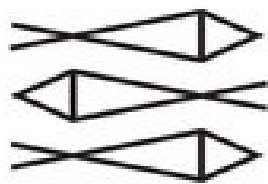


INEZ

CARLOS FUENTES



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Inez

TRANSLATED FROM THE SPANISH BY

MARGARET SAYERS PEDEN

FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX

New York



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To the memory of my beloved son

CARLOS FUENTES LEMUS (1973—1999)

1

“We shall have nothing to say in regard to our own death.”

For a long time this sentence had been going around and around in the aged maestro’s head. He did not dare write it down. He was afraid that consigning it to paper would make it real, with fateful consequences. He would have nothing more to say after that: the dead man does not know what death is, but neither do the living. For that reason the sentence that haunted him like a verbal ghost was both sufficient and insufficient. It said everything, but at the price of never saying anything again. It condemned him to silence. And what could he say about silence? He, who had dedicated his life to music—“the least annoying of noises,” in the crude phrase of the crude Corsican soldier Bonaparte.

He spent hours concentrating on one object. He liked to imagine that by touching some *thing* his morbid thoughts would dissipate, would cling to the material and physical. He discovered very soon that the price of such displacement was very high. He believed that if death and music identified him (or themselves) too closely as and with an old man with no resources but those of memory, holding on to an object would give him, at ninety-three, earthly gravity, specific weight. Him and his object. Him and his tactile, precise, visible, physical thing: an object of unalterable form.

It was a seal.

Not the disk of wax or brass or lead you find with coats of arms and insignia, but a seal of crystal. Perfectly circular and perfectly whole. It could not be used to seal a document, a door, or a coffer; its very texture, being crystalline, would prevent it from molding to the object to be sealed. It was crystal sufficient unto itself, with no utilitarian purpose unless that of imposing an obligation, transcending a dispute with an act of peace, determining a destiny, or perhaps certifying an irrevocable decision.

The crystal seal could *be* all these things, although it was not possible to know of what *use* it could be. At times, contemplating the perfect circular object displayed on its tripod near the window, the aged maestro opted for giving it all the traditional attributes—mark of authority, authenticity, approval—without wedding it to any one of them exclusively. Why?

He couldn’t say exactly. The crystal seal was part of his daily life and thus easily forgotten. We are all both victims and executioners of the short-term memory that lasts no more than thirty seconds and that allows us to go on living without becoming prisoner to every event that happens around us. But long-term memory is like a castle built of great blocks of stone. It takes only a symbol—the castle itself—to remind us of all its contents. Could this round seal be the key to his own personal dwelling? Not the physical house where he was living in Salzburg; not the transitory houses he had lived in throughout his itinerant profession; not his childhood house in Marseilles, tenaciously forgotten so that he would not have to recall, ever again, the migrant’s poverty and humiliation; not even the caves of our first castle, we can reconstruct in our imagination. Could it be the original space, the intimate, inviolable, irreplaceable circle that contains us all but at the price of exchanging sequential memory for an initial memory that is complete in itself and has no need to consider the future?

Baudelaire evokes a deserted house filled with moments now dead. Is it enough to open a document, uncork a bottle, take down an old suit, for a soul to come back to fill it?

Inez.

He repeated the woman’s name.

Inez.

It rhymed with “regress,” *Ee-ness*, and in the crystal seal the maestro hoped to find the impossible.

reflection of both: Inez and a return to a time before the years prohibiting his love. Inez. Regress.

~~It was a crystal seal. Opaque but luminous. That was its greatest marvel. In its place on the tripod by the window, light could shine through it, and then the crystal scintillated. It shot delicate sparks and illegible letters appeared, revealed by the light: letters of a language unknown to the aging orchestra conductor, a score in a mysterious alphabet, perhaps the language of a lost people, maybe a voiceless clamor that came from a long-ago time and in a certain way mocked the professional artist who was so faithful to the composition that even knowing it by memory he had to have it before his eyes as he directed ...~~

Light in silence.

Lyrics without voice.

The maestro had to bow down, had to go to the mysterious sphere and ponder that there wasn't going to be enough time to decipher the message of the signs engraved within its circularity.

A seal of crystal that must have been carved, caressed perhaps, to reach this seamless form, as if the object had been created by means of an instantaneous fiat: *Seal, create thyself! And the seal was.* The maestro didn't know what to admire most about the delicate sphere that at this very moment he held in his hands, fearful that his small and eccentric treasure might shatter, but tempted every moment (and yielding to that temptation) to lay it in one hand and stroke it with the other, as if looking for both a nonexistent flaw and an inconceivable smoothness. Danger altered everything. The object might fall, crack, shatter to bits ...

His senses, nevertheless, predominated, and blotted out the presentiment. To see and to touch the crystal seal also meant to savor it, as if it were, more than vessel, wine from an eternally flowing stream. To see and to touch the crystal seal was also to smell it, as if its substance, free of any secretion, should suddenly begin to sweat, erupt in vitreous pores, as if the crystal might expel its own substance and leave an indecent stain on the hand that caressed it.

What was lacking, then, but the fifth sensation, for him the most important: to hear, to listen to, the music of the seal? That would be to trace the complete circuit—to close the circle, to circulate, to emerge from silence and hear a music that could only be the music of the spheres, expressly, the celestial symphony that regulates the movement of all times and all spaces, never-ending, simultaneous ...

When the crystal seal began, first very low, very distantly, barely in a whisper, to sing, when the center of its circumference vibrated like a magical little bell, invisible, born of the very heart of the crystal—its exaltation and its soul—the old man felt first a shiver of forgotten pleasure run down his spine, then an unwanted rush of saliva, the uncontrollable drool of a mouth fitted with yellowed dentures, and then, as if gaze were allied to taste, he lost command of his tear ducts, and he told himself that old men should disguise their ridiculous tendency to weep at the least excuse, should cover it with the pious veil of a senility—lamentable, but worthy of respect—that tends to dribble like a wineskin run through too often by the swords of time.

