

As soon as I am outside the city I realize night has fallen. I turn on my headlights. I am driving from A to B, along a three-lane superhighway, the kind where the center lane is used for passing in both directions. For night driving our eyes, too, must remove one kind of inner transparency and fit on another, because they no longer have to make an effort to distinguish among the shadows and the fading colors of the evening landscape the little speck of the distant cars which are coming toward us or preceding us, but they have to check a kind of black slate which requires a different method of reading, more precise but also simplified, since the darkness erases all the picture's details which might be distracting and underlines only the indispensable elements, the white stripes on the asphalt, the headlights' yellow glow, and the little red dots. It's a process that occurs automatically, and if I am led to reflect on it this evening it's because now that the external possibilities of distraction diminish, the internal ones get the upper hand within me, and my thoughts race on their own in a circuit of alternatives and doubts I can't disengage; in other words, I have to make a special effort to concentrate on my driving.

I climbed into the car suddenly, after a quarrel over the telephone with Y. I live in A, Y lives in B. I wasn't planning to visit her this evening. But during our daily phone call we said dire things to each other; in the end, carried away by my exasperation, I told Y that I wanted to break off our affair; Y answered that it didn't matter to her and that she would immediately telephone Z, my rival. At this point one of us — I don't remember whether it was she or I — hung up. Before a minute had passed I realized the motive of our quarrel was trifling compared to the consequences it was creating. To call Y back on the telephone would have been a mistake; the only way to resolve the question was to dash over to B and have a face-to-face explanation with her. So here I am on this superhighway I have driven over hundreds of times at every hour in every season but which never seemed so long to me before.

Or, to put it more clearly, I feel as if I had lost all sense of space and of time: the glowing cones projected by the headlights make the outlines of places sink into vagueness; the numbers of the miles on the signs and the numbers that click over on the dashboard are data that mean nothing to me, that do not respond to the urgency of my questions about what Y is doing at this moment, about what she is thinking. Did she really mean to call Z or was it only a threat, blurted out like that, out of pique? And if she was serious, did she do it immediately after our telephone conversation, or is she thinking it over for a moment, letting her anger subside before she makes up her mind? Like me, Z lives in A; for years he has loved Y hopelessly; if she has telephoned him and invited him over, he has surely set out at top speed toward B in his car; therefore he too is speeding along this

superhighway; every car that passes me could be his, as well as every car I pass. It is difficult to be certain: the cars going in the same direction as mine are two red lights when they precede me and two yellow eyes when I see them following me in my rear-view mirror. At the moment of passing I can make out at most what kind of car it is and how many people are inside it, but the cars carrying only their driver are the great majority, and as far as the model is concerned I don't believe Z's automobile is particularly recognizable.

As if that weren't enough, it's begun to rain. My field of vision is reduced to the semicircle of glass swept by the windshield wiper, all the rest is streaked or opaque darkness, the information I receive from outside consists only of yellow and red flashes distorted by a tumult of drops. The only thing I can do with Z is try to pass him and not let him pass me, in whatever car he is, but I won't be able to know if he is here and which car is his. I feel all the cars going in A's direction are equally hostile: every car faster than mine that beats eagerly with its flipper in my mirror asking me to give way causes me a pang of jealousy; and every time I see ahead of me the distance diminish between me and the rear lights of a rival, with an upsurge of triumph I hurl myself into the center lane to reach Y before him.

Only a few minutes' advantage would be enough for me: seeing how promptly I have rushed to her, Y will immediately forget the causes of our quarrel; everything between us will again be as it was before; when Z arrives he will realize he was called into question only because of a kind of game between the two of us; he'll feel he's an intruder. Or perhaps Y at this moment has already regretted everything she said to me, has tried to call me back on the phone, or else she, like me, has decided the best thing was to come in person and has got into her car and is now racing in the direction opposite mine along this superhighway.

Now I have stopped paying attention to the cars going in my direction and I keep looking at those coming toward me which for me consist only in a double star of headlights which dilates until it sweeps the darkness from my field of vision then suddenly disappears behind me dragging a kind of underwater luminescence after it. Y's car is a very common model; like mine, for that matter. Each of these luminous apparitions could be Y speeding toward me, at each one I feel my blood stir as if in an intimacy destined to remain secret, the amorous message addressed exclusively to me is mingled with all the other messages speeding along the superhighway, and yet I couldn't desire from her a message different from this one.

I realize that in rushing toward Y what I desire most is not to find Y at the end of my race: I want Y to be racing toward me, this is the answer I need; what I mean is, I want her to know I'm racing toward her but at the same time I want to know she's racing toward me. The sole thought that comforts me is also the thought that torments me most: the thought that if Y at this moment is speeding toward A, then each time she sees the headlights of a car speeding toward B she will ask herself whether it's I racing toward her, and she will desire it to be I, and she will

never be sure. Now two cars going in opposite directions have found themselves for a moment side by side, a flash has illuminated the raindrops, the sound of the motors has become fused as in an abrupt gust of wind: perhaps it was the two of us, or rather it is certain that one car was I and the other car could be she, that is the one I want to be she, the sign in which I want to recognize her, though it is this very sign that makes her unrecognizable to me. Speeding along the superhighway is the only method we have left, she and I, to express what we have to say to each other, but we cannot communicate it or receive the communication as long as we are speeding.

