

ARTURO PÉREZ-REVERTE

The
Flanders
Panel



Translated from the Spanish
by Margaret Jull Costa

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For Julio and Rosa, Devil's advocates
And for Cristiane Sánchez Azevedo

The Secrets of Meister Van Huys

God moves the player, he in turn the piece.
But what god beyond God begins the round
Of dust and time and sleep and agonies?

Jorge Luis Borges

A SEALED ENVELOPE is an enigma containing further enigmas. This particular one was of the large, bulky manila variety with the name of the laboratory stamped in the lower left-hand corner. And, as she weighed it in her hand whilst scrabbling for a paper knife amongst the many brushes and bottles of paint and varnish, Julia could never have imagined the extent to which the gesture of slitting it open would change her life.

In fact, she already knew what the envelope contained. Or, as she discovered later, she thought she did. Perhaps that's why she felt no special sense of anticipation until she'd removed the prints from the envelope, spread them out on the table and looked at them, almost holding her breath. Only then did she realise that her work on *The Game of Chess* would be far from routine. Unexpected discoveries, in paintings, on furniture, even on the binding of antiquarian books, were commonplace in her profession. During her six years of restoring works of art, she'd uncovered her fair share of preliminary sketches and pentimenti, of retouching and repainting and even forgeries. But never had she come across an inscription concealed beneath the painted surface of a picture: three words revealed by X-ray photography.

She picked up her crumpled pack of unfiltered cigarettes and lit one, unable to take her eyes off the prints. Given the evidence of the 12 × 16 inch X-ray plates, there was no possible room for doubt. The painting was a fifteenth-century Flemish panel, and the original sketch, done in grisaille, was as clearly visible as the grain of the wood and the glued joints of the three pieces of oak that made up the panel on which, out of lines, brush strokes and layers of underpaint, the artist had gradually created his work. At the bottom of the painting, brought to light after five centuries, thanks to radiography, was the hidden phrase, its Gothic characters standing out in sharp contrast against the black and white of the plate.

QUIS NECAVIT EQUITEM

Julia knew enough Latin to be able to translate it without a dictionary: *Quis*, interrogative pronoun meaning "who", *necavit*, from *neco*, "to kill", and *equitem*, the accusative singular of *eques*, "knight". Who killed the knight? Adding a question mark, which, in Latin, the use of *quis* rendered redundant, lent the phrase an air of mystery.

WHO KILLED THE KNIGHT?

It was disconcerting. She took a long pull at her cigarette, holding it in her right hand whilst with her left she rearranged the X-ray photos on the table. Someone, possibly the painter himself, had planted this kind of puzzle in the picture and had then concealed it with a layer of paint. Or perhaps someone else had done so at a later date. That gave her approximately five hundred years to play with in dating the

inscription. The notion pleased Julia. Solving the mystery shouldn't prove too difficult. After all, that was her job.

She picked up the photos and got to her feet. The grey light from the large window in the sloping ceiling fell directly on to the painting on the easel. *The Game of Chess*, oil on wood, painted in 1471 by Pieter Van Huys. She stood in front of it and looked at it for a long time. It was a domestic interior painted in minute fifteenth-century detail, the sort of scene with which the great Flemish masters, using oil for the first time, had laid the foundations of modern painting. The main subjects were two gentlemen of noble appearance, in their middle years, sitting on either side of a chessboard on which a game was in progress. In the background to the right, next to a lancet window framing a landscape, a lady, dressed in black, was reading the book that lay in her lap. Completing the scene were the painstaking details typical of the Flemish school, recorded with a perfection that bordered on the obsessive: the furniture and decorations, the black-and-white tiled floor, the design on the carpet, a tiny crack in the wall, the shadow cast by a minuscule nail in one of the ceiling beams. The painting of the chessboard and chess pieces was executed with the same precision as the faces, hands and clothes of the people depicted, with a realism that contributed to the painting's extraordinarily fine finish, its colours still brilliant despite the inevitable darkening caused by the gradual oxidation of the original varnish.

Who killed the knight? Julia looked at the photo she was holding and then at the picture, where, to the naked eye, not a trace of the hidden inscription was visible. Even closer examination, using a binocular microscope x 7, revealed nothing. She lowered the blind over the large skylight, plunging the room into darkness, and near the easel placed a tripod on which was mounted an ultraviolet lamp. Under its rays all the oldest materials, paints and varnishes would show up as fluorescent, whereas more recent ones would appear dark or black, thus revealing any later repainting and retouching. In this case, however, the ultraviolet light revealed only a uniformly fluorescent surface, including the part concealing the inscription. This indicated that it had been painted over either by the artist himself or very soon after the painting was completed.

She switched off the lamp and raised the blind. The steely light of the autumn morning again spilled onto the easel and the painting; it filled the whole book-cluttered studio, its shelves overflowing with paints and brushes, varnishes and solvents, the floor a jumble of carpentry tools, picture frames and precision instruments, antique sculptures, bronzes and wooden stretchers, pictures that rested, face to the wall, on the valuable but paint-stained Persian carpet. In a corner, on a Louis XV bureau, sat a hi-surrounded by piles of records: Don Cherry, Mozart, Miles Davis, Satie, Lester Bowie, Michael Edge, Vivaldi . . . On one wall a gold-framed Venetian mirror presented Julia with a slightly blurred image of herself: shoulder-length hair, faint shadows (from lack of sleep) under her large, dark and, as yet, unmade-up eyes. Whenever César saw her face framed in gold by that mirror, he used to say that she was as lovely as one of da Vinci's models, *ma piú bella*. And although César could be considered more of an expert on young men than on madonnas, Julia knew that what he said was absolutely right. Even she enjoyed looking at herself in that gold-framed mirror, because it always gave her a sense of having suddenly emerged on the other side of a magic door, a door through which she'd leapfrogged time and space, and it returned to her an image of herself that had all the robustness of an Italian Renaissance beauty.

She smiled to think of César. She always smiled when she thought of him and had since she was a child. It was a smile of tenderness, often a smile of complicity. She put the X-ray photos down on the table, stubbed out her cigarette in the heavy bronze ashtray signed by Benlliure and sat down at her typewriter.

Oil on wood. Flemish school. Dated 1471.

Artist: Pieter Van Huys (1415-1481).

Base: Three fixed oak panels, joined by glue.

Dimensions: 60 × 87 cm (three identical panels of 20 × 87).

Thickness of panel: 4 cm.

State of preservation of base: No warping. No noticeable damage by woodworm.

State of preservation of the painted surface: Good adhesion and cohesion of the layer structure.

No changes in colour. Some craquelure due to ageing, but no blistering or scaling.

State of preservation of surface film: No apparent traces of salt exudation or damp. Excessive darkening of the varnish due to oxidation; varnish removal and new varnish advisable.

The coffeepot was bubbling in the kitchen. Julia got up and poured herself a large cup, black, no sugar. She returned with the cup in one hand, drying the other on the baggy man-size sweater she was wearing over her pyjamas. A light touch of her index finger and the sounds of Vivaldi's *Concerto for flute and viola d'amore* burst upon the room, gliding on the grey morning light. She took a sip of thick, bitter coffee that burned the tip of her tongue. Then she sat down again, her feet bare on the carpet, and continued typing the report.

UV and X-ray examination: Detected no obvious major changes, alterations or subsequent repaints. The X-rays reveal a concealed inscription of the period, in Gothic lettering (see enclosed prints). This is not visible using conventional methods of examination. It could be uncovered without damage to the original by removing the layer of paint now covering the area.