He then took the crystal seal in his fist, as if to choke it as he would an annoying little gerbil, extinguishing the voice beginning to issue from its transparency, though he was fearful of snapping the seal's fragility in his grip, for he was still strong—even if stringy and strung out—accustomed to directing, cuing without a baton, with the pure flourish of a long-fingered bare hand, as eloquent for the full orchestra as for a violin or piano or cello solo, and stronger than the fragile *bâton* he had always scorned because, he said, it's nothing but a little stick, a stage prop that hinders rather than favors the flow of nervous energy that streams from my black curling locks, from my clear brow bursting with the light of Mozart, Bach, Berlioz, as if they, Mozart, Bach, Berlioz, they alone, were inscribing the score upon that brow, and from my eyebrows, beetling but separated by the sensitively anguished space between them that they—the orchestra—perceive as my fragility, my guilt, and my

punishment for being not Mozart or Bach or Berlioz but, rather, the simple transmitter, the conductor, the *conductor* so filled with energy, yes, but so fragile, too, so fearful of being the first to fail, to betray the work, he who has no right to err, but he who—despite appearances, despite a hiss from the audience or a silent recrimination from the orchestra or an attack from the press or a temperamentally charged scene with the soprano or a gesture of disdain from the soloist or the scornful vanity of a tenor or the buffoonery of a bass—least deserves a critic harsher on himself than he himself, Gabriel Atlas Ferrara.

He himself, looking at himself alone before the mirror and saying to himself, I wasn't up to the task, I betrayed my art, I deceived everyone who depends on me, the audience, the orchestra, and most of all, the composer ...

He studied himself every morning in the mirror as he shaved, but he could find nothing now of the man he once had been.

Even the space between the eyebrows, which becomes more noticeable over the years, had in his case become overgrown and obscured by the uncontrollable eyebrows sprouting in every direction like those of a tamed Mephistopheles, a tangle he deemed frivolous to groom beyond an impatient shoo-finger gesture that had no effect on the grizzled anarchy, so white now it would be invisible were it not for its copiousness. Once those eyebrows had inspired terror: they commanded, they said that the splendor of the Jovian brow and the tossed-back ebony curls should not be misconstrued, while the space between the eyebrows promised chastisement and sculpted the severe mask of the conductor, with its indescribably invasive eyes, like a pair of black diamonds flaunting their pride in being blazing jewels and inextinguishable carbon, its nose of a perfect Caesar, sharp but with the flaring nostrils of a predator on the scent, brutal but sensitive to the slightest odor; and only then was the mouth trace of an admirable, masculine, but fleshy. The lips of an executioner and of a lover, which promise sensuality but only in exchange for punishment, and pain only as the price of pleasure.

Was this he? This tissue-paper effigy crinkled from so much smoothing out of wrinkles, from being folded so many times among garments packed for the long travels of a famous orchestra, forced, in every climate and under every circumstance, to don the uncomfortable work uniform of white tie and tails instead of the envied overalls that mechanics wear when they—yes, they too—wield the precise instruments of their labors?

That had been he. Today his mirror denied it. But he had the good fortune to possess a second mirror, not the old, flaking mirror in his bathroom but the crystalline reflection from the sea displayed on a tripod before the window open to the unchanging panorama of Salzburg, the German Rome, happy in its gentle valley among massive mountains and its division by the river flowing like a pilgrim from the Alps, bringing water to a city that once perhaps, in another time, had submitted to the impressive power of its natural setting, but at the turn of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had created a design rivaling nature's, reflecting but also challenging the world. The architect of Salzburg, Fischer von Erlach, with his twin towers and concave façades and his adornments like billowing clouds and his surprising military simplicity, which accommodated delirious baroque and Alpine stateliness, had invented a second physical, tangible nature for a city filled with the intangible sculpture of music.

The old man gazed from his window up toward the mountain forests and monasteries, and down to eye level to console himself, but he could not avoid—it was an effort—the monumental presence of the cliffs and fortresses sculpted like a pleonasm on the face of Mönchsberg. The sky raced by above the panorama, with no thought of competing with either nature or architecture.

He had other frontiers. Between the city and him, between the world and him, existed this object from the past, which did not vacillate before the course of time but resisted and reflected it. Was it dangerous, a crystal seal that perhaps contained all the memories of life yet was as fragile as they? Looking at it there, displayed on its tripod near the window, between the city and him, the old man

asked himself whether losing that transparent talisman would also mean losing memory; would memory itself splinter if, through his carelessness or that of the maid who came in twice a week, because of a fit of pique from the good Ulrike—his ponderous housekeeper, affectionately called Dicke or sometimes Dumpling by the neighbors—the crystal seal disappeared from his life?

“If anything happens to your little piece of glass, maestro, don’t blame me. If it’s so important, put it in a safe place.”

Why did he keep it there, in plain sight—almost, you might say, unprotected?

The old man had several answers for such a logical question. He repeated them—authority, resoluteness, fate, emblem—and in the end was left with only one: memory. Stored away in a cabinet, the seal would have to be remembered, instead of being the visible memory of its owner. Exposed, it convoked the memories the maestro needed to go on living. He had decided, seated idly at the piano and slowly picking out, almost like a beginner, a Bach partita, that the crystal seal would be his living past, the receptacle of all he had been and done. It would survive him. The mere fact that it was such a fragile object had led him to impose on it the sign of his own life, almost hoping to transform life into an inanimate object: a *thing*. The truth was that in the impossible transparency of the object all the past of this man who was, had been, and, briefly, would continue to be him, would persist beyond death ... Beyond death. How long was that? That, he didn’t know. It wouldn’t be important. The dead man does not know he is dead. The living do not know what death is.

“We shall have nothing to say in regard to our own death.”

It was a wager, and he had always been a betting man. Once he had left the poverty of Marseille behind, and once he had decided to reject wealth without glory, and power without greatness, so as to devote himself to a vocation with true power, music, his life had provided him with the solid pedestal of self-confidence. But all these things that made him *him* depended on something that did *not* depend on him: life and death. The wager was that this object, so bound up with his life, would resist death and that in some mysterious, perhaps supernatural way the seal would maintain the tactile warmth, the sharp sense of smell, the sweet savor, the fantastic sound, and the inflamed vision of its owner’s life.

