

SCHLUMM (from BARDO OR NOT BARDO)

ANTOINE VOLODINE

Translated from the French by Brian Evenson

I found myself inside of a train, these things happen. I wasn't traveling for pleasure. I had been entrusted with a task that I had to carry out along the route. A disagreeable task since it was a question of sending a man back into the nothingness from whence he had come forty-eight years beforehand, like me, which is to say probably by mistake. It always disgusted me a little to have to eliminate someone who is the same age as me and whose destiny, basically, could be measured from start to finish against my own. I was under escort until the final second, and was made to climb into the train car without the direction I was going to take having been communicated to me. This is one of our superiors' techniques, it rests on the conviction that, each of us being perpetually misled inside of his own existence, he doesn't need to know where he is truly going, especially when he isn't the one driving the vehicle in which the job is carried out. Nevertheless, since I had struggled during the final moments, I had been able to smuggle away a few images and get an idea of the route that I was going to travel. I had been put on an urban line, in a large city, let's say Hong Kong to say something and to respect the principle of verisimilitude upon which it is customary for all narrative murmurs to rest. Let's say on the line going from Mongkok to the sea. This line is hardly traveled at certain times of the day. Some details can be whispered here without it being detrimental to the Organization, and even totally false details always reassure those who feel uncertain and who are listening.

The train advanced. I slumped facing the direction the train was traveling. Some people claim that to sit facing opposite the direction of the trip causes serious physical difficulties. Until the present I had never been sick in a train, I mean to say as a result of the jolts of the carriage or because I might have been bothered by the smell

of dust or of bodies. Certainly, I have sometimes traveled in dreadful conditions and in a state of physical and mental dilapidation which exceeds the ordinary, but the illness had already broken out or was smoldering before I climbed into the carriage. Those days and those nights the mode of transportation was therefore not a factor. It seems that certain illnesses are terrible when one travels. The bubonic plague, in particular, or beriberi, or again gaseous gangrene. I cite only the best-known ailments, obviously. In the case of short trips the patient makes the best of it, but when the journey becomes interminable the symptoms worsen. Doctors have published on this, and not the least known among them. As far as I'm concerned, I wasn't suffering from any major scourge during that period. However, at the moment of taking a seat, I turned my upper body and face toward the front, as if, in an instinctive fashion, my body had dictated to me the best possible posture for confronting an accident or an ordeal.

There was almost nobody in the compartment when I settled in, at Mongkok, and, after something like a minute the Chinese passenger who occupied the seat neighboring my own gathered up her things and slipped away. My manner of dress is disturbing, I know. My monastic old clothes, which are still not out of the dry cleaners, give rise to negative reactions, made worse by my preference for a squatting position, at the base of the bench, a position nonetheless natural and quite comfortable. Sometimes I am questioned immediately after I have parked myself at the foot of the seat. I am driven away with the tip of a shoe sole, there is fidgeting, my presence is deplored aloud. As I am in commissioned service and the Organization looks after me upon my return, I tolerate these humiliations courageously. I absorb the insults without responding to them and, when there are blows, I roll with the blows. Faithful to the Chinese culture of unflappability, the passenger had hurled no disagreeable remark before disappearing. As our trainers say, you can all the same escape getting beaten up, and, in China in any case, there are people who know how to live and let live.

I thus remained, squatting and tossed about and in relatively good health, from Mongkok Road to Cheungwong Road, drowsy during the long monotonous hours.

A little after Cheungwong Road, Schlumm entered the compartment. Even during this period of his existence, one could with difficulty sustain the idea that he had human form. It is true that he looked a lot like me, which didn't play in his favor. His rags of a destitute Buddhist monk stuck to his flesh and seemed to directly wrap his

bones; that underlined the bizarre sturdiness of his frame and didn't encourage you to make his acquaintance. He passed me without throwing me a glance, examined the corner window as if he were discovering there a setting of premier importance, or perhaps as if he would have to stay several years in ascetic catatonia, then, having decided, he tucked himself up abruptly and squatted against the ventilation system. He squatted the wrong way round. His scarves and the very dirty rags that he wore, indigo, blackish brown and very dirty, started to fly and flap around him. He stretched his arm toward the control for the air conditioner and cut the air. The rags immediately fell again. Calm once established among the fabrics, silence reigned, if one can call silence the racket in which railroad journeys are carried out. I again started to drowse, this lasted an hour or two.