She removed the sheet of paper from the typewriter and put it in an envelope with the X-ray photos, drank the rest of the coffee, which was still hot, and settled down to smoke another cigarette. Before her on the easel, in front of the lady by the window absorbed in her reading, the two chess players were engaged in a game that had been going on now for five centuries, a game depicted by Pieter Van Huys with such rigour and mastery that, like all the other objects in the picture, the chess pieces seemed to stand out in relief from the surface. The sense of realism was so intense that the painting effortlessly achieved the effect sought by the old Flemish masters: the integration of the spectator into the pictorial whole, persuading him that the space in which he stood was the same as that represented in the painting, as if the picture were a fragment of reality, or reality a fragment of the picture. Adding to this effect were the window on the right-hand side of the composition, showing a landscape beyond the central scene, and a round, convex mirror on the wall to the left, reflecting the foreshortened figures of the players and the chessboard, distorted according to the perspective of the spectator, who would be standing *facing* the scene. It thus achieved the astonishing feat of integrating three planes—window, room and mirror - into one space. It was, thought Julia, as if the spectator were reflected between the two players, inside the painting.

She went over to the easel. Arms folded, she stood looking at the painting for a long time, utterly still, apart from drawing occasionally on her cigarette and screwing up her eyes against the smoke. One of the chess players, the one on the left, looked to be about thirty-five. His brown hair was shaved just above the ears in the medieval fashion; he had a strong, aquiline nose and a look of intense concentration. He was wearing a doublet painted in a vermilion that had admirably withstood both the passage of time and the oxidation of the varnish. Round his neck he wore the insigne of the Golden Fleece and near his right shoulder an exquisite brooch, whose filigree pattern was rendered in minute detail, right down to the tiny gleam of light on each precious stone. He was sitting with his left elbow and right hand resting on the table on either side of the board. Between the fingers of his right hand h

was holding one of the chess pieces: a white knight. By his head there was an identifying inscription in Gothic lettering: *FERDI-NANDUS OST. D.*

The other player was thinner and about forty. He had a smooth forehead and almost black hair turning to grey at the temples, where the finest of white lead brush marks were just distinguishable. This, together with his expression and general air of composure, gave him a look of precocious maturity. His profile was serene and dignified. Unlike the other player, he was dressed not in sumptuous court clothes, but in a simple leather cuirass, with a gorget of burnished steel that gave him an unmistakably military air. He was leaning further over the chessboard than his opponent, as if concentrating hard on the game, apparently oblivious to his surroundings, his arms folded on the edge of the table. His concentration could be seen in the faint, vertical lines between his eyebrows. He was looking at the pieces as if they were confronting him with a particularly difficult problem whose solution required every ounce of intellectual energy. The inscription above his head read: *RUTGIER AR. PREUX.*

The lady sitting next to the window was set apart from the two players by the use of a sharp linear perspective that situated her on a higher plane within the picture. The black velvet of her dress, to which the skilled application of white and grey glazes added volume; seemed to come out of the painting towards you. Its realism rivalled even the painstaking detail of the carpet border, the precision in the painting of the tiled floor, every knot, joint and grain of the ceiling beams. Leaning towards the painting to study these effects more closely, Julia felt a shiver of professional admiration run through her. Only a master like Van Huys could have used the black of a gown to such advantage employing colour created out of the absence of colour to an extent few would have dared. Yet it was so real that Julia felt that at any moment she would hear the soft swish of velvet on the embossed leather of the low stool.

She looked at the woman's face. It was beautiful and, in the fashion of the time, extremely pale. Her thick blonde hair, carefully smoothed back from her temples, was caught up beneath a toque of white gauze. Her arms, sheathed in light grey damask, emerged from loose sleeves; her hands, long and slender, held a book of hours. The light from the window picked out the same metallic gleam on the open clasp of the book and on the single gold ring adorning her hand. Her eyelids were lowered, over what had to be blue eyes, in an expression of serene and modest virtue characteristic of female portraits of the period. The light came from two sources, the window and the mirror, at once connecting the woman with the two chess players and keeping her subtly separate, her figure more marked by foreshortening and shadows. Her inscription read: *BEATRIZ BURG. OST. D.*

Julia took a couple of steps back to view the painting as a whole. There was no doubt about it: it was a masterpiece, with documentation accredited by experts. That would mean a high price at the auction to be held by Claymore's in January. Perhaps the hidden inscription, together with the appropriate historical documentation, would increase the value of the painting. Ten per cent for Claymore's, five per cent for Menchu Roch, the rest for the owner. Less one per cent for insurance and her fee for restoring and cleaning it.

She took off her clothes and stepped into the shower, leaving the door open, so that Vivaldi's music could keep her company in the steam. Restoring *The Game of Chess* for its entry into the art market could bring her a sizeable amount. Within only a few years of finishing her degree, Julia had won for herself a solid reputation and become one of the art restorers most sought after by museums and antiquarians. Methodical and disciplined, a painter of some talent in her spare time, she was known for the respect she showed the original work, an ethical position not always shared by her colleagues. In the difficult and often awkward spiritual relationship between any restorer and his or her job, in the bitter controversy between conservation and renovation, the young woman had the virtue of never losing sight of one fundamental principle: no work of art could ever be restored to its primitive state

without sustaining serious damage. Julia believed that things like the ageing process, the patina, the way colours and varnishes changed, even flaws, repainting and retouching, became, with the passing of time, as integral a part of a work of art as the original work. Perhaps because of that, the paintings that passed through her hands never left them decked out in strange new, supposedly original colours and lights—"painted courtesans", César called them—but were treated with a delicacy that integrated the marks of time with the work.

She emerged from the bathroom wrapped in a bathrobe, her wet hair dripping onto her shoulders. Lighting yet another cigarette, she stood in front of the picture while she dressed: low-heeled shoes, a brown pleated skirt and a leather jacket. She gave a satisfied glance at herself in the Venetian mirror and then, turning to the two grave-faced chess players, she winked at them provocatively. *Who killed the knight?* As she put the photographs and her report into her bag, the phrase kept going round and round in her head as if it were a riddle. She switched on the electronic alarm and turned the key twice in the security lock. *Quis necavit equitem.* One way or another, it must mean something. She repeated the three words under her breath as she went down the stairs, sliding her fingers along the brass-trimmed banister. She was genuinely intrigued by the painting and its hidden inscription, but there was something else, too: She felt a strange sense of apprehension, the same feeling she'd had when she was a little girl and used to stand at the top of the stairs trying to screw up enough courage to peep into the dark attic.

"You've got to admit he's a beauty. Pure quattrocento."

Menchu Roch was not referring to one of the paintings on display in the gallery that bore her name. Her pale, heavily made-up eyes were trained on the broad shoulders of Max, who was talking to someone he knew at the bar of the cafe. Max was six foot tall, with the shoulders of a swimmer beneath his well-cut jacket. He wore his hair long and tied back in a brief ponytail with a dark silk ribbon and he moved with a kind of indolent flexibility. Menchu gave him a long, appreciative look and, with proprietorial satisfaction, sipped her martini. He was her latest lover.

"Pure quattrocento," she repeated, savouring both the words and her drink. "Doesn't he remind you of one of those marvellous Italian bronzes?"

Julia nodded half-heartedly. They were old friends, but the ease with which Menchu could lend suggestive overtones to even the most vaguely artistic remark never failed to surprise her.

"An Italian bronze, one of the originals, I mean, would work out a lot cheaper."

Menchu gave a short, cynical laugh.

"Cheaper than Max? I should say." She sighed ostentatiously and bit into the olive in her martini. "Michelangelo was lucky; he sculpted them in the nude. He didn't have to foot their clothes bill courtesy of American Express."

"No one forces you to pay his bills."

"That's the whole point, darling," Menchu said, batting her eyelids in a languid, theatrical manner. "That no one forces me to do it, I mean. So you see . . ."

