

PSYCHOPHANT

WE ARE A RATHER exclusive group of friends. We are men and women tied by a bond that is serious and profound, yet old and rarely renewed, a bond that consists in having lived through important years together, and having lived them without too many weaknesses. Since then, as often happens, our paths have diverged, some of us have made compromises, some have wounded each other intentionally or not, some have forgotten how to speak or lost their antennae. Nevertheless, we enjoy getting together: we trust each other, we respect one another, and whatever subject we may be discussing, we realize with joy that despite everything we still speak the same language (some call it a jargon), even though our opinions don't always coincide. Our children show a precocious tendency to move away from us, but they are bound among themselves by a friendship similar to ours, and this seems to us strange and beautiful, because it happens spontaneously, without our having meddled. Now they constitute a group that in many aspects reproduces our group when we were their age.

We profess to be open, universalist, cosmopolitans; we feel like this in our innermost beings, and we despise intensely all forms of segregation due to wealth, caste or race. And yet, in actuality, our group is so close that, even though it is generally held in esteem by the "others," over the course of thirty years it has accepted only a few recruits. For reasons that I find difficult to explain to myself, and of which in any case I am not proud, it would seem unnatural to us to welcome someone who lives north of Corso Regina Margherita or

west of Corso Raconigi. Not all of us who have married have seen our spouses accepted; in general the endogamous couples, who are not few, seem to be favored. Every now and then, someone makes an outside friend and brings him along, but it is rare for this friend to become part of the group; most often, he's invited once, twice, and treated benevolently, but the next time he's not there, and the evening is devoted to studying, discussing, and classifying him.

There was a time when each of us would occasionally invite all the others to visit. When the children were born, some of us moved to the country, others had their parents living in their home and did not want to disturb them; so at present, there's only Tina who has people in. Tina likes to have people in, and so she does it well; she has good wine and excellent stuff to eat, she's lively and curious, she always has new things to tell and she tells them gracefully, she knows how to put people at their ease, she's interested in other people's affairs and remembers them with precision, she judges with severity but is fond of almost everyone. She is suspected of entertaining relations with other groups, but she (and only she) is willingly forgiven for this infidelity.

The bell rang and Alberto entered, late as usual. When Alberto enters a house the light seems to grow brighter: everybody feels in a better mood, and in better health too, because Alberto is one of those doctors who can heal patients simply by looking at them and talking with them. From patients who are friends (and few people in this world have as many friends as Alberto) he does not accept payment, and therefore every Christmas he receives an avalanche of presents. That evening in fact he had just received a gift, but different from the customary bottles of precious rare wines and the usual useless accessories for his car: it was a curious present, one he couldn't wait to try out, and he had decided to inaugurate it with us, because apparently it was a sort of parlor game.

Tina did not say no, but you could easily tell that she wasn't fond of the idea; perhaps she felt her authority threatened, and feared that the reins of the evening might slip from her hands. But it is difficult to resist Alberto's wishes, which are quite numerous, unpredictable, amusing and compelling: when Alberto wants something (and this happens every fifteen minutes), he manages in an instant to get everyone else to want it, and so he always moves at the head of a swarm

of followers. He takes them to eat snails at midnight, or to ski on the Breithorn, or to see a risqué film, or to visit Greece in the mid-August holidays, or to drink at his house while Miranda is asleep, or to call on someone who isn't at all expecting it but welcomes him with open arms all the same, him and all his friends, and the other men or women he has picked up on the way.

Alberto said that in the box there was an instrument called a Psychophant and that confronted by a name like that there could be no hesitation.

In the blink of an eye, a table was cleared, we all sat down around it, and Alberto opened the box. From it he extracted a broad, flat object formed by a rectangular tray of transparent plastic that rested on a black enameled metal base; this base projected approximately thirty centimeters beyond one of the short sides of the tray, and on the projection was a shallow mold in the shape of a left hand. There was an electric wire with a plug; we inserted it in the socket, and while the apparatus was warming up, Alberto read aloud the instructions. They were very vague and written in abominable Italian, but in substance they told us that the game, or pastime, consisted in putting one's left hand into the mold: on the tray would then appear what the instructions clumsily defined as the players' "inner image."