Wager: the crystal seal would break before he did. Certainty—oh yes!—dream, prediction, nightmare, diverted desire, unutterable love: they would die together, the talisman and its owner ...

The old man smiled. No. This was no scrap of the skin of a wild ass that shrank with each winter, granted for and because of its owner. The crystal seal neither grew nor diminished. It was always the same, but its possessor knew that without its changing shape or dimensions all of a lifetime memories fit miraculously within it, perhaps revealing a mystery. Memory was not an accumulation of matter that eventually, because of sheer quantity, would burst the seal’s fragile confines. Memory fit within the object because its dimensions were identical. Memory was not something that overflowed or was shoehorned into the shape of the object; it was something that was distilled, *transformed*, with each new experience. The original memory recognized each new-coming memory offering it a welcome to the place whence, unknowingly, the new memory had originated, believing itself in the future only to discover that it would always be in the past. What was yet to come would also be a memory.

An image—equally obvious—was different. An image has to be exhibited. Only the most wretched miser hides away a Goya, because he fears not robbers but Goya. Because he fears that the painting displayed—not even on the wall of a museum, but on a wall in the hoarder’s own home—might be seen by others and, worse, might see them. To cut off that communication, to steal from the artist a possibility of seeing and being seen, to interrupt forever his vital outpouring: ah, nothing could be more satisfying to the consummate miser, nothing so near the pleasure of a dry fuck. With every viewing, something of the painting is stolen.

The old man had never, not even when young, wanted to withhold. His arrogance, his isolation, his

cruelty, his conceit, his sadistic pleasure—all the defects attributed to him throughout his career—did not include spiritual constipation or a refusal to share his creation with a live audience. It was legendary that he refused to give his art to an audience that wasn't present. That decision was definitive. Zero records. Zero films. Zero radio or, horror of horrors, television broadcasts. He was, also legendarily anti-Karajan, a man he considered a clown to whom the gods' only gift had been the fascination of vanity.

Gabriel Atlan-Ferrara? No, he never wanted that ... His "art object"—which was how the crystalline seal was presented to society—was in full view. It had become the property of the maestro only recently, having before that passed through other hands; its opacity had been converted into transparency penetrated by many old, old gazes, which perhaps survived only within the crystal paradoxically alive because they were captive.

Was it an act of generosity to exhibit the *objet d'art*, as some said? Was it a seigneurial emblem, seal for a coat of arms, a simple but mysterious cipher engraved on crystal? Was it a heraldic charge? Had it closed a wound? Or was it nothing more or less than the seal of Solomon, imaginable as the matrix of the great Hebrew monarch's royal authority but also identifiable, more modestly, as a rhizomatous plant with pedunculate, drooping greenish-and-white flowers and clusters of red berries. Solomon's seal?

It was none of these. He knew that, but he had no way to confirm its provenance. He was convinced from what he did know, that this object had been not crafted but *found*. That it had not *been* conceived but had *itself conceived*. That it had no price because it had absolutely no value.

That it was something transmitted. Yes, transmitted. His experience confirmed that. It came from the past. It had come to him.

But finally, the reason why the crystal seal was exhibited there, near the window looking out over the beautiful Austrian city, had little to do with either memory or image.

It had everything to do—the old man approached the object—with sensuality.

There it was, near at hand, precisely so the hand could touch it, caress it, feeling with every nerve ending the perfect and exciting smoothness of that incorruptible skin, as if it were a woman's shoulder, the beloved's cheek, a lithe waist, or an immortal fruit.

More than sumptuous cloth, more than a perishable flower, more than a hard jewel, the crystal seal was not affected by wear or tear or time. It was something integral, beautiful, forever pleasing to the eye and to the touch when fingers tried to be as delicate as their object.

The old man was a paper ghost, yet his grasp was as strong as forceps. He closed his eyes and picked up the seal in one hand.

This was his greatest temptation. The temptation to love the crystal seal so much that he would destroy it forever with the power of his fist.

This magnetic and virile fist, which conducted Mozart, Bach, Berlioz like no other—what did it leave but a memory, fragile as a crystal seal, of an interpretation, judged in the moment to be genius and unrepeatably. For the maestro never allowed any of his performances to be recorded. He refused, he said, to be "canned like a sardine." His musical ceremonies would be live, only live, and would be unique, unrepeatably, as profound as the experience of those who heard them, as volatile as the memory those same audiences kept of them. In that way, he *demandé* that if they wanted it they would *remember* it.

The crystal seal was like that, like the great orchestral ritual presided over by the high priest that gave and took away with an incandescent mixture of will, imagination, and caprice. The interpretation of the work is, at the moment of its execution, the work itself. Berlioz's *The Damnation of Faust* interpreted, is the Berlioz work. Similarly, the image is the same as the thing. The crystal seal was the thing and it was image and both were identical.

He looked at himself in the mirror and searched in vain for some trace of the young French orchestra conductor renowned throughout Europe, who when the war began broke with the fascistic seductions of his occupied country and left to conduct in London, risking the Luftwaffe bombs, a kind of challenge from the ancestral culture of Europe to the beast of the Apocalypse, the lurking and sordid barbaric creature that could fly but not walk, except crawling with its belly flat to the ground and its tits slathered with blood and shit.

Then came the main reason to keep the object in an old man's retreat in the city of Salzburg. He admitted it with an excited and shameful trembling. He wanted to have the crystal seal in his hand so that he could hold it and squeeze it until he destroyed it; hold it the way he wanted to hold her, tighter and tighter, until she choked, communicating a fiery urgency, making her feel that in love—his for her, hers for him, theirs for each other—there was a latent violence, a destructive danger, that was the final homage of passion to beauty. To love Inez, to love her to death.

He dropped the seal, heedless yet fearful. For an instant it rolled across the table. The old man picked it up again, feeling a blend of fear and fondness as vivid as that aroused by the adrenaline rush of watching people jump without a parachute in the Arizona desert, a circus he had sometimes watched with fascination on the television he detested, the passive shame of his aging years. He set the seal back on the little tripod. This was not Columbus's egg, which, like the world itself, could sit on its slightly flattened base. Without support, the crystal seal would roll, fall, shatter ...