She finished her drink, keeping one little finger carefully raised; she did this on purpose, purely to provoke. Menchu was nearer fifty than forty and was of the firm belief that sex was to be found everywhere, even in the most subtle nuances of a work of art. Perhaps that's why she was able to look at men with the same calculating, greedy eye she employed when assessing the potential of a painting. Amongst those who knew her, the owner of Gallery Roch had the reputation of never missing an opportunity to appropriate anything that aroused her interest, be it a painting, a man or a line of cocaine. She was still attractive, although her age made it increasingly difficult to overlook what César scathingly referred to as certain "aesthetic anachronisms". Menchu could not resign herself to growing old, largely because she didn't want to. And, perhaps as a kind of challenge to herself, she

fought against it by adopting a calculated vulgarity in her choice of make-up, clothes and lovers. For the rest, in line with her belief that art dealers and antiquarians were little more than glorified rag-and-bone merchants, she pretended a lack of culture that was far from the truth, deliberately bungling artistic and literary references and openly mocking the rather select world in which she conducted her professional life. She boasted about all this with the same frankness with which she had once claimed to have experienced the best orgasm of her life masturbating in front of a catalogued and numbered reproduction of Donatello's *David*, an anecdote that César, with his refined, almost feminine brand of cruelty, always cited as the only example of genuine good taste that Menchu Roch had ever shown in her life.

"So what shall we do about the Van Huys?" asked Julia.

Menchu looked again at the X-ray photos lying on the table between her glass and her friend's coffee cup. She was wearing blue eye shadow and a blue dress that was much too short for her. Julia thought, quite without malice, that twenty years ago Menchu must have looked really pretty in blue.

"I'm not sure yet," said Menchu. "Claymore's have undertaken to auction the painting exactly as it stands . . . We'll have to see what effect the inscription has on its value."

"Just think what that could mean."

"I love it. You've hit the jackpot and you don't even realise it."

"Ask the owner what he wants to do."

Menchu put the prints back in the envelope and crossed her legs. Two young men drinking aperitifs at the next table cast furtive, interested glances at her bronzed thighs. Julia fidgeted, a touch irritated. She was usually amused by the blatant way Menchu contrived special effects for the benefit of her male audience, but sometimes the display struck her as unnecessary. She looked at the square-faced Omega watch she wore on the inside of her left wrist. It was much too early to be showing off one's best underwear.

"The owner's no problem," Menchu explained. "He's a delightful old chap in a wheelchair. And if the discovery of the inscription increases his profits, he'll be only too pleased . . . His niece and her husband are a pair of real bloodsuckers."

Max was still chatting at the bar but, ever-conscious of his duties, he turned round occasionally to bestow a dazzling smile on Julia and Menchu. Speaking of bloodsuckers, Julia said to herself, but decided against putting the thought into words. Not that Menchu would have minded—she showed an admirable cynicism when it came to men—but Julia had a strong sense of the proprieties which always stopped her from going too far.

Ignoring Max, she said: "It's only two months till the auction. That's not nearly enough time if I have to remove the varnish, uncover the inscription and then revarnish again. Besides, getting together the documentation on the painting and the people in it *and* writing a report will take time. It would be a good idea to get the owner's permission as soon as possible."

Menchu agreed. Her frivolity did not extend to her professional life, in which she moved with all the cunning of a trained rat. She was acting as intermediary in the transaction because the owner of the Van Huys knew nothing of the workings of the art market. It was she who had handled the negotiations for the auction with the Madrid branch of Claymore's.

"I'll phone him tomorrow. His name is Don Manuel Belmonte, he's seventy years old, and he's delighted, as he puts it, to be dealing with a pretty young woman with such a splendid head for business."

There was something else, Julia pointed out. If the uncovered inscription could be linked to the story of the people in the painting, Claymore's would be sure to play on that to up the asking price.

"Have you managed to get hold of any more useful documentation?"

"Very little," Menchu said, pursing her lips in her effort to remember. "I gave you all I had along

with the painting. So you're going to have to find out for yourself."

Julia opened her handbag and took longer than necessary to find her cigarettes. At last, she slowly took one out and looked at her friend.

"We could ask Álvaro."

Menchu raised her eyebrows and said at once that the very idea left her petrified, or saltified or whatever the word was, like Noah's wife, or was it Lot's? Anyway, like the wife of that twit who got so fed up with life in Sodom.

"It's up to you, of course," she said, her voice growing hoarse with expectation. She could sense strong emotion in the air. "After all, you and Álvaro . . ."

She left the phrase hanging and adopted a look of exaggerated concern, as she did whenever the topic of conversation turned to the problems of others, whom she liked to think of as utterly defenceless when it came to affairs of the heart.

Julia held her gaze, unperturbed, and said only: "He's the best art historian we know. And this has nothing to do with me, but with the painting."

Menchu pretended to be considering the matter seriously and then nodded. It was up to Julia, of course. But if she was in Julia's shoes, she wouldn't do it. *In dubio pro reo*, as that old pedant César always said. Or was it *in pluvio*?

"I can assure you that as regards Álvaro, I'm completely cured."

"Some illnesses, sweetie, you never get over. And a year is nothing. As the song says."

Julia couldn't suppress a wry smile at her own expense. A year ago Álvaro and she had finished a long affair, and Menchu knew all about it. It had been Menchu who, quite unintentionally, had pronounced the final verdict, which went to the very heart of the matter, something along the lines of "In the end, my dear, a married man invariably finds in favour of his legal wife. All those years of washing underpants and giving birth always prove to be the deciding factor." "It's just the way they're made," she had concluded between sniffs, her nose glued to a narrow white line of cocaine. "Deep down, they're sickeningly loyal." Another sniff. "The bastards."

Julia exhaled a dense cloud of smoke and slowly drank the rest of her coffee, trying to keep the cup from dripping. That particular ending had been very painful, once the final words had been said and the door slammed shut. And it went on being painful afterwards. On the two or three occasions when Álvaro and she had met by chance at lectures or in museums, both had behaved with exemplary fortitude: "You're looking well." "Take care of yourself." After all, they both considered themselves to be civilised people who, quite apart from that fragment of their past, had a shared interest in the world of art. They were, to put it succinctly, mature people, adults.

She was aware of Menchu watching her with malicious interest, gleefully anticipating the prospect of new amorous intrigues in which she could intervene as tactical adviser. She was forever complaining that since Julia had broken up with Álvaro her subsequent affairs had been so sporadic as to be hardly worth mentioning: "You're becoming a puritan, darling," she was always saying, "and that's deadly dull. What you need is a bit of passion, a return to the maelstrom." From that point of view, the mere mention of Álvaro seemed to offer interesting possibilities.

Julia realised all this without feeling the slightest irritation. Menchu was Menchu and always had been. You don't choose your friends, they choose you, and you either reject them or you accept them without reservations. That was something else she'd learned from César.

Her cigarette was nearly finished, so she stubbed it out in the ashtray and smiled wanly at Menchu.

"Álvaro's not important. What concerns me is the Van Huys." She hesitated, searching for the right words as she tried to clarify her idea. "There's something odd about that painting."

Menchu shrugged distractedly, as if she were thinking about something else.

"Don't get worked up about it, love. A picture is just canvas, wood, paint and varnish. What matter

is how much it leaves in your pocket when it changes hands.” She looked across at Max’s broad shoulders and blinked smugly. “The rest is just fairy tales.”

Throughout her time with Álvaro, Julia had thought of him as conforming to the most rigorous of professional stereotypes, a conformity that extended to his appearance and style of dress. He was pleasant-looking, fortyish, wore English tweed jackets and knitted ties, and, to top it all, smoked a pipe. When she saw him come into the lecture hall for the first time—his subject that day had been “A and Man”—it had taken her a good quarter of an hour before she could actually listen to what he was saying, unable as she was to believe that anyone who looked so like a young professor actually was a professor. Afterwards, when Álvaro had dismissed them until the following week and everyone was streaming out into the corridor, she’d gone up to him as if it were the most natural thing in the world knowing full well what would happen: the eternal repetition of a rather unoriginal story, the classic teacher-student plot, and Julia had simply assumed this, even before Álvaro, who was on his way out of the door, had turned round and smiled at her for the first time. There was something inevitable about the whole thing—or at least so it seemed to Julia as she weighed the pros and cons of the matter—a suggestion of a deliciously classical *fatum*, of paths laid by Destiny, a view she’d keenly espoused ever since her schooldays, when she’d translated the brilliant family dramas of that inspired Greek, Sophocles. She hadn’t been able to bring herself to mention it to César until much later, and he, who had acted as her confidant in affairs of the heart for years—the first time, Julia had still been in short socks and pigtails—had simply shrugged and, in a calculatedly superficial tone, criticised the scant originality of a story that had provided the most sentimental plots, my dear, for at least three hundred novels and as many films, especially—and here he’d pulled a scornful face—French and American films: “And that, as I’m sure you’ll agree, Princess, sheds a new and truly ghastly light on the whole subject.” But that was all. César had never gone in for reproachful remarks or fatherly warnings, which, as they both well knew, would never have helped anyway. César had no children of his own, nor would he ever have, but he did possess a special flair when it came to tackling such situations. At some point in his life, César had realised that no one ever learns from anyone else’s mistakes and, consequently, there was only one dignified and proper attitude to be taken by a guardian—which, after all, was what he was—and that consisted in sitting down next to his young ward, taking her by the hand and listening, with infinite kindness, to the evolving story of her loves and griefs, whilst nature took its own wise and inevitable course.