The countryside unscrolled vaguely behind the window. The views of Cheun-wong Road had been succeeded by the poorly maintained façades of Kamlam Street. I saw this in a very fragmentary manner, between two bouts of torpor. To see better, it would have been necessary to plaster your face against the windowpane. Now, I had avoided the corner window which Schlumm presently occupied. The window side is often preferred, even if to secure this seat you must sometimes travel facing rearwards, and thus risk falling ill. The passenger perceives what scrolls past and thus believes that he can determine the place in the world where he finds himself. This kills his anguish or reduces it. Yet, when you think about it, the landmarks which are chosen in studying the images issued from outside are quite illusory. Quite illusory and quite unstable. Let's take a simple example. The surroundings of Kamlam Street, for example, are confused with an arrival onto Kamfong Street. The buildings stand up according to similar vertical lines; above the doors the wishes for happiness in four characters differ in nothing; on the sidewalks the Asiatic faces of the crowd are similarly handsome and moving; people are dressed in the same way. That's why I prefer to stay near to the floor when I want to gather reliable information. Near to the floor the reference points are fixed, but as soon as one interrogates the window everything moves vertiginously. Near the floor, my geography leans on simple givens, it confines itself to the metallic structures which fasten the bench seats to the floor. I have under my eyes details which have nothing fugitive about them, here a hardened wad of chewing gum, there four black hairs rolled into a loop, and, farther away, a puddle of dark gray dust. If there is something that releases me from my anxiety, it's this, these mod-

est elements, and this landscape for shoe soles which isn't erased between two dozes. It's this, rather than fleeting visions of architecture or of crowds. Be that as it may, as the end of the afternoon was approaching, I felt like going to observe what was seen beyond the glass.

I stood up, helping myself with my hands not to lose my balance, I went toward the window. Dusk had not yet completely taken the universe, but I moved blindly, as I often did, that is without worrying about the lowered or raised position of my eyelids. Certain mystics of the Organization assert that displacements through feeling one's way and holding one's breath offer fewer risks than the others. Without being always in agreement with these visionaries, I confess that such recommendations don't leave me cold. I had already made good progress when I heard Schlumm groan. My left foot was pressing on a piece of his robe. I stepped back a few centimeters and mumbled a word of apology.

—I felt like going to see what there was outside, I explained.

—Not a reason for being unaware of what there is inside, said Schlumm.

—Your robe is in the way, I said.

—What robe, said Schlumm. That's my skin.

—Ah, said I. Excuse me. I didn't see.

—Ah, you see? exulted Schlumm in a sinister tone. And yet, it's inside.

—Oh, inside, out, I said. Let's not quibble. Except that . . .

I turned my attention toward the landscape and I fell silent. I now made sure to stare wide-eyed. It was necessary to cling to the handrail if you didn't want to once again tread on Schlumm's clothing, or skin. Time had passed, but the landscape had hardly changed since Mongkok Road. We were still in the city, surrounded by stalls mounted on trestles and protected by canvas covers and hangings, and it was raining. The shop owners had just switched on bare lightbulbs under which were exposed hardware, t-shirts, padded bras, duck parts tanned in soy sauce, assortments of pirated records. I noted in passing the presence, at the top of the piles, of my favorite stars of Canto-Pop. Gluttonously, I scrutinized the hustle and bustle of the market for a quarter of an hour.

—Would you be a certain Puffky? said Schlumm, from below, from his mouth which blew the words out at the height of my left knee.

—No, I said. Puffky is dead. He was discovered on a mezzanine. With his blood he had time to write on the wall: *Schlumm bumped me off*.

—That doesn't mean anything, said Schlumm. Everyone does that, now. It's become the fashion.

—I saw the photos, I said. He had a nasty death.

—Bullshit, protested Schlumm. There are no illustrations of that sort in the reviews of the Organization.

—An independent review, I explained.

—Ah, said Schlumm.

Evening thickened, then Schlumm asked me if I knew who he was.

—No, I said, who are you?

—Let me introduce myself, he said. Schlumm, Ingo Schlumm. It's possible that you might have already encountered this name in the Organization. I have namesakes. Certain Schlumms devote themselves to theoretical research, others are linked to the Action branch. Still others are miserable bastards. But anyway. The Organization warned me that I was going to meet a certain Puffky.

—Puffky? I repeated, in a pensive tone. I can't see it.

—Yes, said Schlumm. Someone of my type, not yet dead, but cracked, unquestionably. I say cracked so as not to dramatize the diagnosis. A guy not yet dead, with identity problems. That could be you, no?

—I don't know, I said. Perhaps. My name is of no importance.