He stared at it until Frau Ulrike—Dicke—appeared, holding his overcoat.

She wasn't really fat, merely clumsy in walking, as if she was dragging, more than wearing, her ample traditional clothing (skirts layered over skirts, apron, thick wool stockings, shawl upon shawl, as if she was never warm). Her hair was white, and it was impossible to guess what color it had been when she was a girl. Everything about her—her bearing, her halting walk, her bowed head—made one forget that Ulrike had once been young.

"Professor, you are going to be late for the performance. Remember, it is in your honor."

"I don't need an overcoat. It's summer."

"Herr Professor, from now on you will *always* need an overcoat."

"You're a tyrant, Ulrike."

"Don't stand on ceremony. Call me Dicke, like everyone else."

"You know, Dicke? Growing old is a crime. You can end up with no identity and no dignity, sitting around in a nursing home with other old people as stupid and disinherited as you." He looked at her affectionately. "Thank you for taking care of me, my dear Dumpling."

"Haven't I said it many times? You are a sentimental and ridiculous old man." The housekeeper feigned a little hop, making sure the coat fell correctly over the shoulders of her eminent professor.

"Bah, what does it matter how I dress to go to a theater that was once the court stables?"

"It is in your honor."

"What am I going to hear?"

"What do you mean, maestro?"

"What are they playing in my honor, devil take it!"

"*The Damnation of Faust*. That's what it says in the program."

"You see how forgetful I've become."

"No, no. We all get distracted, especially all you geniuses." She laughed.

The old man took one last look at the crystal sphere before going out into the dusk along the Salzach River. He was going to walk, his step still steady, needing no cane, to the concert hall, the Festspielhaus, and in his head buzzed a self-willed memory: status is measured by the number of Indians under the chief's command. And he was a chief, he should not forget that, not for a single instant, a proud and solitary chief who was dependent on no one—which was why he had refused

ninety-three years and all, to have someone come pick him up at his home. He would walk, alone and without a cane, thanks but no thanks; he was the chief, not “director,” not “conductor,” but *chef d’orchestre*, the French expression was the one he really liked—*chef*. He hoped Dicke wouldn’t hear she’d think he was crazy if in his old age he devoted himself to the kitchen. And he? How could he explain to his own housekeeper that directing an orchestra was walking on a knife blade—exploiting the need that some men have to belong to a group, to be members of an ensemble, feeling free because they follow orders and don’t have to give them, to others or to themselves? How many do you command? Is status measured by the number of people we command?

Still, he thought as he set out for the Festspielhaus, Montaigne was right: no matter how high you may be seated, you are never higher than your own ass. There were forces that no one, at least no one human, could dominate. He was headed for a performance of Berlioz’s *Faust*, and he had always known that the work had escaped both its composer, Hector Berlioz, and its *chef d’orchestre*, Gabriel Atlan-Ferrara, and had installed itself in a territory where it defined itself as the “beautiful, strangely savage, convulsive, and harrowing” master of its own universe and its own meaning, victorious over the composer and the interpreter.

Did the seal, which was his alone, take the place of the fascinating and disturbing independence of the choral symphony?

Maestro Atlan-Ferrara looked at it before leaving for the homage being paid him at the Salzburg Festival.

The seal, so crystalline until now, was suddenly fouled with some excrescence.

An opaque form, dirty, pyramidal, similar to a brown obelisk, began to spread from its center, which only moments before had been perfectly transparent.

That was the last thing he noticed before leaving for the performance, in his honor, of *The Damnation of Faust* by Hector Berlioz.

It was, perhaps, an error of perception, a perverse mirage in the desert of his old age.

When he came home that darkness had disappeared.

Like a cloud.

Like a bad dream.

As if divining her master’s thoughts, Ulrike watched him walk down the street along the riverbank and did not move from her post at the window until she saw the figure of the professor, still noble and upright though cloaked in a heavy overcoat in midsummer, reach what she calculated to be the point where he would not turn back and interrupt the secret plan of his faithful servant.

Ulrike picked up the crystal seal and placed it in the center of her held-out apron. She made sure, forming a fist around it, that the object was carefully wrapped in the cloth, and then she whipped the apron with a couple of efficient, professional tugs.

She walked to the kitchen, where without a second’s hesitation she laid the apron with the seal wrapped in it on the rough table stained with the blood of edible beasts and, picking up a rolling pin, began to pound it with fury.

The servant’s face grew agitated and inflamed; her bulging eyes were fixed on the object of her rage as if she wanted to be sure that the seal was crushed to bits beneath the savage strength of the strong right arm of Frau Dicke, with her braids threatening to fall loose in a cascade of white hair.

“Swine, swine, swine!” she grunted in a diapason that swelled until it exploded in a harsh, strangely savage, convulsive, harrowing scream ...