“In affairs of the heart, Princess,” César used to say, “one should offer neither advice nor solutions . . . just a clean hanky when it seems appropriate.”

And that was exactly what he’d done when it had all ended between her and Álvaro, that night when she’d turned up at César’s apartment, like a sleepwalker, her hair still damp, and had fallen asleep with her head on his lap.

But that had happened long after that first encounter in the corridor at the university, when there were no notable deviations from the anticipated script. The ritual proceeded along well-trodden, predictable paths, which proved, nonetheless, unexpectedly satisfying. Julia had had other affairs, but never before—as she had on the afternoon when, for the first time, she and Álvaro lay down together in a narrow hotel bed—had she felt the need to say “I love you” in quite that painful, heart-wrenching way, hearing herself say the words with joyous amazement, words she’d always refused to say, in a voice she barely recognised as her own, more like a moan or a lament. And so, one morning when she woke up with her face buried in Álvaro’s chest, she had carefully brushed the tousled hair from her own face and studied his sleeping profile for a long time, feeling the soft beat of his heart against her cheek, until he too had opened his eyes and smiled back at her. In that moment Julia knew, with absolute certainty, that she loved him, and she knew too that she would have other lovers but never

again would she feel what she felt for him. Twenty-eight months later, months she had lived through and counted off almost day by day, the moment arrived for a painful awakening from that love, for her to ask César to get out his famous handkerchief. “The dreaded handkerchief,” he’d called it, theatrically as ever, half in jest but perceptive as a Cassandra, “the handkerchief we wave when we say good-bye for ever.” And that, in essence, had been their story.

A year had been enough to cauterise the wounds, but not the memories, memories that Julia had no intention of giving up anyway. She’d grown up quite fast, and that whole moral process had crystallised in the belief—unashamedly drawn from those professed by César—that life is like an expensive restaurant where, sooner or later, someone always hands you the bill, which is not to say that you should deny the joy and pleasure afforded by the dishes already eaten.

Julia was pondering this now, as she watched Álvaro at his desk, leafing through a book and making notes on white index cards. He’d hardly changed at all physically, apart from a few grey hairs. His eyes were still calm and intelligent. She’d loved those eyes once, as she had those long, slender hands with their smooth, round nails. She watched as his fingers turned the pages, held his pen, and she heard, much to her discomfort, a distant murmur of melancholy; which, after brief analysis, she decided to accept as perfectly normal. His hands did not provoke in her the same feelings now as they had, but they had, nonetheless, once caressed her body. Even his smallest touch, its warmth, had remained imprinted on her skin; the traces had not been erased by other loves.

She tried to slow the pulse of her feelings. She hadn’t the least intention of giving in to the temptations of memory. Besides, that was now a secondary consideration. She hadn’t gone there in order to stir up nostalgic longings. So she forced herself to concentrate on her ex-lover’s words and not on him. After the first awkward minutes, Álvaro had looked at her thoughtfully, as if trying to assess the importance of what had brought her there again after all this time. He smiled affectionately, like an old friend or colleague, relaxed and attentive, placing himself at her disposal with the quiet efficiency so familiar to her, full of silences and considered remarks uttered in that low voice of his. After the initial surprise, there was only a hint of perplexity in his eyes when Julia asked him about the painting, though not about the hidden inscription, which she and Menchu had decided to keep a secret. Álvaro confirmed that he knew the painter, his work and the historical period well, but that he hadn’t known the painting was going to be auctioned or that Julia had been placed in charge of its restoration. In fact he had no need of the colour photographs Julia had brought, and he seemed familiar with the people in the painting. Running his forefinger down the page of an old volume on medieval history to check a date, he was intent on his task and apparently oblivious to the past intimacy which Julia sensed floating between them like the shroud of a ghost. But perhaps he feels the same, she thought. Perhaps from Álvaro’s point of view, she too seemed oddly distant and indifferent.

“Here you are,” he said, and Julia clung to the sound of his voice like a drowning woman to a piece of wood, knowing, with relief, that she couldn’t do two things at once: remember him as he was then and listen to him now. With no regret, her feelings of nostalgia were immediately left behind, and the relief on her face must have been so patent that he looked at her, surprised, before turning his attention back to the page of the book.

Julia glanced at the title: *Switzerland, Burgundy and the Low Countries in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries*.

“Look.” Álvaro was pointing at a name in the text. Then he transferred his finger to the photograph of the painting she had placed on the table. “*FERDINANDUS OST. D.* is the identifying inscription of the chess player on the left, the man dressed in red. Van Huys painted *The Game of Chess* in 1471, so there’s no doubt about it. It’s Ferdinand Altenhoffen, the Duke of Ostenburg, *Ostenburgensis Dux*, born in 1435, died in . . . yes, that’s right, in 1474. He was about thirty-five when he sat for the painter.”

Julia had picked up a card from the table and was pointing at what was written there.

~~“Where was Ostenburg? . . . In Germany?”~~

Álvaro shook his head and opened a historical atlas.

“Ostenburg was a duchy that corresponded, more or less, to Charlemagne’s Rodovingia . . . It was here, inside the Franco-German borders, between Luxembourg and Flanders. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the Ostenburg dukes tried to remain independent, but ended up being absorbed, first by Burgundy and then by Maximilian of Austria. In fact, the Altenhoffen dynasty died out with this particular Ferdinand. If you like, I can make you some photocopies.”

“I’d be very grateful.”

“It’s no trouble.” Álvaro sat back in his chair, took a tin of tobacco from a drawer in the desk and started filling his pipe. “Logically, the lady by the window, with the inscription *BEATRIX BURG. OS D.* can only be Beatrice of Burgundy, the Duke’s consort. See? Beatrice married Ferdinand Altenhoffen in 1464, when she was twenty-three.”

“For love?” asked Julia with an enigmatic smile, looking at the photograph. Álvaro responded with a brief, rather forced smile of his own.

“As you know, very few marriages of this kind were love matches . . . The wedding was an attempt by Beatrice’s uncle, Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy, to create closer ties with Ostenburg in an alliance against France, which was trying to annex both duchies.” Álvaro looked at the photograph and put his pipe between his teeth. “Ferdinand of Ostenburg was lucky though, because she was very beautiful. At least, according to what the most important chronicler of the time, Nicolas Flavin, said in his *Annales bourguignonnes*. Your Van Huys seems to have thought so too. It appears she’d been painted by him before, because there’s a document, quoted by Pijoan, which states that Van Huys was for a time court painter at Ostenburg. In 1463, Ferdinand Altenhoffen assigned him a pension of £100 a year, payable half at the feast of St John and the other half at Christmas. The same document contains the commission to paint a portrait, *bien au vif*, of Beatrice, who was then the Duke’s fiancée.”

“Are there any other references?”

