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Opening Extract from...

I Am God

Written by Giorgio Faletti

Translated by Howard Curtis

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I Am God

Giorgio Faletti

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To Mauro, for the rest of the journey

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I feel like a hitchhiker caught in a hailstorm on a Texas highway.
I can't run.
I can't hide.
And I can't make it stop.

Lyndon B. Johnson
President of the United States

EIGHT MINUTES

I start walking.

I walk slowly because I don't need to run. I walk slowly because I don't want to run. Everything is planned, down to the time it'll take me to walk that distance. According to my calculations, I only need eight minutes. I have a cheap watch on my wrist and a weight in the pocket of my jacket. It's a green cotton jacket, and on the little pocket at the front, over the heart, there used to be a sewed-on strip bearing a name and a rank. The memory of the person it belonged to has faded, as if that memory was given to a senile old man for safekeeping. All that remains of that strip is a slightly lighter patch, like a small bruise on the material, which had already survived a thousand washes when someone

who?

why?

tore off that thin strip and transferred the name, first on to a gravestone and then into oblivion.

Now it's a jacket and that's it.

My jacket.

I've decided I'll put it on every time I go out for my little eight-minute walk. My steps will be lost like whispers in the roar of millions of other steps walked every day in this city. The minutes will merge into one another.

I have to walk eight minutes at a regular pace to be sure that the radio signal is sufficiently strong to carry out its task.

I read somewhere that if the sun suddenly went out, its light would continue to reach the earth for another eight minutes before plunging everything into the dark and cold of farewell.

All at once, I remember that and start to laugh. Alone, in the middle of the people and the traffic, my head raised to the sky, my mouth wide open on a New York sidewalk as if surprised by a satellite in space, I start laughing. People move around me and look at this guy laughing like a crazy man.

Some may be thinking I really am crazy.

One joins in with my laughter for a few moments, then realizes he's laughing without knowing why. I laugh until I weep at the incredible, contemptuous meanness of fate. Men have lived to think, and others haven't been able to because they've been forced merely to survive.

And others to die.

An anxiety without remission, a breathless wheezing, a question mark to be carried on their backs like the weight of a cross, because that uphill climb is an illness that never ends. Nobody has found a remedy, for the simple reason that there is no remedy.

Mine is just a suggestion: eight minutes.

None of the human beings bustling around me has any idea when those last eight minutes will begin.

But I do.

I hold the sun in my hands, and I can blot it out whenever I want. I reach the point that, for my steps and my stopwatch, represents the word 'here'. I put my hand in my pocket and my fingers close around a small, solid, familiar object.

My skin on the plastic is a reliable guide, a path to be travelled, an ever-watchful memory.

I find a button and press it gently.

And another.

And then one more.

A moment or a thousand years later, the explosion is like thunder without a storm, the earth greeting the sky, a moment of liberation.

Then the screams and the dust and the sound of cars crashing, and the sirens tell me that for many people behind me the eight minutes are over.

This is my power.

This is my duty.

This is my will.

I am God.

Too Many Years Earlier

CHAPTER 1

The ceiling was white, but for the man lying on the couch it was full of images and mirrors. The images were the same ones that had been haunting him every night for months. The mirrors were those of reality and memory, in which he continued to see his face reflected.

The face he had now, the face he used to have.

Two different faces, the tragic spell of a transformation, two pawns that in their journey had marked the beginning and end of that long parlour game called war. Many people had played that one, too many. Some had had to stay out of the game for one turn, others for ever.

Nobody had won. Nobody, on either side.

But in spite of everything, he had made it back. He had kept his life and the ability to look, but had lost for ever the desire to be looked at. Now, for him, the world didn't go beyond the limits of his own shadow.

Behind him, Colonel Lensky, the army psychiatrist, was seated in a leather armchair, a friendly presence in a defensive position. It had been months, maybe years, in fact centuries, that they had been meeting in this room that couldn't erase from the air the slight smell of rust you always found on military premises. Even though this wasn't a barracks, but a hospital.

