tome on ancient Mesopotamian civilisations, lies where it was left the previous night, on the coffee table, waiting, like the other two breadcrumbs, waiting, as all things always are, it's something they can't avoid, it is their ruling destiny, part, it seems, of their invincible nature as things. Given what we have so far seen of the character of Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, who, in the short time we have known him, has already shown signs of being something of a daydreamer, even somewhat non-committal, it would come as no surprise now if he were to indulge in a display of certain conscious acts of self-deceit, leafing with feigned enthusiasm through his students' homework, opening the book at the page where he stopped reading, coolly studying both sides of the video cassette box, as if he had not yet decided what he wanted to do. But appearances, whilst not always as deceptive as people say,

not infrequently belie themselves, revealing new modes of being that open the door to the possibility of real changes in a pattern of behaviour which, generally speaking, had been assumed to be already defined. This laborious explanation could have been avoided if, instead, we had got right to the point and said that Tertuliano Máximo Afonso headed straight for the desk, picked up the video, read the information on the front and back of the box, studied, on the former, the smiling, amiable faces of the actors, noted that only one of the names was known to him, the main one, that of a pretty, young actress, a sure sign that the film, when it came to drawing up contracts, had not been taken very seriously by the producers, and then, with the bold action of a will that seemed never to have wavered for a moment, slotted the cassette into the video player, sat down in the armchair, pressed the button on the remote control and settled back to enjoy the evening as best he could, although, given the unpromising material, any real enjoyment seemed unlikely. And so it proved. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso laughed twice and smiled three or four times, for the comedy was not just light, to use the Mathematics teacher's conciliatory expression, it was, above all, absurd, ridiculous, a cinematographic monster in which logic and common sense had been left protesting on the other side of the door, having been refused entry into the place where the madness was being perpetrated. The title, *The Race is to the Swift*, was deployed merely as a very obvious metaphor, like one of those really easy riddles, what's white and is laid by hens, though there was no mention of races, runners or speed, it was just a story of rampant personal ambition which the pretty, young actress embodied as well as she had been trained to do, the plot being full of misunderstandings, hoaxes, mix-ups and confusions, in the midst of which, alas, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's depression found not the least relief. When the film ended, Tertuliano was more irritated with himself than with

his colleague. The latter had the excuse of being well-intentioned, but he himself was far too old to go chasing after sky rockets, and, as always happens with the ingenuous, what pained him most was his own ingenuousness. Out loud he said, I'll return this crap tomorrow, there was no surprise this time, he felt he had earned the right to vent his feelings using crude language, and one must bear in mind, too, that this was only the second vulgarity to escape him in recent weeks, what's more he had only thought the first one, and mere thoughts don't count. He glanced at his watch and saw that it wasn't yet eleven o'clock. It's early, he murmured, and by this he meant, as immediately became apparent, that he still had time to punish himself for his frivolity in having exchanged obligation for devotion, the authentic for the false, the enduring for the transient. He sat down at his desk, carefully drew the History homework towards him, as if seeking its forgiveness for his neglect, and worked into the night, like the scrupulous teacher he had always prided himself on being, full of pedagogical love for his pupils, but rigorous with dates and implacable when it came to epithets. It was late by the time he reached the end of the task he had set himself, but, still repentant for his lapse, still contrite for his sin, and like someone who has decided to swap one painful hairshirt for another no less punitive one, he took to bed with him the book on ancient Mesopotamian civilisations and began the chapter about the Amorites and, in particular, about their king Hammurabi and his code of law. After only four pages, he fell peacefully asleep, a sign that he had been forgiven.

He awoke an hour later. He had not been dreaming, no horrible nightmare had disordered his brain, he had not been flailing around, trying to defend himself against a gelatinous monster that was stuck to his face, he merely opened his eyes and thought, There's someone in the apartment. Slowly, unhurriedly, he sat up in bed and