Of course I took my place behind the wheel in order to reach her as fast as possible; but the more I go forward the more I realize that the moment of arrival is not the real end of my race. Our meeting, with all the inessential details a meeting involves, the minute network of sensations and meanings and memories that would spread out before me — the room with the philodendron, the opaline lamp, the earrings — and the things I would say to her, some of which would surely be mistaken or mistakable, and the things she would say, to some extent surely jarring or in any case not what I expect, and all the succession of unpredictable consequences that each gesture and each word involved would raise around the things that we have to say to each other, or rather that we want to hear each other say, a storm of such noise that our communication already difficult over the telephone would become even more hazardous, stifled, buried as if under an avalanche of sand. This is why, rather than go on talking, I felt the need to transform the things to be said into a cone of light hurled at a hundred miles an hour, to transform myself into this cone of light moving over the superhighway, because it is certain that such a signal can be received and understood by her without being lost in the ambiguous disorder of secondary vibrations, just as I, to receive and understand the things she has to say to me, would like them to be only (rather, I would like her to be only) this cone of light I see advancing on the superhighway at a speed (I'm guessing, at a glance) of eighty or ninety. What counts is communicating the indispensable, skipping all the superfluous, reducing ourselves to essential communication, to a luminous signal that moves in a given direction, abolishing the complexity of our personalities and situations and facial expressions, leaving them in the shadowy container that the headlights carry behind them and conceal. The Y I love is really that moving band of luminous rays, and all the rest of her can remain implicit; and the me that she can love, the me that has the power of entering that circuit of exaltation which is her affective life, in the flashing of this pass which, through love of her and with a certain risk, I am now attempting.

And also with Z (I haven't forgotten Z for a moment) I can establish the proper relationship only if he is for me simply the flash and glare that follow me, or the taillights I follow: because if I start taking into consideration his person, with its pathetic — shall we say — element but also with its undeniably unpleasant aspect, though it is — I must admit — also excusable, with all his boring story of unhappy love and his way of behaving which is always a bit questionable . . . well, there's no

telling where I would end. Instead, while things continue like this, all is well: Z trying to pass me or allowing himself to be passed by me (but I don't know if it is he), Y hastening toward me (but I don't know if it's she) repentant and again in love, I hurrying to her, jealous and eager (but I'm unable to let her or anyone else know).

Naturally, if I were absolutely alone on this superhighway, if I saw no other cars speeding in either direction, then everything would be much clearer, I would be certain that Z hasn't moved to supplant me, nor has Y moved to make peace with me, facts I might register as positive or negative in my accounting, but which would in any case leave no room for doubt. And yet if I had the power of exchanging my present state of uncertainty for such a negative certainty, I would refuse the bargain without hesitation. The ideal condition for excluding every doubt would prevail if in this part of the world there existed only three automobiles: mine, Y's, and Z's; then no other car could proceed in my direction except Z's, and the only car heading in the opposite direction would surely be Y's. Instead, among the hundreds of cars that the night and the rain reduce to anonymous glimmers, only a motionless observer situated in a favorable position could distinguish one car from the other and perhaps recognize who is inside. This is the contradiction in which I find myself: if I want to receive a message I must give up being a message myself, but the message I want to receive from Y — namely, that Y has made herself into a message — has value only if I in turn am a message, and on the other hand the message I am has meaning only if Y doesn't limit herself to receiving it like any ordinary receiver of messages but if she also is that message I am waiting to receive from her.

By now to arrive in B, go up to Y's house, find that she has remained there with her headache brooding over the causes of our quarrel, would give me no satisfaction; if then Z were to arrive also a scene would be the result, histrionic and loathsome; and if instead I were to find out that Z has prudently stayed home or that Y didn't carry out her threat to telephone him, I would feel I had played the fool. On the other hand, if I had remained in A, and Y had gone there to apologize to me, I would have found myself in an embarrassing position: I would have seen Y through different eyes, a weak woman, clinging to me, and something between us would have changed. I can no longer accept any situation other than this transformation of ourselves into the messages of ourselves. And what about Z? Even Z must not escape our fate, he too must be transformed into the message of himself; it would be terrible if I were to run to Y jealous of Z and if Y were running to me, repentant, avoiding Z, while actually Z hasn't remotely thought of stirring from his house . . .

Halfway along the superhighway there is a service station. I stop, I run to the bar, I get a handful of change, I dial the B area code, then Y's number. No answer. I allow the rain of returned coins to pour down with joy: it's clear Y couldn't overcome her impatience, she got into her car, she has rushed toward A. Now I have gone back to the superhighway, but on the other side: I too am rushing

toward A. All the cars I pass could be Y, or else all the cars that pass me. On the opposite lane all the cars advancing in the other direction could be Z, in his self-delusion. Or else Y too has stopped at a service station, has telephoned my house in A; not finding me in she has realized I am going to B, she has turned around. Now we are speeding in opposite directions, moving away from each other, and the car I pass or that passes me is Z, who also tried telephoning Y at the halfway point.

Everything is more uncertain than ever but I feel I've now reached a state of inner serenity: as long as we can check our telephone numbers and there is no answer then we will continue, all three of us, speeding back and forth along these white lines, with no points of departure or of arrival to threaten with their sensations and meanings the single-mindedness of our race, freed finally from the awkward thickness of our persons and voices and moods, reduced to luminous signals, the only appropriate way of being for those who wish to be identified with what they say, without the distorting buzz our presence or the presence of others transmits to our messages.

To be sure, the price paid is high but we must accept it: to be indistinguishable from all the other signals that pass along this road, each with his meaning that remains hidden and undecipherable because outside of here there is no one capable of receiving us now and understanding us.