Tina laughed "It's probably like those tiny cellophane fish they used to sell before the war: you put them on the palm of your hand, and depending on whether they rolled up or vibrated or fell to the floor, they could tell your character. Or the same as doing 'he loves me, he loves me not' with a daisy." Miranda said that if this was the case she would take the veil rather than put her hand in the mold. Others said other things, there were noisy exchanges. I said that if you wanted to see cheap miracles, you might as well go down to the fair on Piazza Vittoria; however, some people competed for the first try, others designated this or that person to do it, and this or that person refused with various excuses. Little by little the victory went to the party who proposed to send Alberto on reconnaissance. Alberto was delighted: he settled in front of the apparatus, put his left hand in the mold, and pressed a button with his right.

There was a sudden silence. At first a small, round, orange spot like the yolk of an egg formed on the tray. Then it swelled, stretched upward, and the upper extremity dilated, taking on the appearance of

the cap of a mushroom; spread over its entire surface there appeared many small polygonal spots, some emerald green, some scarlet, some gray. The mushroom grew rapidly, and when it was about a hand's breadth tall it became weakly luminous, as though inside it had a small flame that pulsed rhythmically: it emitted an agreeable but pungent odor similar to the scent of cinnamon.

Alberto removed his finger from the button, and at that the pulsation stopped, and the luminescence slowly dimmed. We were uncertain as to whether we could touch the object or not; Anna said it was better not to do so, because it would certainly dissolve right away—indeed, perhaps it didn't even exist, was a purely sensory illusion, like a dream, or a collective hallucination. There was nothing in the instructions about what one could or should do with the images, but Henek wisely observed that it was certainly necessary to touch it, if only to clear the tray: it was absurd to think that the apparatus could be used only once. Alberto detached the mushroom from the tray, examined it carefully, and declared himself satisfied; in fact, he said that he had always felt orangeish, even as a child. We passed it around: it had a firm and elastic consistency, it was tepid to the touch. Giuliana said she wanted it; Alberto gladly let her have it, saying that he had plenty of time to make more of them for himself. Henek pointed out to him that they might turn out differently, but Alberto said he didn't care.

Several people insisted that Antonio should try. By now Antonio is only an honorary member of our group, because he's been living far away for many years, and he was with us that evening only because of a business trip: we were curious to see what he would cause to grow on the tray, because Antonio is different from us, more resolute, more interested in success and gain; these are virtues that we obstinately deny possessing, as if they were shameful.

For a good minute nothing happened, and some were already beginning to smirk, and Antonio was beginning to feel uncomfortable. Then we saw a small square metal bar push up on the tray: it grew slowly and steadily, as though coming from below already perfectly formed. Soon another four appeared, arranged in the shape of a cross around the first; four small bridges joined them to it; and then one after another, more small bars appeared, all of them with the same cross-pieces, some vertical and others horizontal, and in the end on the tray

there stood a small, graceful, shiny structure that had a solid and symmetrical appearance. Antonio tapped it with a pencil, and it rang out like a tuning fork, emitting a long pure note that slowly faded away.

"I don't agree," Giovanna said.

Antonio smiled quietly. "Why?" he asked.

"Because you're not like that. You're not all straight corners, you're not made of steel, and you have a few cracked weldings."

Giovanna is Antonio's wife and she is very fond of him. We thought that she shouldn't have expressed all those reservations, but Giovanna said that no one could know Antonio better than she, who had lived with him for twenty years. We didn't really listen to her because Giovanna is one of those wives who are in the habit of denigrating their husbands in their presence and in public.

The Antonio-object seemed rooted to the tray, but a weak tug detached it cleanly, and it wasn't even as heavy as it looked. Then it was Anna's turn, who squirmed on her chair with impatience and kept saying that she always wanted such an apparatus, and that several times she had even seen it in her dreams, but hers created life-size symbols.

Anna placed her hand on the black slab. We were all watching the tray, but you couldn't see a thing on it. Suddenly, Tina said, "Look, it's up there!" In fact, at the height of about half a meter above us we saw a purple-pink cloudlet of vapor, the size of a fist. Slowly, it unwound like a ball of yarn, and lengthened downward emitting many transparent vertical ribbons. It continually changed shape: it became oval like a rugby ball, although always preserving its diaphanous and delicate appearance; then it divided into rings set one on top of the other, from which shot out small crepitating sparks, and finally it contracted, shrank to the size of a nut, and disappeared with a sputter.

"Very beautiful, and accurate too," Giuliana said.

"Yes," said Giorgio, "but the trouble with this gadget is that one never knows what to call its creations. They're always hard to define."