listened. His bedroom has no windows, even during the day any outside noises are inaudible, and at this time of night, What time is it, the silence is usually complete. And it was complete. Whoever the intruder was, he was staying put. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso reached out to the bedside table and turned on the light. The clock said a quarter past four. Like most ordinary people, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso is a mixture of courage and cowardice, he isn't one of those invincible cinema heroes, but neither is he a wimp, the kind who pees his pants when, at midnight, he hears the door of the castle dungeon creak open. True, he felt all the hairs on his body prickle, but that even happens to wolves when faced by danger, and no-one in their right mind would describe wolves as pathetic cowards. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso is about to prove that he certainly isn't either. He slid quietly out of bed, picked up a shoe for lack of any sturdier weapon and, very cautiously, peered out into the corridor. He looked to right and left. The sense of another presence that had woken him up grew slightly stronger. Turning on lights as he went, aware of his heart pounding in his chest like a galloping horse, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso went first into the bathroom and then into the kitchen. No-one. And oddly enough, the presence seemed less intense there. He went back into the corridor and, as he approached the living room, he felt the invisible presence growing denser with each step, as if the atmosphere had been set vibrating by reverberations from some hidden incandescence, as if Tertuliano, in his nervousness, were walking over radioactive ground carrying in his hand a Geiger counter, which, instead of sending out warning signals, was pumping out ectoplasm. There was no-one in the room. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso looked around him, there they were, solid and impassive, the two tall, crowded bookshelves, the framed engravings on the walls, to which no reference has been made until now, but which are nonetheless there, and there, and there, and there, the desk with the typewriter on it, the chair, the

coffee table in the middle with a small sculpture placed in its exact geometric centre, and the two-seater sofa and the television set. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso muttered fearfully to himself, So that's what it was, and then, just as he uttered that last word, the presence, like a soap bubble bursting, silently disappeared. Yes, that's what it was, the television set, the video machine, the comedy called The Race is to the Swift, an image from inside which had now returned to its place after going to rouse Tertuliano Máximo Afonso from his bed. He couldn't imagine what it could be, but he was sure he would recognise it as soon as it appeared. He went into the bedroom, put a dressing gown on over his pyjamas, so as not to catch cold, and came back. He sat down in the armchair, pressed the button on the remote control, and leaning forward, all eyes, his elbows on his knees, no laughter or smiles this time, he replayed the story of that pretty, young woman who wanted to be a success in life. After twenty minutes, he saw her go into a hotel and walk over to the reception desk, he heard her say her name, My name's Inês de Castro, he had noticed this interesting, historical coincidence earlier, then he heard her go on, I have a room reserved, the clerk looked straight at her, at the camera, not at her, or, rather, at her standing where the camera stood, but this time, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso barely understood what the clerk said, the thumb of the hand holding the remote control immediately pressed the pause button, but the image had gone, obviously they weren't going to waste film on an actor who was little more than an extra, who only appeared twenty minutes into the plot, the tape rewound, past the receptionist's face, the pretty, young woman went into the hotel again, said again that her name was Inês de Castro and that she had reserved a room, and now, there it was, the frozen image of the clerk at the reception desk looking straight at the person looking at him. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso got up from the chair, knelt down in front of the television, his face as close to the

screen as he could get it and still be able to see, It's me, he said, and once more he felt the hairs on his body stand on end, what he was seeing wasn't true, it couldn't be, any sensible person who happened to be there would say reassuringly, Come off it, Tertuliano, I mean, he's got a moustache, and you're clean-shaven. Sensible people are like that, they tend to simplify everything, and then, but always too late, we witness their astonishment at the great diversity of life, they remember that moustaches and beards don't have minds of their own, they grow and prosper only when allowed to do so, or, occasionally, out of sheer indolence on the part of the wearer, but, from one moment to the next, because the fashion changes or because their hirsute monotony becomes an irritating sight in the mirror, they can also vanish without trace. Since, of course, anything can happen in the world of actors and the dramatic arts, there was also a strong probability that the clerk's fine, well-groomed moustache was, quite simply, false. It has been known. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso could himself have come up with these considerations, which, precisely because they were so obvious, would be bound to occur to anyone, had he not been so intent on finding other scenes involving this same extra or, to be more accurate, this supporting actor with a small speaking part. The man with the moustache appeared another five times in the film, and on each occasion had very little to do, although in the last scene he was given a couple of supposedly saucy remarks to exchange with the mighty Inês de Castro and then, as she walked off, swaying her hips, he had to gaze after her with a grotesque leer on his face, which the director must have thought the audience would find irresistibly funny. Needless to say, if Tertuliano Máximo Afonso had failed to find this funny the first time, he found it still less so the second. He had gone back to the first image, the one in which the clerk at reception, in close-up, is looking directly at Inês de Castro, and he was minutely analysing the image,