2

Cry out, cry out with terror, howl like a hurricane, moan like the deepest forest, let rocks crash down and torrents roar, cry out with fear because in this instant you see black horses racing through the skies, bells fall silent, the sun is obscured, dogs are baying, the devil has taken over the world, skeletons have come out of their tombs to hail the passing of the inky steeds of damnation. It's raining blood from the heavens! The horses are as swift as thought, as unexpected as death, they are the beast that has pursued us forever, since the cradle, the ghost that knocks at our door at night, the invisible creature that scratches at our windowpane; cry out, all of you—as if your life depended on those cries—HELP; pray to the Virgin Mary for mercy, you know in your hearts that she can't save you, that no one can save you, you are damned, the beast is pursuing us, it's raining blood, the wings of nocturnal birds are beating in our faces, Mephistopheles has poisoned the world, and you're singing as if you were in the chorus of a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta! Think what you're doing! You are singing Berlioz's *Faust*, not to please, not to impress, not even to stir emotions; you're singing to spread fear, you are a chorus of birds of bad omen, you bring a warning, you come to take our nests from us, you come to peck out our eyes and eat our tongues, then you answer, with the last hope of fear, you cry *Sancta Maria, ora pro nobis*, this nest is ours, and if anyone comes near we will peck out his eyes and we will eat his tongue and we will cut off his balls and we will suck the gray matter from his skull and we will draw and quarter him and feed his guts to the hyenas and his heart to the lions and his lungs to the crows and his kidneys to the boar and his anus to the rats—cry out!—cry out your terror, but stand your ground, defend yourselves, there is more than one devil, that's his deception, he poses as Mephisto but the devil is multiple, the devil is a merciless *we*, a hydra that knows no pity and no limit, the devil is like the universe, Lucifer has no beginning and no end, learn this, comprehend this, the incomprehensible, Lucifer is the infinite fallen to earth, he is heaven's exile rockbound in the immensity of space, that was his divine punishment, *You shall be infinite and immortal on this mortal and finite earth*, but you, this night, here on this stage in Covent Garden, sing as if you were the allies of God abandoned by God, cry out as if you wished to hear God cry out because his favorite ephemeris, his angel of light, betrayed him, and God, caught between laughter and tears—the Bible! what a melodrama!—gave the world to the devil so that on this finite rock he could play out the tragedy of exiled infinitude: sing as God's and the devil's witnesses, *Sancta Maria, ora pro nobis, ora pro nobis*, cry *has, has, Mephisto*, drive out the devil, *Sancta Maria, ora pro nobis*, horn, sing out ... bells, peals ... assert yourselves, brass, the mortal multitude is approaching, you, chorus, you too are a multitude, a legion to drown out the clamor of the bombs with your voices, tonight in London we are rehearsing during a blackout, and the Luftwaffe bombing is relentless, wave after wave of black birds sweep by, streaming blood, endless troops of the devil's steeds are racing through the black skies, the wings of the evil one are beating in our faces, *feel* him, that's what I want to hear, a chorus of voices that will silence the bombs, no more, no less, Berlioz deserves that, don't forget that I am French—*allez vous faire niquer!*—sing until the bombs of Satan are silenced, I will not rest until I hear that—do you understand?—as long as the bombs outside drown out the voices inside, we will stay here, *allez vous faire foutre, mesdames et messieurs*, until we drop with exhaustion, until the fatal bomb falls on our concert hall and, worse than fucked, we are ground into the ground, until you and I together rout the cacophony of the war with the dissonant harmony of Berlioz, the artist who doesn't want to win a war, only drag us down to hell with Faust, because we, you and you and you and you and I as well, have sold our

collective soul to the devil; sing like wild animals seeing yourselves for the first time in a mirror and not knowing you are you, howl like the specter that doesn't recognize itself, like the hostile reflection wail as if you discovered that your image in the mirror of my music is that of the most ferocious enemy, not the Antichrist, but the anti-you, the anti-father and anti-mother, the anti-child and the anti-lover, the creature with shit and pus under its fingernails that wants to stick its fingers up our asshole and in our mouths and in our ears and eyes, that wants to split open our spinal cords and infect our brains and devour our dreams: cry out like animals lost in the forest, beasts that must howl so that other beasts can recognize them from a distance, shriek like the birds to terrorize the aggressor that wants to take our nest from us ... !

“Regard the monster you had never imagined, not a monster but a brother, a member of your family, who one night opens the door, rapes us, murders us, and burns down the house we all share ...

Gabriel Atlán-Ferrara wanted, at that point in the night rehearsal of *The Damnation of Faust* by Hector Berlioz, that December 28, 1940, in London, to close his eyes and know again that overwhelming yet serene sensation of work that is exhausting but finally accomplished; he wanted the music to flow independently to the ears of the public, even though everything in this ensemble depends on the authoritarian power of the conductor: the power of obedience. One gesture to impose authority. One hand, readying the percussion to announce the arrival at hell, the cello to lower its tone to the murmur of love, the violin to signal a tremolo of coming terror and the horn a dissonant caesura ...

He wanted to close his eyes and feel the music flowing like a great river carrying him far away from the specific circumstance of this concert hall on a night during the London blitz, with German bombs raining down all around, and the orchestra and chorus of Monsieur Berlioz conquering Field Marshal Goring and assaulting the Führer himself with the terrible beauty of horror, saying to him, Your horror is true horror, it lacks grandeur, it's niggardly horror, because you don't understand you will never be capable of understanding, that immortality, life, death, and sin are mirrors of our universal, internal soul, not your transitory and cruel external power ... Faust places an unfamiliar mask on the man who doesn't recognize it but ends up adopting it. That is his triumph. Faust enters the devil's territory as if returning to the past, to lost myth, to the land of original terror—man's work, not God's or the devil's, Faust conquers Mephisto because Faust is exiled, expelled, expulsed, mastered of terrestrial terror, terrorized, interred, and disinterred: the human terrain on which Faust, despite his vicious defeat, forever reads himself ...

The maestro wanted to close his eyes and think what he was thinking, wanted to say all these things to himself in order to be one with Berlioz, with the orchestra, with the chorus, with the collective music of this great and incomparable hymn to the demonic power of the human being when the human discovers that the devil is not a unique incarnation—*has, has, Mephisto*—but a collective hydra—*hup, hup, hup*. Atlán-Ferrara wanted, moreover, to renounce, or at least believe he was renouncing, the authoritarian power that inevitably made him, the young and already eminent European conductor “Gabriel Atlán-Ferrara,” the dictator of a collective ensemble untouched by the vanity or pride that could stigmatize the director, free of Lucifer's sin. Inside the theater, Atlán-Ferrara was a minor god who renounced his powers on the altar of an art that was not his, not his alone but first of all the work of a creator named Hector Berlioz—though only he could conduct, he, Atlán-Ferrara, conduit, conductor, interpreter of Berlioz, and in any case authority over the interpreter subject to his power. Chorus, soloists, orchestra.