“Loads. Van Huys became quite an important person.” Álvaro took a file out of a cabinet. “Jean Lemaire, in his *Couronne Margaritique*, written in honour of Margaret of Austria, Governor of the Low Countries, mentions Pierre de Brugge (Van Huys), Hughes de Gand (Van der Goes) and Dieric de Louvain (Dietric Bouts), together with the person he dubs the king of Flemish painters, Johannes (Van Eyck). The actual words he uses in the poem are: ‘Pierre de Brugge, qui tant eut les traits utez’, which translates literally as ‘he who drew such clean lines’. By the time that was written, Van Huys had been dead for twenty-five years.” Álvaro carefully checked through some other cards. “And there are earlier mentions too. For example, inventories from the Kingdom of Valencia state that Alfonso V the Magnanimous owned works by Van Huys, Van Eyck and other painters, all of them now lost. Bartolomeo Fazio, a close relative of Alfonso V, also mentions him in his *De viribus illustribus liber* describing him as ‘Petrus Husyus, insignis pictor’. Other authors, particularly Italians, call him ‘Magistro Piero Van Hus, pictori in Bruggia’. There’s a quote in 1470 in which Guido Rasofalco mentions one of his paintings, a Crucifixion, which again has not survived, as ‘Opera buona di mano di un chiamato Piero di Juys, pictor famoso in Fiandra.’ And another Italian author, anonymous this time, refers to a painting by Van Huys that has survived, *The Knight and the Devil*, stating that ‘A magistro Petrus Juisus magno et famoso flandesco fuit depictum.’ He’s also mentioned by Guicciardini and Van Mander in the sixteenth century and by James Weale in the nineteenth century in his books on great Flemish painters.” He gathered up the cards and put them carefully back into the file, which he returned to the cabinet. Then he sat back in his chair and looked at Julia, smiling.

“Satisfied?”

“Very.” She’d noted everything down and was now taking stock. After a moment, she pushed her

hair back and looked at Álvaro curiously: “Anyone would think you’d had it all prepared. I’m positively dazzled.”

The professor’s smile faded a little, and he avoided Julia’s eyes. One of the cards on his desk seemed suddenly to require his attention.

“It’s my job,” he said. And she couldn’t tell if his tone was simply distracted or evasive. Without quite knowing why, this made her feel vaguely uncomfortable.

“Well, all I can say is, you’re still extremely good at it.” She observed him with interest before returning to her notes. “We’ve got plenty of references to the painter and to two of the people in the painting.” She leaned over the reproduction and placed a finger on the second player. “But nothing about him.”

Álvaro was busy filling his pipe and didn’t reply at once. He was frowning.

“It’s difficult to say with any exactitude,” he said between puffs. “The inscription *RUTGIER AR. PREUX* isn’t very explicit. Although it’s enough to come up with an hypothesis.” He paused and stared at the bowl of his pipe as if hoping to find in it confirmation of his idea. “Rutgier could be Roger, Rogelio, Ruggiero, all of them possible forms—and there are at least ten variants—of a name common at the time. Preux could be a surname or a family name, in which case we’d come to a dead end, because there’s no mention of any Preux whose deeds would have merited an entry in the chronicles. However, *PREUX* was also used in the high Middle Ages as an honorific adjective, even as a noun, with the sense of ‘valiant’, ‘chivalrous’. The word is applied to Lancelot and Roland, to give you but two famous examples. In France and England, they would use the formula ‘soyez preux’ when knighting someone, that is, ‘be loyal or brave’. It was a very exclusive title, used to distinguish the *crème de la crème* of the knighthood.”

Unconsciously, out of professional habit, Álvaro had adopted the persuasive, almost pedagogical tone that he tended to slip into sooner or later whenever a conversation touched on aspects of his speciality. Julia noticed it with some alarm; it stirred up old memories, the forgotten embers of an affection that had occupied a place in time and space and in the formation of her character as it was now. The residue of another life and other feelings that a relentless war of attrition had succeeded in deadening and displacing, the way you relegate a book to a shelf to gather dust, with no intention of ever opening it again, but which is still there, despite everything.

Confronted by such feelings, she knew that she had to resort to other tactics: keep her mind on the matter in hand; talk, ask for further details, whether she needed to know them or not; lean over the desk, pretending to concentrate hard on taking notes; imagine she was standing before a different Álvaro, which, of course, she was; act, feel, as if the memories belonged not to them, but to two other people someone had once mentioned to her and whose fate was a matter of indifference.

Another solution was to light a cigarette, and Julia did so. The smoke filling her lungs helped reconcile her and lend her a small measure of detachment. She looked at Álvaro, ready to continue.

“What’s your hypothesis then?” Her voice sounded quite normal and that made her feel much calmer. “As I see it, if Preux wasn’t the surname, then the key might lie in the abbreviation AR.”

Álvaro nodded. Half-closing his eyes against the smoke from his pipe, he leafed through the pages of another book until he found a name.

“Look at this. Roger de Arras, born in 1431, the same year in which the English burned Joan of Arc at the stake in Rouen. His family were related to the Valois, the reigning dynasty in France at the time and he was born in the castle of Bellesang, very near the duchy of Ostenburg.”

“Could he be the second chess player?”

“Possibly. *AR* would be exactly right for the abbreviation of Arras. And Roger de Arras appears in all the chronicles of the time. He fought in the Hundred Years’ War alongside the King of France, Charles VII. See? He took part in the conquest of Normandy and Guyenne to win them back from the

English. In 1450 he fought in the battle of Formigny and three years later at the battle of Castillon. ~~Look at this engraving. He might well be one of those men; perhaps he's the knight with his visor down, offering his horse in the midst of the fray to the King of France, whose own horse has been killed, but who continues to fight on foot . . .~~"

"You amaze me, Professor," Julia said, looking at him with open astonishment. "I mean that picturesque image of the warrior in the battle. You were the one who always said that imagination is the cancer of historical rigour."

Álvaro burst out laughing.

"Consider it poetic licence, in your honour. How could I forget your fondness for going beyond the mere facts? I recall that when you and I . . ."

He fell silent, suddenly uncertain. His allusion to the past had caused Julia's face to darken. Recognising that memories were out of place just then, Álvaro hurriedly back-pedalled.

"I'm sorry," he said in a low voice.

"It doesn't matter," Julia replied, briskly stubbing out her cigarette in the ashtray and burning her fingers in the process. "It was my fault really." She looked at him more calmly. "So what have you got on our warrior, then?"

With visible relief, Álvaro plunged back into familiar terrain. Roger de Arras, he explained, had not only been a warrior, he'd been many other things besides. For example, he was a model of chivalry, the perfect medieval nobleman. In his spare time he'd been a poet and musician. He was much admired in the court of the Valois, his cousins. So the word "preux" fitted him like a glove.

"Did he have any links with chess?"

"There's no mention of any."

Julia was taking notes, caught up in the story, but she stopped suddenly and looked at Álvaro.

"What I don't understand," she said, chewing the end of her pen, "is what this Roger de Arras would be doing in a picture by Van Huys, playing chess with the Duke of Ostenburg."

Álvaro fidgeted in his seat with apparent embarrassment, as if suddenly gripped by doubt. He sucked on his pipe and stared at the wall behind Julia's head, with the air of someone waging an inner battle. Finally, he managed a cautious smile.

"I've no idea what he's doing there—apart from playing chess, that is." Julia was sure that he was looking at her with unusual wariness, as if he could not quite put into words an idea that was going round and round in his head. "What I do know," he added at last, "and I know this because it's mentioned in all the books on the subject, is that Roger de Arras didn't die in France, but in Ostenburg." After a slight hesitation, he pointed to the photograph of the painting. "Have you noticed the date of this painting?"

Puzzled, Julia said: "Yes, 1471. Why?"

Álvaro slowly exhaled some smoke and uttered something that sounded like an abrupt laugh. He was looking at Julia as if trying to read in her eyes the answer to a question he could not quite bring himself to ask.