line by line, feature by feature, Apart from a few slight differences, he thought, especially the moustache, the different hairstyle, the thinner face, he's just like me. He felt calmer now, the resemblance was, to say the least, astonishing, but that was all it was, and there's no shortage of resemblances in the world, twins for example, the really amazing thing would be that out of the six thousand million people on the planet there weren't two people exactly alike. Obviously, they couldn't be exactly alike, the same in every detail, he said, as if he were talking to his almost-alter ego staring out at him from inside the television set. Seated once more in the armchair, thus occupying the position of the actress playing the part of Inês de Castro, he too pretended to be a customer at the hotel, My name's Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, he announced, then with a smile, What's yours, it was the rational thing to ask, if two identical people meet, it's only natural that they should want to know everything about each other, and the name is always the first thing we ask, because we imagine that this is the door through which one enters. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso fast-forwarded the tape to the end, there was the list of the supporting cast, he wondered if the roles they played would be mentioned too, but the names, and there were a lot of them, were simply listed alphabetically. He absent-mindedly picked up the box, glanced again at what was on it, the smiling faces of the leading actors, a brief plot summary, and underneath, in small print, amongst the technical details, the date of the film. It's five years old, he muttered, and remembered that his colleague, the Mathematics teacher, had told him this as well. Five years, he said again, and suddenly, the world gave another almighty shudder, it was not the effect of another impalpable, mysterious presence such as the one that had woken him, but of something concrete, not just concrete, but something that could be documented. With trembling hands, he opened and closed drawers, pulled out envelopes full of negatives and

photographs, scattered them over his desk, and, at last, found what he was looking for, a photo of himself, five years ago. He had a moustache, a different hairstyle, and his face was thinner.

NOT EVEN TERTULIANO Máximo Afonso himself could have said whether or not sleep once more opened her merciful arms to him after what, to him, had been the terrifying revelation of the existence, possibly in that same city, of a man who, to judge by his face and by his general appearance, was his very image. After a careful comparison of the photograph from five years ago with the close-up of the clerk in the film, and after finding no difference, however tiny, between the two, not even the smallest line present in one and absent in the other, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso fell onto the sofa, not into the armchair, which was not large enough to contain the physical and moral collapse of his body, and there, head in hands, nerves exhausted, stomach churning, he struggled to put his thoughts in order, untangling them from the chaos of emotions that had accumulated since the moment when memory, watching without his knowledge from behind the closed curtain of his eyelids, had woken him with a start from his initial and only sleep. What troubles me most, he finally managed to think, isn't so much the fact that the guy resembles me, is a copy, you might say, a duplicate of me, that's not so very unusual, there are twins, for example, there are look-alikes, species do repeat themselves, the human being repeats itself, head, trunk, arms, legs, and it could happen, although I can't be sure, it's just a hypothesis, that some unforeseen change in a particular genetic group could result in the creation of a being similar to one generated by another entirely unrelated genetic group, that doesn't trouble me as much as knowing that five years ago I was the same as he was then, I mean, both of us even had moustaches, and more than that, the possibility, or, rather, the probability that five years on, that is, now, right now, at this precise hour in the morning, that sameness continues, as if a change in me would occasion the same change in him, or worse still, that one of us changes not because the other one changes, but because

any change is simultaneous, that's enough to send you stark staring mad, yes, all right, I mustn't make this into a tragedy, we know that everything that can happen will happen, but, first, there was the chance event that made us the same, then there was the chance event of my seeing a film I'd never even heard of, I could have lived out the rest of my life never imagining that a phenomenon like this would choose to manifest itself in an ordinary teacher of History, a man who only a few hours earlier was correcting his students' mistakes and who now doesn't know what to do with the mistake into which he himself, from one moment to the next, has seen himself transformed. Am I really a mistake, he wondered, and supposing I am, what significance, what consequences does it have for a human being to know that he's a mistake. A shiver of fear ran down his spine and he thought that some things were better left just as they are, to be what they are, because otherwise there is the danger that other people will notice and, even worse, that we too will begin to see through their eyes the hidden blunder that corrupted us at birth and which waits, impatiently chewing its nails, for the day when it can show itself and say, Here I am. The excessive weight of such deep thought, centred as it was on the possibility of the existence of absolute doubles, albeit intuited in brief flashes rather than put into words, made his head slowly droop, and, eventually, sleep, a sleep which, in its own way, would continue the mental labours carried out up until then by wakefulness, overwhelmed his weary body and helped it make itself comfortable on the sofa cushions. Not that it was a rest that merited and justified that sweet name, for after a few moments, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso suddenly opened his eyes, like a talking doll whose mechanism has gone wrong, and repeated, in different words this time, the question he had just asked, What does it mean, being a mistake. He shrugged, as if the question had abruptly ceased to interest him. Whether this indifference was the