Miranda said it was best that way: it would have been unpleasant to find oneself represented by a soup ladle or a fife or a carrot. Giorgio added that, come to think of it, it could not have been otherwise: "These . . . these things, in short, have no name because they are

individuals, and there is no science, that is, no classification of the individual. In them just as in us, existence precedes essence."

Everyone had liked the Anna-cloud, but not Anna herself, who had actually been rather disappointed. "I don't think I'm so transparent. But perhaps it's because I'm tired tonight and my ideas are confused."

Hugo caused the growth of a sphere of polished black wood, which upon closer examination turned out to be made up of about twenty pieces that fit into each other perfectly; Hugo took it apart and was unable to put it together again. He wrapped it up in a small parcel and said he would try again the next day, which was a Sunday.

Claudio is shy, and he agreed to the test only after much insistence. At first—and nothing could yet be seen on the tray—there hung in the air a familiar but unexpected smell: we had trouble defining it there and then, but it was unquestionably a kitchen smell. Immediately thereafter we heard a frying sound, and the bottom of the tray was covered by a liquid that bubbled and smoked; from the liquid emerged a flat beige polygon which beyond all reasonable doubt was a large Milanese cutlet with a side dish of fried potatoes. There were surprised comments because Claudio is neither a gourmet nor a voracious man; on the contrary, about him and his family we always say that they lack a digestive system.

Claudio blushed, and looked this way and that, embarrassed. "You've turned real red!" Miranda exclaimed, so that Claudio turned almost purple; then, addressing us, she added, "What are you talking about, symbols! It's very clear that this thing here has absolutely no manners, and intended to insult Claudio: to say that somebody is a cutlet is an insult. These things are to be taken literally! I knew that sooner or later it would show its hand. Alberto, if I were you I would return it to the person who gave it to you."

In the meantime, Claudio had managed to recover enough breath to speak, and he said that he had turned red not because he felt insulted, but for another reason, so interesting that he almost felt like telling us about it, even though it was a secret he had never confessed to anyone before, not even to Simonetta. He said that he had, not a vice really, or a perversion, but, let's say, a singularity. He said that ever since he was a young boy, women, all of them, have always felt distant to him: he does not feel their closeness and attraction, he does

not perceive them as creatures of flesh and blood, unless he has seen them at least once in the act of eating. When this happens, he feels intense tenderness for them, and almost always falls in love with them. It was clear that the Psychophant had meant to allude to this: in his opinion it was an extraordinary instrument.

"Did you fall in love with me that way too?" Adele asked, seriously.

"Yes," Claudio answered. "It happened the evening that we had dinner at Pavorolo. We had fondue with truffles."

Adele too was a surprise. As soon as she placed her finger on the button, we heard a sharp "pop," as when a cork pops out of a bottle, and on the tray there appeared a tawny, shapeless, squat, vaguely conical mass made of a rough, friable material, dry to the touch. It was as large as the entire tray; actually it even protruded a bit. In it were set three white-and-gray spheres: we immediately realized that they were three eyes, but no one dared to say so, or comment in any way because Adele has had an irregular, painful and difficult existence. Adele was dismayed. "That's me?" she asked, and we noticed that her eyes (I mean the real ones) had filled with tears. Henek tried to come to her help.

"It's impossible for an apparatus to tell you who you are, because you aren't any one thing. You and everyone, change from year to year, from hour to hour. Anyway: who are you—what you think you are, the one you'd like to be? Or the one others think you are—and which others? Everyone sees you differently, everyone gives his personal version of you."

Miranda said, "I don't like this gismo, because it's a kibitzer. As for me, what counts is what one does, not what one is. One is one's actions, past and present: nothing else."

I, however, like the device. It didn't matter to me whether it told the truth or it lied, but it created from nothing, invented: *found*, like a poet. I placed my hand on the plate and waited without distrust. On the tray appeared a small shiny grain, which grew to form a cylinder the size of a thimble; it continued to grow, and soon it reached the dimensions of a tin can, and then it became clear that it was in fact a can and more precisely a can of varnish, lithographed on the outside with lively paint colors; nevertheless it did seem to contain paint because when shaken it rattled. Everyone urged me to open it, and inside there were several things that I lined up in front of me on the

table: a needle, a seashell, a malachite ring, various used tickets from streetcars, trains, steamers and airplanes, a compass, a dead cricket and a live one, and a small ember, which however, died out almost immediately.