—Good, said Schlumm. In short, if any name suits you, nothing is stopping me from calling you Puffky?

—If you feel like it, I said, and then I became sullen.

Switching off the air conditioning had brought about a rise in temperature. With the exception of a pinkish night lamp which was dying in agony at the entrance to the neighboring compartment, no lamp in the train car was working. Around us was the odor of sleep and mold. In the living space—I mean by this that in which we lived—the trend was toward steam, toward humid condensation, miasma. My brownish rags, my indigo scarves and my feet started to give off the stale smells of a locker room. Beneath my clothing, my underthings were wringing wet. I remained stoically inert for an hour, then I started to think that action on my part was legitimate and even desirable. Taking advantage of a moment of inattention on Schlumm's part, I manipulated,

making use of an able-bodied toe that I had, the control for the air conditioning. The ventilator started, the scarves started to undulate and to flap around me and around Schlumm's head, as they had done at the beginning of the journey.

Outside, night prevailed, but, since we were again crossing a commercial zone, garlands of white lightbulbs pierced the darkness. Numerous salesgirls were seated behind their merchandise, heads bent over bowls of instant noodles. If it had been raining less, one would have been able to distinguish what was augmenting the noodles, fish or crab or spiced cuttlefish, or sesame shrimp. The rain had intensified since a short time before. It beat down vertically. There were almost no raindrops on the window.

—Tungchoi, said Schlumm.

Strips of grimy cotton fluttered about before his lips, making his elocution far from effective.

—Excuse me? I said.

—We must be at the level of Tungchoi Street, said Schlumm. We're zigzagging instead of charging straight for the sea.

—Possibly, I said.

—Do you know the market of Tungchoi? asked Schlumm.

—Tungchoi Market? I said.

—Yes. It's called that. Have you ever been?

—No, I said.

A minute passed, punctuated by the flapping of skin or of fabric around Schlumm's face.

—With this Puffky, you have unfinished business? I inquired. The Action branch has charged you with eliminating him?

Schlumm didn't answer. I turned toward him, although I had persisted, until then, in looking out the window. I lowered my head in his direction. Lifted by the ventilator, the bits of material flitted about in front of his nose and slapped him from time to time on the rim of the eyelid, one half of the forehead, the mouth. I know that some people claim that we have very similar, nearly identical physiognomies, but in the shadow of the compartment I felt no sympathy toward Schlumm's look, a look of a scrawny, ungraceful, and psychologically unstable boxer.

—I'm warning you, I'm not Puffky, I said. Let's stop joking about that subject. I too am called Schlumm. Djonny Schlumm.

Schlumm didn't react. I turned again toward the outside. The train had slowed down, its movements had softened, then were interrupted, you had the impression of waiting for a red light. The silence had greatly increased. Schlumm and I were unjolted, nearly paralyzed in the darkness, existing only through speech and in the lighting of the merchants, in the wet reflections coming from the outside. The pinkish night lamp was far from us, as if in another universe, inaccessible.

—One more namesake, I continued. The miserable bastard category, I suppose, in your classification system.

Schlumm coughed. Who knows if he hadn't taken ill, traveling like that, facing backward and next to the window. I had heard about him, I had read reports on him, on his allergies and his neuroses. I also knew that he was doing research on the loss of personality during the first forty-nine days of death, on the sensation of split personality which poisoned the crossing of the first hells. The Organization had tolerated this blasphemous research until recently, as long as he had agreed to pass on the results; it no longer tolerated it today, because he no longer shared his traveling notebooks with anyone. From whence came my work, my mission. The tatters lapped around Schlumm's emaciated and brutal face. Schlumm's cheeks and even his skull, when these blackish strips slapped him, rang in a manner which didn't make one think of a healthy flesh, but rather of an organism that is being forced to live without regard for its deep desire for extinction, its violent attraction for a definitive and irreversible peace.

—I don't believe you, Puffky, Schlumm stiffened suddenly in drawing away from my right leg. You came here to eliminate me, you received a mandate from the Organization to snatch from me the results of my research and to eliminate me.

—You're the one who came in here, Schlumm, I retorted. Don't accuse me indiscriminately. Don't reverse the roles, eh. You're the one who appeared in a train car where I had been traveling for hours, since Mongkok.

—Ah, you climbed on at Mongkok? asked Schlumm.

—Yes.

—Me too, said Schlumm. There was a woman. My presence disturbed her. She changed compartments.

—Chinese? I asked, interested.