The colonel was a man with sparse brown hair and a calm voice. At first sight, you'd think he was a chaplain rather than a soldier. Sometimes he was in uniform, but mostly he wore civilian clothes. Quiet clothes in neutral colours. A nondescript face, one of those people who you meet and immediately forget.

Who want to be immediately forgotten.

But in all that time, he had listened to his voice more than he had looked at his face.

'So, tomorrow you'll be leaving us.'

Those words meant many things: a final discharge, boundless relief, inescapable solitude.

'Yes.'

'Do you feel ready?'

No! he would have liked to scream. *I'm not ready, any more than I was ready when all this started. I'm not ready now and I'll never be ready. Not after seeing what I saw and feeling what I felt, not after my body and face . . .*

'I'm ready.'

His voice had been firm. Or at least it had seemed firm to him as he uttered that sentence that condemned him to the world. And even if it hadn't been, Colonel Lensky clearly preferred to think that it was. As a man and as a doctor, he had chosen to believe that his job was over, rather than admit that he'd failed. That was why he was prepared to lie to him.

'That's good. I've already signed the papers.'

He heard the creak of the armchair and the rustle of cotton pants as the colonel stood up. Corporal Wendell Johnson sat up on the couch and for a moment did not move but looked out through the open window at the grounds, where green treetops framed a patch of blue sky. From that position, he could not see what he would certainly have seen if he had

gone to the window. Sitting on benches or propped in the hostile relief of a wheelchair, standing under the trees or attempting those few faltering movements that some called self-sufficiency, were men just like him.

When they had left they were called soldiers.

Now they were veterans.

A word without glory, which attracted not attention but silence.

A word that meant that they had survived, that they had come out alive from the hellish pit of Vietnam, where nobody knew what sin he had to atone for even though everything around him showed him how to atone for it. They were veterans and each of them bore, more or less visibly, the burden of his personal redemption, which began and ended within the confines of a military hospital.

Colonel Lensky waited for him to stand and turn before he approached him. He held out his hand and looked him in the eye. Corporal Johnson sensed the effort the colonel was making to stop his gaze turning away from the scars that disfigured his face.

'Good luck, Wendell.'

It was the first time he had ever addressed him by his first name.

A name doesn't mean a person, he thought.

There were so many names around, carved on white crosses arranged in rows with military precision. That changed nothing. Nothing would help to bring those young men back to life, to remove from their lifeless chests the numbers they kept pinned to them like medals in honour of lost wars. He would always be merely one of the many. He had known lots like him, soldiers who moved and laughed and smoked joints and shot up with heroin to forget that they

were constant targets. The only difference between them lay in the fact that he was still alive, even though, to all intents and purposes, he felt as if he was one of those crosses. He was still alive, but the price he had paid for this negligible difference had been a leap into the grotesque void of monstrousness.

'Thank you, sir.'

He turned and walked to the door. He felt the doctor's eyes on the back of his neck. It was some time since he had last been expected to give a military salute. It wasn't required of those who were being reconstructed piece by piece in body and mind with the sole purpose of allowing them to remember for the rest of their lives. And the rest of the mission had been accomplished.

Good luck, Wendell.

Which actually meant: Fuck off, corporal.

He walked along the light green corridor. The dim light that filtered through the small skylight reminded him of rainy days in the forest, when the leaves were so shiny they were like mirrors and the hidden part seemed made of shadow. A shadow from which the barrel of a rifle could emerge at any moment.

He left the building.

Outside was the sun and the blue sky and different trees. Trees easy to accept and forget. They weren't scrub pines or bamboo or mangrove or aquatic stretches of paddy fields.

This wasn't *Dat-nuoc*.

The word echoed in his head, in its correct, slightly guttural pronunciation. In the spoken language of Vietnam it meant country, although the literal translation was land-water, an extremely realistic way to express the essence of the place. It was a happy image for some, provided you didn't have to