His limit was the public. The artist was at the mercy of the audience. Ignorant, vulgar, distracted or perceptive, intransigent connoisseur or simple traditionalist, intelligent but closed to the new, like the public that wouldn't accept Beethoven's Second Symphony, damned by a renowned Viennese critic of the time as “a vulgar monster that furiously slashes its uplifted tail until the desperately awaited final

is reached ...” And hadn’t another celebrated critic, this one French, written in *La Revue des deux mondes* that Berlioz’s *Faust* was a work of “disfigurement, vulgarity, and bizarre sounds emitted by a composer incapable of writing for the human voice”? With good reason, sighed Atlan-Ferrara, there were no monuments anywhere in the world to the memory of a literary or music critic.

Situated in the precarious equilibrium between two creations—the composer’s and the conductor’s—Gabriel Atlan-Ferrara wanted to be borne away by the dissonant beauty of the seductive and yet frightening hell of Hector Berlioz’s oratorio. The secret to preserving that equilibrium—and consequently the spiritual peace of the *chef d’orchestre*—is that no one person should stand out. Especially in *The Damnation of Faust*, the voice must be collective in order to inspire the unavoidable fall and damnation of the hero.

But this night during the London blitz, what was it that prevented Atlan-Ferrara from closing his eyes and lifting his arms to direct Berlioz’s at once classic and romantic, cultivated and savage cadences?

It was that woman.

That singer who rose above the chorus kneeling before a cross—*Sancta Maria, ora pro nobis*—*Sancta Magdalena, ora pro nobis*—yes, kneeling like all the other women and yet imperious and majestic, distinct, separated from the chorus by a voice as black as her lidless eyes and as electric as the flaming hair curling like an ocean surf of enervating, magnetic distraction, bursting the unity of the ensemble, as above the sun-orange aureole of her hair and below the nocturnal velvet of her voice she was heard as something apart, something singular, something disturbing that endangered the equilibrium-from-chaos so carefully fashioned by Atlan-Ferrara this night when the bombs of the Luftwaffe were reducing central London to ashes.

He interrupted the rehearsal with a furious, unaccustomed gesture, pounding his right fist into his left hand. A blow so loud that it silenced everything except a passionate voice, not insolent yet insistent, a singer at center stage, standing out yet kneeling before the altar of the *Sancta Maria*.

Ora pro nobis, the woman’s high, crystalline voice filling the space of the stage, the singer possessed or empowered by the very gesture attempting to silence her, the conductor’s pounded fist. Tall, vibrant, mother-of-pearl skin, red hair, and dark gaze, the singer disobeyed—disobeyed him and disobeyed the composer, for Berlioz himself would not have tolerated a solitary, narcissistic voice rising above the chorus.

The furious bombardment outside imposed silence—the firebombing that since summer had kept the city in flames, a phoenix reborn again and again from its ashes—although this was neither an accident nor an act of local terrorism but aggression from without, a rain of fire that thundered hell from leather through the skies, recalling the final part of *Faust*; everything gave the impression that the hurricane of the skies was erupting like a rumbling earthquake, up from the entrails of the city, that the thunder was the fault of the earth not the sky ...

It was the silence broken by the rain of bombs that inflamed Atlan-Ferrara, who unconsciously attributed his rage not to what was happening outside, or to its relation to what was happening inside, but to the rupture of his exquisite musical equilibrium—imposing balance on chaos—by that high and profound, isolated and proud voice “black” as velvet and “red” as fire affirming itself by rising above the women’s chorus, solitary as the presumed protagonist of a work that wasn’t hers, not because it belonged solely to Berlioz or to the director, the orchestra, the soloists, or the chorus, but because it belonged to everyone, and yet the woman’s voice, sweetly obstructive, proclaimed, “This music is mine.”

“This isn’t Puccini, and you’re not Tosca, Mam’selle Whatever-Your-Name-Is!” the maestro shouted. “Who do you think you are? Am I some cretin who can’t express himself clearly? Or are you some mental case who can’t understand me? *Tonnerre de Dieu!*”

The concert hall was his territory, he knew, and the success of the performance depended on the tension between the director's energy and will and the obedience and discipline of the ensemble under his command. The woman with the electric hair and velvet voice was challenging his authority. The woman was enamored of her own voice, she caressed it, took pleasure in it, and she was conducting herself: the woman was doing with her voice what the conductor did with the ensemble—dominating it. She defied the conductor. She was saying to him, with her insufferable arrogance, Once you're out of this building, who are you? Who are you when you step down from the podium? And deep inside he was silently asking her, How dare you, from your place in the chorus, display your solitary voice and your beautiful face like that? Why do you show such lack of respect? Who are you?

Maestro Atlan-Ferrara closed his eyes. He was overcome by an uncontrollable desire, a natural even savage impulse to rebuff and scorn this woman who was interrupting the perfect fusion of music and ritual so essential to Berlioz's dramatic legend. But at the same time he was fascinated by the voice he heard. He closed his eyes, believing that he was being seduced to enter the marvelous trance spun by the music, while in truth he wanted to isolate the voice of this rebellious, unthinking woman—though he didn't know that yet. Nor did he know if, feeling these things, what he wanted was to make the woman's voice his, to appropriate it.

"It is forbidden to interrupt, mademoiselle!" he shouted, because he had the right to shout whenever he wanted, and to see if his thunderous voice, his voice alone, would drown out the sound of the bombing outside. "You are whistling in a church at the moment of the sacrament!"

"I thought I was contributing to the work," she said in her ordinary voice, and he thought the way she spoke was even more beautiful than the way she sang. "As they say, variety never stands in the way of unity."

"In your case, it does," the maestro stormed.

"That's your problem," she replied.

Atlan-Ferrara checked his impulse to ask her to leave. That would be a sign of weakness, not authority. It would look like vulgar revenge, a childish tantrum, or something worse ...

"Ah, love scorned ..." Gabriel Atlan-Ferrara smiled and shrugged his shoulders, dropping his arms in resignation, in the midst of the laughter and applause of the orchestra, soloists, and chorus. "Can't help it," he sighed.