"There's something not quite right there," he said finally. "That date is either incorrect or the chronicles are lying, or else that knight is not the Rutgier Ar. Preux of the painting." He picked up a mimeographed copy of the *Chronicle of the Dukes of Ostenburg* and, after leafing through it for a while, placed it in front of her. "This was written at the end of the fifteenth century by Guichard de Hainaut, a Frenchman and a contemporary of the events he describes, and it is based on eyewitness accounts. According to Hainaut, our man died at Epiphany in 1469, two years *before* Pieter Van Huys painted *The Game of Chess*. Do you understand, Julia? Roger de Arras could never have posed for the picture, because by the time it was painted, he was already dead."

He walked her to the university car park and handed her the file containing the photocopies. Almost everything was in there, he said: historical references, an update on the catalogued works of Van Huy, a bibliography . . . He promised to send a chronological account and a few other papers to her as soon as he had a free moment. He stood looking at her, his pipe in his mouth and his hands in his jacket pockets, as if he still had something to say but was unsure whether or not to do so. He hoped, he added after a short pause, that he'd been of some help.

Julia nodded, feeling perplexed. The details of the story she'd just learned were still whirling round in her head. And there was something else.

"I'm impressed, Professor. In less than an hour you've completely reconstructed the lives of the people depicted in a painting you've never studied before."

Álvaro looked away, letting his gaze wander over the campus. Then he made a wry face.

"The painting wasn't entirely unfamiliar to me," he said. Julia thought she detected a tremor of doubt in his voice, and it troubled her. She listened extra carefully to his words. "Apart from anything else, there's a photograph in a 1917 Prado catalogue. *The Game of Chess* used to be exhibited there. It was on loan for about twenty years, from the turn of the century until 1923, when the heirs asked for it back."

"I didn't know that."

"Well, now you do." He concentrated on his pipe again, which seemed about to go out. Julia looked at him out of the corner of her eye. She knew him, or, rather, she had known him once, too well not to sense that something important was preying on his mind, something he couldn't bring himself to say.

"What is it you haven't told me, Álvaro?"

He didn't move, just stood there sucking on his pipe, staring into space. Then he he turned slowly towards her.

"I don't know what you mean."

"I just mean that everything to do with this painting is important." She looked at him gravely. "I'm staking a lot on this."

She noticed that Álvaro was chewing indecisively on the stem of his pipe. He sketched an ambivalent gesture in the air.

"You're putting me in a very awkward position. Your Van Huys seems to have become rather fashionable of late."

"Fashionable?" She became tense, alert, as if the earth might suddenly shift beneath her feet. "Do you mean that someone else has already talked to you about him, before I did?"

Álvaro was smiling uncertainly now, as if regretting having said too much.

"They might have."

"Who?"

"That's the problem. I'm not allowed to tell you."

"Don't be ridiculous."

"I'm not. It's true." He looked at her imploringly.

Julia sighed deeply, trying to fill the strange emptiness she felt in her stomach; somewhere an alarm bell was ringing. But Álvaro was talking again, so she remained attentive, searching for some sign. He'd like, he said, to have a look at the painting, if Julia didn't mind, of course. He'd like to see her, too.

"I can explain everything," he concluded, "when the time is right."

It could be a trick, she thought. He was quite capable of creating the whole drama as a pretext for seeing her again. She bit her lower lip. Inside her, the painting was now jockeying for position with feelings and memories that had nothing whatever to do with it.

"How's your wife?" she asked casually, giving in to a dark impulse. She looked up, mischievously

and saw that Álvaro had stiffened and seemed suddenly uncomfortable.

~~“She’s fine,” was all he said. He was staring hard at the pipe in his hand, as if he didn’t recognise it.~~
“She’s in New York, setting up an exhibition.”

A memory flitted into Julia’s head: an attractive blonde woman in a brown tailored suit, getting out of a car. Just fifteen seconds of a rather blurred image that she could only barely recall, but which had marked the end of her youth, as cleanly as a cut with a scalpel. She seemed to remember that his wife worked for some official organisation, something to do with the Ministry of Arts, with exhibitions and travelling. For a time, that had facilitated matters. Álvaro never talked about her, nor did Julia, but they felt her presence between them, like a ghost. And that ghost, fifteen seconds of a face glimpsed purely by chance, had ended up winning the game.

“I hope things are going well for you both.”

“They’re not too bad. I mean not entirely bad.”

“Good.”

They walked on a little in silence, not looking at each other. At last, Julia clicked her tongue, put her head on one side and smiled into the empty air.

“Anyway, it doesn’t much matter now,” she said and stopped in front of him, her hands on her hips and a roguish smile on her lips. “How do you think I’m looking these days?”

He looked her up and down, uncertainly, his eyes half-closed.

“You look great. Really.”

“And how do you feel?”

“A bit confused.” He gave a melancholy smile and looked contrite. “I keep wondering if I made the right decision a year ago.”

“That’s something you’ll never find out.”

“You never know.”

He was still attractive, Julia thought, with a pang of anxiety and irritation that made her stomach clench. She looked at his hands and eyes, knowing that she was walking along the edge of something that simultaneously repelled and attracted her.

“I’ve got the painting at home,” she said in a cautious, noncommittal way, trying to put her ideas in order. She wanted to reassure herself of her painfully acquired resolution, but she sensed the risks and the need to remain on guard. Besides—indeed above all else—she had the Van Huys to think about.

That line of argument helped at least to clarify her thinking. So she shook the hand he held out to her, sensing in that contact the clumsiness of someone unsure of how the land lies. That cheered her up, provoking in her a malicious, subterranean joy. On an impulse that was at once calculated and unconscious, she kissed him quickly on the mouth—an advance on account, to inspire confidence—before opening the car door and getting into her little white Fiat.

“If you want to have a look at the painting, come and see me,” she said, with equivocal nonchalance, as she started the car. “Tomorrow afternoon. And thanks.”

She knew that, with him, she need say no more. She watched him receding in her rear-view mirror, as he stood waving, looking thoughtful and perplexed, the campus and the brick faculty building looming behind him. She smiled as she drove through a red light. You’ll take the bait, Professor, she was thinking. I don’t know why, but someone, somewhere, is trying to play a dirty trick on me. And you’re going to tell me who it is, or my name’s not Julia.

On the little table, within easy reach, the ashtray was piled high with cigarette ends. Lying on the sofa she read until late into the night. The story of the painting, the painter and his subjects was gradually taking shape. She was reading avidly, alert to the smallest clue, driven on by her desire to find the key to the mysterious game of chess that was still being played out on the easel opposite the sofa, in the

semidarkness of the studio, amongst the shadows:

. . . Released from vassalage to France in 1453, the Dukes of Ostenburg struggled to maintain a difficult equilibrium between France, Germany and Burgundy. Ostenburg's policy aroused the suspicions of Charles VII of France, who feared that the duchy might become absorbed by powerful Burgundy, which was trying to establish itself as an independent kingdom. In that whirl of palace intrigue, political alliances and secret pacts, French fears grew with the marriage, in 1464, between Ferdinand, the son and heir of Duke Wilhelmus of Ostenburg, and Beatrice of Burgundy, niece of Philip the Good and cousin of the future Burgundian duke Charles the Bold.

Thus, during those years, which were crucial for the future of Europe, two irreconcilable factions were lined up face to face in the court of Ostenburg: the Burgundy faction, in favour of integrating with the neighbouring duchy, and the French faction, plotting for reunification with France. Right up until his death in 1474, the turbulent government of Ferdinand of Ostenburg was characterised by confrontation between those two forces.

She placed the file on the floor and sat up, her arms round her knees. The silence was absolute. For a while she remained motionless, then she got to her feet and went over to the painting. *QUIS NECAVI EQUITEM*. Without actually touching the surface, she passed a finger over the hidden inscription, covered by the successive layers of green pigment that Van Huys had used to represent the cloth covering the table. Who killed the knight? With the facts Álvaro had given her, the phrase took on a dimension which here, in the painting only dimly lit by a small lamp, seemed sinister. She placed her face as close as possible to that of *RUTGIER AR. PREUX*. Regardless of whether or not he was Roger de Arras, Julia was convinced that the inscription referred to him. It was obviously a kind of riddle, but she was puzzled by the role the chess game played. *Played*. Perhaps that's all it was, a game.

