

As for myself, I was clearly on the threshold of great change; only the final catalyst was now required, and in my case that catalyst took the form of lunch. Juan- Bautista's invitation caught me off guard; he simply mentioned, as I was passing his office one day, that it would be a shame to have visited Valparaiso without having tasted sea bass cooked in salt, and as he intended to go to his favorite restaurant that afternoon, I really ought—if I were free—to accompany him. I said—out of politeness and curiosity, and also because I was eager to seize any pretext to avoid returning to the poisonous atmosphere of our team room—that it would be an honor, and the next thing I knew, I found myself making my way through the streets of the city with a man who desired more than any other to see our client's acquisition fail to proceed.

Juan-Bautista wore a hat and carried a walking stick, and he ambled at a pace so slow that it would likely have been illegal for him to cross at an intersection in New York. When we were seated and he had ordered on our behalf, he said, "I have been observing you, and I think it is no exaggeration to say, young man, that you seem upset. May I ask you a rather personal question?" "Certainly," I said. "Does it trouble you," he inquired, "to make your living by disrupting the lives of others?" "We just value," I replied. "We do not decide whether to buy or to sell, or indeed what happens to a company after we have valued it." He nodded; he lit a cigarette and took a sip from his glass of wine. Then he asked, "Have you heard of the janissaries?" "No," I said. "They were Christian boys," he explained, "captured by the Ottomans and trained to be soldiers in a Muslim army, at that time the greatest army in the world. They were ferocious and utterly loyal: they had fought to erase their own civilizations, so they had nothing else to turn to."

He tipped the ash of his cigarette onto a plate. "How old were you when you went to America?" he asked. "I went for college," I said. "I was eighteen." "Ah, much older," he said. "The janissaries were always taken in childhood. It would have been far more difficult to devote themselves to their adopted empire, you see, if they had memories they could not forget." He smiled and speculated no further on the subject. Our food arrived shortly thereafter and the sea bass may well have been as splendid as he had claimed; unfortunately, I can no longer recall its taste.

[...]

In any case, Juan-Bautista's words plunged me into a deep bout of introspection. I spent that night considering what I had become. There really

could be no doubt: I was a modern-day janissary, a servant of the American empire at a time when it was invading a country with a kinship to mine and was perhaps even colluding to ensure that my own country faced the threat of war. Of course I was struggling! Of course I felt torn! I had thrown in my lot with the men of Underwood Samson, with the officers of the empire, when all along I was predisposed to feel compassion for those, like Juan-Bautista, whose lives the empire thought nothing of overturning for its own gain.