In his dressing room, naked to the waist, toweling sweat from his neck, face, chest, and underarms, Gabriel looked at himself in the mirror and succumbed to the vanity of knowing he was young, thirty-three, one of the youngest *chefs d'orchestre* in the world. Briefly, he admired his aquiline profile, his black, curling mane, the infinitely sensual lips. The dark, gypsy-olive skin worthy of his Mediterranean and Central European hyphenated names. Now he will dress in a black turtle-neck sweater and dark wool trousers and will throw on the Spanish cape that gives him the soigneur air of a kob, a splendid antelope in prehistoric meadows that would swagger into the street wearing a silver collar like the ruff of a Spanish hidalgo ...

Nevertheless, as he regarded himself with deep regard (and liking his likeness), he no longer saw his own vain image; it was being obliterated by that of the woman, a very special woman who dared to plant her person in the center of the musical universe of Hector Berlioz and Gabriel Atlan-Ferrara.

It was an impossible image. Or maybe merely difficult. He admitted that. He wanted to see her again. The idea distressed him and pursued him as he strode arrogantly into the night of the German blitzkrieg over London; it wasn't the first war, it wasn't the first terror of the eternal combat of man-is-the-wolf-of-man, but, making his way, as sirens wailed, among the people forming a queue to go down to the underground, he told himself that these bureaucrats with headcolds, bone-tired waitresses, mothers with babies, old men clutching thermoses, children dragging blankets, these Londoners with their weariness and bleary eyes and insomniac skin were unique, they belonged not to "the history

war” but to the specific actuality of *this* war. What was he in a city where more than fifteen hundred people could die in a single night? What was he in a London where bombed-out shops displayed signs proclaiming BUSINESS AS USUAL? What was he, leaving the sandbagged theater in Bow Street, but a pathetic figure captured amid the terror of a rain of ice from a shattered shop window, the whinnying of a horse frightened by the flames, and the red aureole that lit up the crouching city?

He walked toward his hotel on Piccadilly, the Regent’s Palace, where a soft bed was waiting, a place to forget the voices he overheard as he cut through the lines for the underground.

“Don’t waste any shillings in the gas meter.”

“Chinese all look alike, how do you tell them apart?”

“We’ll all sleep together, it’s not too bad.”

“Yes, but next to whom? Yesterday my butcher *touched* me.”

“Well, we English know about perversion from elementary school on.”

“Thank God the children are in the country.”

“Don’t be too complacent. Southampton, Bristol, and Liverpool have all been bombed.”

“And in Liverpool there wasn’t any anti-aircraft defense; why, that’s dereliction of duty!”

“It’s the Jews who’re to blame for this war, as usual.”

“They’ve bombed the House of Commons, the Abbey, the Tower of London. Aren’t you surprised when you find you still have a house?”

“We know ‘ow to take it, mate, we know ‘ow to take it.”

“And we know ‘ow to help a buddy, more nor ever, mate.”

“More nor ever.”

“Good evening, Mr. Atlan,” said the first violin, wrapped in a sheet that had little effect against the night cold. He looked like a ghost that had escaped from the *Faust* oratorio.

Gabriel nodded with dignity, but at just that moment he was seized by the most *un*-dignified urgencies. He needed desperately to urinate. He hailed a taxi to speed his return to the hotel. The taxi driver smiled at him amiably.

“First, gov’ner, I don’t know me way around the city anymore. Second, the streets are bang-up with broken glass, and tires don’t grow on trees. Sorry, gov’ner. It’s too risky where you want to go.”

He looked for the first alleyway among the many that weave together Brewer’s Yard and St. Martin’s Lane, trapping the odor of chips, lamb cooked in lard, and rancid eggs. The city’s breath was sour and melancholy.

He unbuttoned his fly, took out his cock, and urinated with a sigh of pleasure.

A musical laugh made him turn and stop in midstream.

She was looking at him with affection, with amusement, with attention. She was standing at the entry to the alleyway, laughing.

Then she cried, “*Sancta Maria, ora pro nobis!*” with the terror of someone pursued by a beast, her face beaten by the wings of nocturnal birds, her eardrums pierced by the sound of hooves racing through skies raining down blood ...

She was afraid. London, with its underground stations, was undoubtedly safer than this open country.

“Then why do they send children to the country?” Gabriel asked as they careened down the road in his yellow sports car, top down despite the cold and wind.

She wasn’t complaining. She tied a silk kerchief around her head to keep her red hair from beating her face like the ominous birds in Berlioz’s opera. The maestro could say what he wanted, but, driving away from the capital and toward the sea, weren’t they inevitably getting closer to France, to the Europe occupied by Hitler?

“Remember Poe’s ‘The Purloined Letter’? The best way to hide something is to leave it out in the open. If they come after us, thinking we’ve disappeared, they would never look for us in the most obvious place.”

She didn’t have much faith in the *chef d’orchestre*, who was driving the little open car with the same vigor and unbridled concentration he devoted to conducting an orchestra, as if he wanted to proclaim to the four winds that he was also a practical man and not just a long-haired musician, a man like him were called in Anglo-American circles, a synonym for an almost idiotically impractical person.

She turned her attention from the speed, the roadway, her fear, to an appreciation of where she was, allowing herself to feel a plenitude that granted this round to Gabriel Atlan-Ferrara—nature enduring as the city dies—and made herself focus on the gardens along the road, the woods and the smell of dead leaves, the fog dripping from the hedgerows. She was assaulted by the sensation that sap, an invincible and nurturing energy boundless as a great river with no beginning or end, was flowing without regard for the criminal madness only human beings introduce into nature.

“Do you hear the owls?”

“No, the car’s making too much noise.”

Gabriel laughed. “The sign of a good musician is to know how to listen to many things at the same time, and to *pay attention* to them all.”

She should listen to the owls. They were not only the night watchmen of the countryside but also the scullery maids as well.

“Did you know that owls catch more mice than a good mouser?” Gabriel made this more a pronouncement than a question.

“Then why did Cleopatra bring her cats to Rome?” she asked, but not argumentatively.

She thought that it might be nice to have owls around as zealous housekeepers. But who could sleep with that constant screeching?