Schlumm shrugged his bony and solid shoulders, acquiesced with a low mooring and added nothing more.

The train had set off again, the light must have turned green again. I returned to squat in the direction we were traveling. My having hustled about had not done me any good, my having talked with Schlumm had shaken me from bottom to top. At this point, physical difficulties developed. I now had attacks of fever accompanied by chills and cold sweats. The nape of my neck hurt. In my mind I started to go over the atypical illnesses to which I might have been exposed without realizing it. In public transportation, it is not uncommon to be contaminated by spit. I had avoided it, until then, but I wasn't completely sure.

—Did someone spit on you? I asked.

—No, said Schlumm. Not as far as I know.

We stayed for hours without emitting meaningful sounds. We were next to one another, seated in our fashion, at the foot of the bench seat in the thick darkness, and, now and then, I felt upon me the breeze of the ventilator, immediately followed by the noise of crumpled tissue and, on my neck, on my forehead, the tatters of our two robes tangled, twisted, folded up, snaked around, flapped. The route followed by the train zigzagged for a long time between Papko Street and Hapko Street, then we tore along in the direction of Yaumatei.

A bad attack of weakness had seized me. I dozed off several times. In all probability, days and nights dashed past without my being conscious of them. Perhaps without me knowing, people boarded the train and got off, came into the compartment and left it. In the middle of one of those indistinct mornings or at the beginning of an afternoon, Schlumm again set the control of the air conditioner at zero, and the lapping of material around us died away.

—Three days ago, a Tibetan climbed on at the top of Lee Yip Street, said Schlumm.

—Ah, a Tibetan, I said.

—A Tibetan from the Organization, Schlumm explained.

—And? I said.

—She got off again, said Schlumm. A little before we arrived at Shek Lung Street. She too was looking for a certain Puffky. The Organization had put her on your trail. She had as her task to worm certain information out of you.

—What sort of, I asked.

—What you didn't want to deliver, it seems.

A spring of sweat started to flow over the whole of my body, rising to the surface at the same time in dozens of places and then spilling in an equal fashion into the folds and over the smooth surfaces of my skin, bathing me from foot to head, chilling me. I shivered.

—Information, I panted. Information about what.

—On the seven weeks which follow death, said Schlumm.

—Oh, there are many more than that, I said.

—It was the first seven which interested her, said Schlumm.

—And she left? I asked.

—Yes, said Schlumm. As soon as . . .

—As soon as what, I said.

—As soon as you had finished with your revelations, said Schlumm. You know, you talked in your sleep.

—I don't see what I could have spilled, I lied. The first seven weeks. And why not the last seven, while she was at it?

—She was wearing a satisfied expression when she got off at Shek Lung Street, Schlumm announced.

—What could I really, I asked. You were there, you. You heard everything, since you were there. What did I talk about?

—I don't know, said Schlumm. I too was also asleep. My health has deteriorated a lot, these days, if you want to know. I no longer manage to struggle victoriously against sleep, as in the past.

He had a disappointed look, his expression was worried, but I had the impression that he was making fun of me and I stood up to fight with him, or, at least, to strike him. He knew too much, it was time for me to eliminate him. We grabbed each other. We were both soaked in sweat and we felt sick. Our state of extreme exhaustion slowed our gestures.

I started trying to punch him in the face.

—What did I spill during your so-called sleep, eh? I forked out. Are you going to reveal it to me, yes or no?

He rapidly gained the upper hand. I had been informed that he knew close combat holds, kempo and jiu-jitsu, but he was content to land blows of his knees into my chest and, at the moment when I believed my thoracic cage had smashed into splinters, he made me topple over backward and roll under the opposite bench, with the same ease as if I had been a sack containing a few bones and a spadeful of sawdust.

We defied each other with our gazes for hours and without a word while within us the adrenaline was diluted. The network of ribs which fenced off my lungs reformed, the hematomas had stopped swelling in what it is quite necessary to call my flesh, for lack of another more appropriate term. The fever made me suffer the consequences of the battle. Sometimes I breathed with difficulty, sometimes not. The train ran alongside or went through temples. The smell of incense and smoke was introduced by the ventilation system. So as not to sink into moroseness in thinking exclusively of my conflicts with the Organization and with its henchmen, I made an effort to see in imagination the pious chaos of the altars and the devout who brandished a fistful of thin stalks, praying Guan Yin or bowing before the dog-headed idols, calling out to ancestors, to demons. I have always felt a lively sympathy toward these rites—which it seems to me, however, absurd to observe myself, supposing that I find myself in a situation where it would be required of me to demonstrate my piety.