She had an unpleasant sense of exasperation, like the feeling she got when she had to resort to the scalpel to remove a stubborn layer of varnish, and she clasped her fingers behind the back of her neck and closed her eyes. When she opened them, there was the profile of the unknown knight, intent on the game, frowning in grave concentration. He had clearly been an attractive man. He had a noble demeanour, an aura of dignity cleverly suggested by the colours the artist had chosen to surround him. Furthermore, his head was placed exactly at the intersection of lines known in painting as the golden section, the law of pictorial composition that classical painters from the time of Vitruvius onwards had used as a guide to the proportions of figures in a painting.

The discovery startled her. According to the rules, if Van Huys had intended, when painting the picture, to highlight the figure of Duke Ferdinand of Ostenburg—who, given his rank, undoubtedly deserved this honour—he would have placed *him* at the intersecting point of the golden section, not to the left. The same could be said of Beatrice of Burgundy, who had in fact been relegated to the background next to the window, at the right. It was reasonable to suppose, therefore, that the person presiding over that mysterious game of chess was not the Duke or the Duchess but *RUTGIER AR. PREUX*, who just might be Roger de Arras. Except that Roger de Arras was dead.

Keeping her eyes on the painting, looking at it over her shoulder as if fearing that someone in it might move the moment she turned her back, she went over to one of the book-crammed shelves. Bloody Pieter Van Huys, she muttered, setting riddles that were keeping her from her bed five hundred years later. She picked up Amparo Ibañez's *Historia del Arte*, the volume on Flemish painting, and sat down on the sofa with the book on her lap. Van Huys, Pieter. Bruges 1415-Ghent 1481.

. . . While Van Huys does not wholly reject the embroidery, jewellery and marble of the court painter, the family atmosphere of his paintings and his eye for the telling detail mark him as an

essentially bourgeois artist. Although influenced by Jan Van Eyck, and above all by his own teacher Robert Gampin (Van Huys makes clever use of both these artists' techniques), his is a serene analysis of reality, his way of looking at the world a very calm Flemish one. But he was always interested in symbolism, and his paintings are packed with parallel readings (the sealed glass bottle or the door in the wall as signs of Mary's virginity in his *Virgin of the Chapel*, the interplay of shadows in the interior depicted in *The Family of Lucas Bremer*, for example). Van Huys's mastery lies in his incisive delineation of both people and objects and in his approach to the most testing problems in painting at the time, such as the plastic organisation of surface, the seamless contrast between domestic half-light and bright daylight, the way shadows change according to the nature of the material on which they fall.

Surviving works: *Portrait of the Goldsmith Guillermo Walhuus* (1448), Metropolitan Museum, New York. *The Family of Lucas Bremer* (1452), Uffizi Gallery, Florence. *The Virgin of the Chapel* (c. 1455) Prado Museum, Madrid. *The Money Changer of Louvain* (1457), private collection, New York. *Portrait of the Merchant Matteo Conzini and His Wife* (1458), private collection, Zurich. *The Antwerp Altarpiece* (c. 1461), Pinacoteca, Vienna. *The Knight and the Devil* (1462), Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. *The Game of Chess* (1471), private collection, Madrid. *The Ghent Descent from the Cross* (c. 1478), St Bavon Cathedral, Ghent.

By four in the morning, her mouth rough from too much coffee and too many cigarettes, Julia had finished her reading. The story of the painter, the painting and its subjects were at last becoming almost tangible. They were no longer just images on an oak panel, but living beings who had once occupied a particular time and space in the interval between life and death. Pieter Van Huys, painter, Ferdinand Altenhoffen and his wife, Beatrice of Burgundy. And Roger de Arras. For Julia had come with proof that the knight in the painting, the chess player studying the position of the chess pieces with the silent intensity of one whose life depends upon it, was indeed Roger de Arras, born in 1431, died in 1469, in Ostenburg. She was absolutely convinced of that, just as she was sure that the painting, made two years after his death, was the mysterious link that bound him to the two other people and to the painter. A detailed description of that death lay on her lap, on a page photocopied from Guichard de Hainaut's *Chronical*:

And so it was, at the Epiphany of the Holy Kings in the year of our Lord fourteen hundred and sixty-nine, that when Master Ruggier was taking his customary walk along the fosse known as that of the East Gate, a crossbowman posted there did shoot him straight through the heart with an arrow. Master Ruggier remained in that place crying out for his confession to be heard, but by the time help came, his soul had already slipped free through the gaping mouth of his wound. The death of Master Ruggier, a model of chivalry and a consummate gentleman, was sorely felt by the French faction in Ostenburg, the faction he was said to favour. That tragic fact led to many voices being raised in accusation against those who favoured the house of Burgundy. Others attributed the vile deed to some affair of the heart, to which the unfortunate Ruggier was much given. Some even said that Duke Ferdinand himself was the hidden hand behind the blow, carried out by some third party, because Master Ruggier had dared to declare his love for the Duchess Beatrice. The suspicion of such a stain pursued the Duke to his grave. And thus the sad case was concluded without the assassins ever being found, though it was murmured in porches and in gossip shops that they had escaped under the protection of some powerful hand. And so it was left to God to dispense justice. And Master Ruggier was handsome of form and face, despite the wars fought in the service of the King of France, before he came to Ostenburg to serve Duke Ferdinand, with whom he had been brought up in his youth. And he was mourned by many ladies.

And when he was killed, he was in his thirty-eighth year and at the height of his powers . . .

Julia switched off the light, and as she sat in the dark with her head resting on the back of the sofa, she watched the glowing tip of the cigarette in her hand. She couldn't see the picture opposite, nor did she need to. Every last detail of it was engraved on her retina and on her brain. She could see it in the dark.

She yawned, rubbing her face with the palms of her hands. She felt a mixture of weariness and euphoria, an odd sense of partial but exhilarating triumph, like the presentiment you get in the middle of a long race that it is still possible to reach the finishing post. She'd managed to lift one corner of the veil and, though there were still many more things to find out, one thing was clear as day: there was nothing capricious or random in that painting. It was the careful execution of a well-thought-out plan, the aim of which was summed up in the question *Who killed the knight?*, a question that someone, out of expediency or fear, had covered up or ordered to be covered up. And whoever that person was, Julia was going to find out. At that moment, sitting in the dark, dazed from tiredness and lack of sleep, her head full of medieval images and intersecting lines beneath which whistled arrows from crossbows shot from behind as night fell, Julia's mind was no longer on restoring the picture, but on reconstructing its secret. It would be rather amusing, she thought as she was about to surrender to sleep, if when all the protagonists of that story were no more than skeletons turned to dust in their graves, she were to find the answer to the question asked by a Flemish painter called Pieter Van Huys across the silence of five centuries, like an enigma demanding to be solved.

Lucinda, Octavio, Scaramouche

"I declare it's marked out just like a large chessboard!" Alice said at last.

Lewis Carroll

THE BELL ABOVE THE DOOR tinkled as Julia went into the antiques shop. She had only to step inside to find herself immediately enveloped by a sense of warmth and familiar peace. Her first memories were suffused by the gentle golden light that fell on the antique furniture, the baroque carvings and columns, the heavy walnut cabinets, the ivories, tapestries, porcelain, and the paintings, grown dark with age, of grave-faced personages in permanent mourning, who, years before, had watched over her childhood games. Many objects had been sold since then and been replaced by others, but the effect of those motley rooms and of the light gleaming on the antique pieces arranged there in harmonious disorder remained unalterable. Like the colours of the delicate porcelain *commedia dell'arte* figures signed by Bustelli: a Lucinda, an Octavio and a Scaramouche, which, as well as being Julia's favourite playthings when she was a child, were César's pride and joy. Perhaps that was why he never wanted to get rid of them and kept them in a glass case at the back, next to the stained-glass window that opened onto the inner courtyard of the shop, where he used to sit reading—Stendhal, Mann, Sabatini, Dumas, Conrad—waiting for the bell announcing the arrival of a customer.