understandable effect of extreme tiredness or, on the contrary, the beneficent consequence of that brief sleep, it is, nonetheless, both disconcerting and unacceptable because, as we well know, and he better than anyone, the problem was not resolved, it's still there untouched, waiting inside the video player, having put into words that no-one heard but which were there beneath the surface of the scripted dialogue, One of us is a mistake, that was what the clerk at the receptionist actually said to Tertuliano Máximo Afonso when, addressing the actress playing Inés de Castro, he informed her that the room reserved for her was number twelve-eighteen. How many unknown factors are there in this equation, the History teacher asked the Mathematics teacher as he was once more crossing the threshold of sleep. His numerate colleague did not answer his question, he merely looked at him pityingly and said, We'll talk about it later, rest now, try to get some sleep, you need it. Sleep was indeed what Tertuliano Máximo Afonso most wanted at that moment, but the attempt failed. Soon afterwards, he was awake again, full of the brilliant idea that had suddenly occurred to him, which was to ask his colleague in Mathematics to tell him why he had suggested watching *The Race is to the Swift*, when it was a film of little merit, weighed down by five years of what had doubtless been a troubled existence, which, in the case of any run-of-the-mill, low-budget movie is a surefire reason for being retired early on the grounds of disability, or for meeting an inglorious end briefly postponed by the curiosity of a handful of eccentric viewers who, having heard talk of cult movies, erroneously thought that this was one. In this tangled equation, the first unknown factor he would have to resolve was whether or not his colleague had noticed the resemblance when he first saw the film and, if so, why he had not warned him when he suggested renting the video, even by jokily threatening him with, Prepare yourself, you're in for a shock. Although he does not really believe in Fate, distinguished from any lesser

destiny by that respectful initial capital letter, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso cannot shake off the idea that so many chance events and coincidences coming all together could very well correspond to a plan, as yet unrevealed, but whose development and denouement are doubtless already to be found on the tablets on which that same Destiny, always assuming it does exist and does govern our lives, set down, at the very beginning of time, the date on which the first hair would fall from our head and the last smile die on our lips. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso has ceased lying on the sofa like an empty, crumpled suit, he has just stood up as steadily as he can manage after a night which, for violent emotions, has had no equal in his entire life, and, feeling that his head was not quite in its right place, he went over to the window to look out at the sky. The night was still clinging to the city's rooftops, the streetlamps were still lit, but the first, subtle wash of early morning light was beginning to lend a certain transparency to the upper atmosphere. This was how he knew that the world would not end today, for it would be an unforgivable waste to make the sun rise in vain, merely to have the very entity that first gave life to everything witness the beginning of the void, and so, although the link between one thing and the other was not at all clear and certainly far from obvious, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's common sense finally turned up to give the advice that had been noticeable by its absence ever since the clerk at the reception desk first appeared on the television screen, and this advice was as follows, If you feel you must ask your colleague for an explanation, then do so at once, that would be infinitely better than walking around with all kinds of questions and queries stuck in your throat, but I would recommend that you don't open your mouth too much, that you watch what you say, you're holding a very hot potato, so put it down before you get burned, take the video back to the shop today, that way you can draw a line under the whole business and put an end to the mystery

before it begins to bring out things you would rather not know or see or do, besides, if there is another person who is a copy of you, or of whom you are the copy, as apparently there is, you're under no obligation to go looking for him, he exists and you knew nothing about him, you exist and he knows nothing about you, you've never seen each other, you've never passed in the street, the best thing you can do is, But what if one day I do meet him, what if I do pass him in the street, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso broke in, You just look the other way, as if to say I haven't seen you and I don't know you, And what if he speaks to me, If he has even a grain of good sense, he'll do exactly the same, You can't expect everyone to be sensible, That's why the world's in the state it is, You didn't answer my question, Which one, What do I do if he speaks to me, You say, well, what an extraordinary, fantastic, strange coincidence, whatever seems appropriate, but emphasising that it is just a coincidence, then you walk away, Just like that, Just like that, That would be rude, ill-mannered, Sometimes that's all you can do if you want to avoid the worst, if you don't, you know what will happen, one word will lead to another, after that first meeting, there'll be a second and a third, and in no time at all, you'll be telling your life story to a complete stranger, and you've been around long enough to have learned that you can't be too careful with strangers when it comes to personal matters, and frankly, I can't imagine anything more personal, or more intimate, than the mess you seem about to step into, It's hard to think of someone identical to me as a stranger, Just let him continue to be what he has been up until now, someone you don't know, Yes, but he'll never be a stranger, We're all strangers, even us, Who do you mean, You and me, your common sense and you, we hardly ever meet to talk, only very occasionally, and, to be perfectly honest, it's hardly ever been worthwhile, That's my fault I suppose, No, it's my fault too, we are obliged by our nature and our condition to follow