In the late afternoon, my attacks of fever became less frequent. Outside, night was falling. We had reached, I believe, the east end of Wingsing Lane. I still refused to question the exterior landscape to learn in what part of the world we found ourselves. In addition to the disarray of my decaying and filthy clothing, I had beneath my gaze the nasty angle which my right elbow laid out and, in the distance, a little ball of black hair, bits of hamburger, a half-circle traced by a shoe's sole into an oily stain. I compared this with what I already had in memory. Devoting myself to this mental activity, I felt less affected by the bitter disappointment of having been thrashed and less tormented by the jolts of the journey. The compartment indeed swayed relentlessly, which now bothered me to the point of making me feel sick. Perhaps essential organs had been bruised in the scuffle. I watched Schlumm for a moment more. The turned-off blower no longer manhandled his scarves nor the top of his robe which now dangled in strips, because I hadn't hesitated to pull on them during the brawl. Schlumm didn't show any vague desire to resume the battle, nor to put his clothes back into a non-miserable state.

When we had gone beyond Wingsing Lane, I resumed my seated position, one meter away from him, spine leaning on the same bench as him. We stayed like that until morning, in the half-light that the night lamp blushed with modesty from the neighboring compartment, then dawn came. Behind the glass, you started to make out a new urban landscape. A corrugated iron shutter looms up, then vanishes. It was pulled down before an indistinct shop. I had time to identify the very simple character which signifies “ten thousand,” but that hardly got me anywhere.

—Woosung Street, murmured Schlumm.

Having sulked enough, I pretended as if nothing hostile had happened between us. A warm dampness covered the space into which we were withdrawn.

—Perhaps the air conditioning could be turned back on, I suggested.

—I was going to do it, said Schlumm.

He extended his hand to the controls, but the system didn’t start. He maneuvered the crenellated button, making it come and go on the aluminum rectangle, between an unlikely symbol of flames and the drawing of an azure blue snowflake. Empty maneuvers.

—It’s broken, he summed up.

—I can bang on it, I proposed.

—If you want, said Schlumm.

I started to crawl in the direction of the electric panel. When I passed in front of him, Schlumm grimaced.

—Your robe? I asked. Your skin?

—Well really, Puffky, one wonders if you, he moaned.

—I didn’t do it on purpose, I said.

—I should hope not, he said.

I reached the controls and hammered on them with what was left to me of gristle, of bone. I found myself very close to Schlumm. I was taking multiple precautions so as not to step on him once again. I was precariously balanced. We were suffocating, we were both streaming with sweat, swathed with fetid exhalations and on the edge of blacking out, as if an insidious infection had demolished invisible organs within us and extended its havoc as soon as we started to move or to speak. I worked away furiously all day long at the switch which was no longer communicating with the system, and on the system itself, which remained lifeless. The joints of my fist had

shattered, a liquid welled up between my fingers, a very few drops, not really amber, but quite comparable to what grasshoppers dribble when you capture them and they are afraid. I stopped exerting myself, I clung to the edge of the window, to the hand-rail, I straightened until I had a more or less vertical posture. I had the feeling I was performing acrobatic feats of which no one was aware. Outside, the atmosphere was gray. A dense steam covered the window. With my filthy, wounded hands, I scribbled a few words onto the moist surface.

—What are you writing? questioned Schlumm.

—*Schlumm attacked me*, I said.

—Wha, said Schlumm. Why.

—So I remember, I said. So that someone remembers.

—Someone, said Schlumm. Who.

—It's also in case the Organization sends investigators, I said.

—Well, put instead *Schlumm bumped me off*, said Schlumm.

We stayed thoughtful for a certain length of time.

—As long as the murder hasn't taken place, it would be better not to write anything, Schlumm finally said. One never knows in advance who is going to kill us. One can predict it, but one is never 100% certain.

—It's true, there's a margin of error, I said.

I threw Schlumm a sidelong glance. Night was falling and, in the already triumphant darkness, his physiognomy pleased me less and less. It seemed to me that the corner of his mouth wrinkled in a way that nothing except a malevolent irony could explain. This man spoke of murder with indifference, he spoke of it like only an assassin can do. Something bored into the hollow of my marrow and expelled fear into my blood and, five minutes later, I stepped away from the corner window and from the withdrawn form of Schlumm, apparently immobile and peaceful, but now rather disturbing. He seemed to be sleeping. One couldn't dismiss the hypothesis that he truly was sleeping, nor that he was feigning torpor, nor, and this was the most terrible hypothesis, that he was doing both things at the same time.