"Hello, César."

"Hello, Princess."

César was over fifty—Julia had never managed to extract a confession from him as to his exact age—and he had the smiling, mocking blue eyes of a mischievous child whose greatest pleasure lies in defying the world in which he has been forced to live. He had white, immaculately waved hair—she suspected he'd been dyeing it for years now—and he was still in excellent shape, apart from a slight thickening about the hips. He always wore beautifully cut suits, of which the only criticism might be that they were, strictly speaking, a little daring for a man his age. He never wore a tie, not even on the most select social occasions, opting instead for magnificent Italian cravats knotted at the open neck of a shirt, invariably silk, that bore his entwined initials embroidered in blue or white just below his heart. He had a breadth and degree of culture Julia had never met elsewhere and was the most perfect embodiment of the saying that amongst the upper classes extreme politeness is merely the most highly refined expression of one's scorn for others. Within César's social milieu, a concept that might have been expanded to include Humanity as a whole, Julia was the only person who enjoyed that politeness knowing that she was safe from his scorn. Ever since she'd been able to think for herself, César had been for her an odd mixture of father, confidant, friend and confessor, without ever being exactly any of those things.

"I've got a problem, César."

"Excuse me, but in that case, we have a problem. Tell me all about it."

And Julia told him, omitting nothing, not even the hidden inscription, a fact that César acknowledged with a slight lift of his eyebrows. They were sitting by the stained-glass window, and César was leaning slightly towards her, his right leg crossed over his left, one hand, on which gleamed a valuable topaz set in gold, draped nonchalantly over the Patek Philippe watch he wore on his other wrist. It was that distinguished pose of his, by no means calculated (although it may once have been)

that so effortlessly captivated the troubled young men in search of exquisite sensations, the painters, sculptors, fledgling artists whom César took under his wing with a devotion and constancy which, it must be said, lasted much longer than his sentimental relationships.

“Life is short and beauty transient, Princess.” Whenever César adopted his confidential tone, dropping his voice almost to a whisper, the words were always touched with a wry melancholy. “And it would be wrong to possess it for ever. The beauty lies in teaching a young sparrow to fly, because implicit in his freedom is your relinquishment of him. Do you see the subtle point I’m making with this parable?”

As she’d openly acknowledged once before when César, half-flattered and half-amused, had accused her of making a jealous scene, Julia felt inexplicably irritated by all those little sparrows fluttering around César, and only her affection for him and her rational awareness that he had every right to lead his own kind of life, prevented her giving voice to it. As Menchu used to say, with her usual lack of tact: “What you’ve got, dear, is an Electra complex dressed up as an Oedipus complex, or vice versa . . .” Menchu’s parables, unlike César’s, tended to be all too explicit.

When Julia had finished recounting the story of the painting, César remained silent, pondering what she’d said. He didn’t seem surprised—in matters of art, especially at his age, very little surprised him—but the mocking gleam in his eyes had given way to a flicker of interest.

“Fascinating,” he said at last, and Julia knew at once that she would be able to count on him. Ever since she was a child that word had been an incitement to complicity and adventure on the trail of some secret: the pirate treasure hidden in the drawer of the Isabelline bureau—which he sold to the Museo Romántico—and the story he invented about the portrait of the lady in the lace dress, attributed to Ingres, whose lover, an officer in the hussars, died at Waterloo, calling out her name as the cavalry charged. With César holding her hand, Julia had lived through a hundred such adventures in a hundred different lives, and, invariably, in each of them what she’d learned from him was to value beauty, self-denial and tenderness, as well as the delicate and intense pleasure to be gained from the contemplation of a work of art, from the translucent surface of a piece of porcelain to the humble reflection of a ray of sunlight on a wall broken up by a pure crystal into its whole exquisite spectrum of colours.

“The first thing I need to do,” César was saying, “is to have a good look at the painting. I can be at your apartment tomorrow evening, at about half past seven.”

“Fine,” she said, eyeing him cautiously. “It’s just possible that Álvaro will be there too.” If César was surprised, he didn’t say so. He merely made a cruel face with pursed lips.

“How delightful. I haven’t seen the swine for ages, so I’d be thrilled to have an opportunity to send a few poisoned darts his way, wrapped up, of course, in delicate periphrases.”

“Please, César.”

“Don’t worry, my dear, I’ll be kind . . . given the circumstances. My hand may wound, but no blood will be spilled on your Persian carpet . . . which, incidentally, could do with a good cleaning.”

She looked at him tenderly, and put her hands over his.

“I love you, César.”

“I know. It’s only natural. Almost everyone does.”

“Why do you hate Álvaro so much?”

It was a stupid question, and he gave her a look of mild censure.

“Because he made you suffer,” he replied gravely. “I would, with your permission, pluck out his eyes and feed them to the dogs along the dusty roads of Thebes. All very classical. You could be the chorus. I can see you now, looking divine, raising your bare arms up to Olympus, where the gods would be snoring, drunk as lords.”

“Marry me, César. Right now.”

César took one of her hands and kissed it, brushed it with his lips.

“When you grow up, Princess.”

“But I have.”

“No, you haven’t. Not yet. But when you have, Your Highness, I will dare to tell you that I loved you. And that the gods, when they woke, did not take everything from me. Only my kingdom.” He seemed to ponder that before adding, “Which, after all, is a mere bagatelle.”

It was a very private dialogue, full of memories, of shared references, as old as their friendship. They sat in silence, accompanied by the ticking of the ancient clocks that continued to measure out the passage of time while they awaited a buyer.

“To sum up,” said César, “if I’ve understood you correctly, it’s a question of solving a murder.”

Julia looked at him, surprised.

“It’s odd you should say that.”

“Why? That’s more or less what it is. The fact that it happened in the fifteenth century doesn’t change anything.”

“Right. But that word ‘murder’ throws a much more sinister light on it all.” She smiled anxiously at César. “Maybe I was too tired last night to see it that way, but up till now I’ve treated it all as a game like deciphering a hieroglyph . . . a personal matter, in a way. A matter of personal pride.”

“And now?”

“Well, as if it was the most natural thing in the world, you talk about solving a *real* murder, and I suddenly understand . . .” She stopped, her mouth open, feeling as if she were leaning over the edge of an abyss. “Do you see? On the sixth of January 1469, someone murdered Roger de Arras, or had him murdered, and the identity of the murderer lies in the painting.” She sat up straight, carried along by excitement. “We could solve a five-hundred-year-old enigma. Perhaps find the reason why one small event in European history happened one way and not another. Imagine the price *The Game of Chess* could reach at the auction if we managed to do that!”

“Millions, my dear,” César confirmed, with a sigh dragged from him by the sheer weight of evidence. “Many millions.” He considered the idea, convinced now. “With the right publicity, Claymore’s could increase the opening price three or four times. It’s a gold mine, that painting of yours.”

“We must go and see Menchu. Now.”

César shook his head with an air of sulky reserve.

“Oh no. Anything but that. Out of the question. You’re not going to involve me in any of your friend Menchu’s shenanigans. Though I’m quite happy to stand behind the barriers, as bullfighter’s assistant.”

“Don’t be difficult. I need you.”

“I’m entirely at your disposal, my dear. But don’t force me to rub shoulders with that resprayed Nefertiti and her ever-changing crew of panders or, if you want it in the vernacular, pimps. That friend of yours gives me a migraine”—he pressed one temple—“right here. See?”

“César . . .”

“All right, I give in. *Vae victis*. I’ll see Menchu.”

She planted a resounding kiss on his well-shaven cheek, conscious of the smell of myrrh. César bought his perfume in Paris and his cravats in Rome.

“I love you, César. Very much.”

“Don’t you soft-soap me. Fancy trying to get round me like that. At my age too.”

Menchu bought her perfume in Paris too, but it was rather less discreet than César’s. She arrived, in a hurry and without Max, and in a cloud of Balenciaga’s Rumba, which preceded her, like an advance party, across the foyer of the Palace Hotel.

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