Homage

by Nadine Gordimer

Read my lips.

Because I don’t speak. You’re sitting there, and when the train lurches, you seem to bend forward to hear. But I don’t speak.

If I could find them I could ask for the other half of the money I was going to get when I’d done it, but they’re gone. I don’t know where to look. I don’t think they’re here, anymore, they’re in some other country, they move all the time and that’s how they find men like me. We leave home because of governments overthrown, a conscript on the wrong side; no work, no bread or oil in the shops, and when we cross a border we’re put over another border, and another. What is your final destination? We don’t know; we don’t know where we can stay, where we won’t be sent on somewhere else, from one tent camp to another in a country where you can’t get papers.

I don’t ever speak.

They find us there, in one of these places – they found me and they saved me, they can do anything, they got me in here with papers and a name they gave me; I buried my name, no one will ever dig it out of me. They told me what they wanted done and they paid me half the money right away. I ate and I had clothes to wear and I had a room in a hotel where people read the menu outside three different restaurants before deciding where to have their meal. There was free shampoo in the bathroom and the key to a private safe where liquor was kept instead of money.

They had prepared everything for me. They had followed him for months and they knew when he went where, at what time – although he was such an important man, he would go out privately with his wife, without his state bodyguards, because he liked to pretend to be an ordinary person or he wanted to be an ordinary person. They knew he didn’t understand that that was impossible for him, and that made it possible for them to pay me to do what they paid me to do.

I am nobody; no country counts me in its census, the name they gave me doesn’t exist: nobody did what was done. He took time off, with his wife by the arm, to a restaurant with double doors to keep out the cold, the one they went to week after week, and afterwards, although I’d been told they always went home, they turned in to a cinema. I waited. I had one beer in a bar, that’s all, and I came back. People coming out of the cinema didn’t show they recognized him because people in this country like to let their leaders be ordinary. He took his wife, like any ordinary citizen, to that corner where the entrance goes down to the subway trains, and as he stood back to let her pass ahead of him I did it. I did it just as they paid me to, as they tested my marksmanship for, right in the back of the skull. As he fell and as I turned to run, I did it again, as they paid me to, to make sure.

She made the mistake of dropping on her knees to him before she looked up to see who had done it. All she could tell the police, the papers, and the inquiry was that she saw the back of a man in dark clothing, a leather jacket, leaping up the flight of steps that leads from the side street. This particular city is one of steep rises and dark alleys. She never saw my face. Years later now (I read in the papers) she keeps telling people how she never saw the face, she never saw the face of the one who did it, if only she had looked up seconds sooner – they would have been able to find me, the nobody who did it would have become me. She thinks all the time about the back of my head in the dark cap (it was not dark, really, it was a light green-and-brown check, an expensive cap I’d bought with the money, afterwards I threw it in the canal with a stone in it). She thinks of my neck, the bit of my neck she could have seen between the cap and the collar of the leather jacket (I couldn’t throw that in the canal, I had it dyed). She thinks of the shine of the leather jacket across my shoulders under the puddle of light from a streetlamp that stands at the top of the flight, and my legs moving so fast I disappear while she screams.

The police arrested a drug pusher they picked up in the alley at the top of the steps. She couldn’t say whether or not it was him because she had no face to remember. The same with others the police raked in from the streets and from those with criminal records and political grievances; no face. So I had nothing to fear. All the time I was being pushed out of one country into another, I was afraid, afraid of having no papers, afraid of being questioned, afraid of being hungry, but now I had nothing to be afraid of. I still have nothing to fear. I don’t speak.
I search the papers for whatever is written about what was done; the inquiry doesn’t close, the police, the people, this whole country keep on searching. I read all the theories; sometimes, like now, in the subway train, I make out on the back of someone’s newspaper a new one. An Iranian plot, because of this country’s hostility toward some government there. A South African attempt to revenge this country’s sanctions against some racist government there, at the time. I could tell who did it, but not why. When they paid me the first half of the money—just like that, right away!—they didn’t tell me and I didn’t ask. Why should I ask; what government, on any side, anywhere, would take me in? They were the only people to offer me anything.

And then I got only half what they promised. And there isn’t much left after five years five years next month. I’ve done some sort of work, now and then, so no one would be wondering where I got the money to pay the rent for my room and so on. Worked at the racecourse, and once or twice in nightclubs. Places where they don’t register you with any labour office. What was I thinking I was going to do with the money if I had got it all, as they promised? Get away, somewhere else? When I think of going to some other country, like they did, taking out at the frontier the papers and the name of nobody they gave me, showing my face—

I don’t talk.

I don’t take up with anybody. Not even a woman. Those places I worked, I would get offers to do things, move stolen goods, handle drugs: people seemed to smell out somehow I’d made myself available. But I am not! I am not here, in this city. This city has never seen my face, only the back of a man leaping up the steps that led to the alley near the subway station. It’s said, I know, that you return to the scene of what you did. I never go near, I never walk past that subway station. I’ve never been back to those steps. When she screamed after me as I disappeared, I disappeared forever.

I couldn’t believe it when I read that they were not going to bury him in a cemetery. They put him in the bit of public garden in front of the church that’s near the subway station. It’s an ordinary-looking place with a few old trees dripping in the rain on gravel paths, right on a main street. There’s an engraved stone and a low railing, that’s all. And people come in their lunch hour, people come while they’re out shopping, people come up out of that subway, out of that cinema, and they tramp over the gravel to go and stand there, where he is. They put flowers down.

I’ve been there. I’ve seen. I don’t keep away. It’s a place like any other place, to me. Every time I go there, following the others over the crunch of feet on the path, I see even young people weeping, they put down their flowers and sometimes sheets of paper with what looks like lines of poems written there (I can’t read this language well), and I see that the inquiry goes on, it will not end until they find the face, until the back of nobody turns around. All that will never happen. Now I do what the others do. It’s the way to be safe, perfectly safe. Today I bought a cheap bunch of red roses held by an elastic band wound tight between their crushed leaves and wet thorns, and laid it there, before the engraved stone, behind the low railing, where my name is buried with him.