I moved about, taking a thousand precautions not to run aground on the trails of material which extended the Schlumm organism. I wanted to avoid irritating Schlumm or awakening him. I regained my initial spot, the one I had held at the beginning of the journey, then, since the distance between us still seemed ridiculous, since it would

have been enough for Schlumm to lean forward and throw his arm toward me to seize me and send me back into nothingness, I continued my movement in the direction of the threshold of the compartment, and I crossed it.

I started to crawl into the hallway. The lone working night lamp emitted slender gleams which guided me. I had decided to take myself to the neighboring compartment, precisely where this light was burning, to assure myself of more decent conditions for survival. It was not a matter of escaping the pursuit that the Organization had ordered against me, I didn't make this pretense, but only of gaining a little time and space. In the unfluid night, without any sweetness other than that of the temperature, I fixed my eyes on that lamp which was the color of faded lilac, the color of wilted fuchsia, and which had become for me the derisive star of continuation. I call here continuation all that permitted me to avoid an immediate attack and therefore to still keep myself, be it only for an instant, at a distance from the terminal void. From time to time, I completely statufied myself, so as to listen for whether the killer was or wasn't on my trail.

In reality, I detected nothing very stressful. The train pursued its course toward the sea, the wheels uneventfully swallowed the gaps between the rails, the shock absorbers squealed with regularity. The hissings of air and iron striated the shadows in a fashion definitely not unusual. My body escaped me a little, I had the sensation that it prowled about and crept beyond me, already incapable of fighting against aches and fear, but the idea of not yet having completely perished had pierced me and stimulated me. Rather than disastrously collapsing, I raised my head. I leaned my limbs against the lamp and carried on with my advance.

Hours passed. I didn't halt the effort for a moment, it would have been to fail. I finally reached this haven of which I had dreamed, and it was designed to accommodate seating about eight living people. The benches were softly brushed by the rays of the night lamp. Yet the night seemed to me denser than elsewhere, no doubt because my eyesight was failing. Staying on my guard, I settled as I could, at the bottom of a seat, facing in the direction we were traveling.

I had distributed the pieces of my robe in tentacles around me, to be warned by a tugging if someone approached on the sly and in the dark. It is a technique that the Organization teaches to the monks of the Action branch. It reassured me to know that nobody could slip surreptitiously up to my life and take it from me, however thick the

darkness might be in which I bathed. The instructions of the Action branch specified that it was also necessary, for more security, to abstain from making noise, through breathing or other things. I held back from breathing, concentrating on the idea of traveling more than on that of oxygen.

The train was no longer moving. At a great distance, a loudspeaker made an announcement. I pricked up my ears. The acoustics of the outside were bad. I believe I grasped, however, that the next stop would be the Hanfook Street Station. We therefore were still far from the sea. The doors banged shut in another car. Around me, all was now silent. Behind the partition, nobody made his presence known.

An hour dwindled away, then the train moved off again. The darkness, the cradling movements, the state of deep exhaustion in which I found myself got the better of me. Although I can't confirm it with any certainty, it seems to me that I lost consciousness for one or two nights, because, soon, the gleams of early morning entered the compartment. They wormed their way without vigor through the tissue of droplets which covered the glass and which had a tendency to make it opaque. I examined with attention the world visible in my surroundings. My memory was scrambled, my mind disabled. I received things without drawing conclusions. For example, there was, under the bench facing me, a hardened wad of chewing gum and some hair, but I wasn't able to say if they were familiar or not. In the steam, someone had written in a clumsy and soiled hand: *Puffky bumped me off*. I remained like that, before these humble clues, trying to join them together to build a coherent intellectual structure, but my thinking never succeeded. Nothing was built. I had only one solitary constructive obsession, I constantly checked if I was really seated in the direction we were traveling.

On the other side of the partition, I thought I detected a snoring, and then all that might have had a relation to life or sleep fell silent.

—Puffky, are you there? I cried.

No response came. I waited a moment, then I repeated the question.

—Come on, I know you're there, I said.

I started to knock on the partition so that contact between us would be formed.

—There was a murder, I said. Are you alive? I asked.

I continued to beat on the legs of the bench, on the grill of the air conditioner, with my right fist, my feet.

—Listen, Puffky, don't stay in your corner like that, I'm not going to hurt you, I said.

Puffky didn't answer, and, for several days, while we pursued our course toward the sea, I could not know if the murder had taken place or not.