During the drive from London to the sea, she gave herself to the vision of a full moon so bright in the night sky that it seemed it was there to aid the German planes in their raid. The moon was no longer an excuse for romance. It was the beacon for the Luftwaffe. The war changed the times and everything, but the moon insisted on counting the passing of the hours, and they, despite everything, continued to act like time, and perhaps even the time of time, mother of hours ... Without the moon the night would have been a void. Thanks to the moon, the night was defining its monumentality.

A silver fox ran across the road, swifter than the automobile. Gabriel braked and was grateful for the darting fox and for the moonlight. A faint, whispering breeze floated across the heath of ancient Durnovaria and lightly stirred the straight, slender larches whose soft needles of brilliant green seemed to point toward the splendid moon-flooded amphitheater of Casterbridge.

He told her that the moon and the fox had conspired to halt the blind speed of the automobile and to invite them—he got out, he opened the door, he offered his hand to her—to join them at the ruin in the middle of this British grassland, abandoned by Rome, abandoned by the legions of Hadrian, as were the beasts and gladiators who died forgotten in the underground cells of the Casterbridge coliseum.

“Do you hear the wind?” asked the maestro.

“Barely,” she said.

“Do you like this place?”

“It surprises me. I never imagined anything like this in England.”

“We could drive a little farther, north of Casterbridge, to Stonehenge, where there’s a big prehistoric circle more than five thousand years old, and in its center alternating pillars and obelisks of sandstone and ancient blue stones. It’s like a fortress of the beginning. Do you hear it?”

“Sorry?”

“Do you hear the place?”

“No. Tell me how.”

“Do you want to be a singer, a great singer?”

She didn't answer.

“Music is the image of the incorporeal world. Look at this Roman amphitheater. Imagine the millenary circles of Stonehenge. Music can't reproduce them because music doesn't copy the world. You're hearing the perfect silence of the heath, and if you listen sharply the coliseum will act as the sound box of a place without time. Believe me, when I conduct a work like Berlioz's *Faust*, I give up measuring time. The music gives me all the time I need. Calendars are superfluous.”

He looked at her with his dark eyes, savage at that hour, and was surprised that in the moonlight the eyelids of this woman listening to him became transparent.

He placed his lips on hers, and she didn't protest, but neither did she respond.

He had rented the house—well, the cottage—before the war, when he was beginning to be asked to conduct in England. It was an opportune decision—the conductor smiled ironically—although I, we, no one could have foreseen how fast France would fall to the invaders.

It was an ordinary little house on the coast. Narrow, two stories, pitched roof, living room, dining room, kitchen downstairs, and two bedrooms and a bath upstairs. And the attic?

“I use one of the bedrooms for storage.” Gabriel smiled. “A musician collects too many things. I'm not an old man, but I have a century's worth of stuff, piles of scores, notes, sketches, costumes, drawings, set maquettes, reference books, whatever ...”

He looked at her, unblinking.

“You can sleep in the living room.”

She was about to shrug her shoulders. He had been blocking her view of the stairway. It was so steep that it looked more like a ladder than a stairway, requiring you to use hands as well as feet to climb, rung after rung—like ivy, like an animal, like a monkey.

She looked away.

“Yes, whatever you like.”

He fell silent, then said it was late, there were eggs, sausage, a coffeepot in the kitchen, maybe some stale bread and an even harder chunk of Cheddar.

“No.” She shook her head. First she wanted to see the ocean.

“It isn't much.” The last thing in the world he would do would be to lose his pleasant smile, but it always held a hint of irony. “The coast here is flat and undramatic. The beauty of the region is inland, the part we drove through tonight. Casterbridge. The Roman amphitheater. The gentle, whispering wind. I like even the most arid parts. It pleases me to know that behind me is a whole backbone of quarries, chalk hills, and centuries of clay. All of it pushes you toward the sea, as if the force and beauty of the English landscape were sweeping you seaward, driving you from a land jealous of its somber, rainswept solitude. Look, there, across from where we're standing. See that treeless little islet, that barren rock? Imagine when it emerged from the sea, or was separated from the land. I can calculate that not in thousands of years, but millions.” He pointed, his arm fully extended. “Now because of the war, the lighthouse there is blacked out. *To the Lighthouse!*” Gabriel laughed. “No more Virginia Woolf.”

But she had a different impression of the winter night and of the blazing beauty of the cold but intensely green forested landscape; she was grateful for the tree-covered lanes, because they protected her from the flaming air, from death from the skies ...

“The really beautiful coast is in the west,” Gabriel continued. “Cornwall, too, is land edged toward the Atlantic Ocean by fields of heather. What happens on that coast is a battle. Rock pushes against ocean, and ocean against rock. As you might suppose, the ocean ends up winning. The water is fluid

and generous in that it's always offering form; the land is hard, and scarred, but the encounter magnificent. Granite cliffs rise almost three hundred feet above the sea; they resist the Atlantic battering them mercilessly, but in their whole formation is the work of that incessant attack of the pounding surf. There are advantages."

Gabriel put his arm across the singer's shoulders. This cold early morning facing the sea. She did not reject it.

"The land defends itself against the sea with its ancient stone. There are caves everywhere. The sand is silvery. They say that the caves were smugglers' dens. But footprints in the sand betray. Best of all the weather is very mild and the vegetation abundant, thanks to the Gulf Stream, the heating system for Europe."

She looked at him, moving a little away from the embrace.

"I'm Mexican. My name is Inés. Inés Rosenzweig. Why haven't you asked me?"

Gabriel's smile broadened, but it was joined by a frown. "For me you have no name or nationality."

"Please, don't make me laugh."

"Forgive me. You're the singer who rose above the chorus to give me her beautiful voice: singular yes, but still a little savage, needing to be cultivated ..."

"Thank you for that. I didn't want sentiment ..."

"No. Simply a voice that needs to be cultivated, like the English heaths."

"You should see where the mesquite grows in Mexico." Nonchalantly, Inés moved away.

"In any case," Gabriel continued, "a woman without a name, an anonymous creature who crosses my path one night. A woman without age."

"Romantic!"

"And who saw me urinate in an alley."

They both laughed, he longer than she.

"A woman you bring for the weekend and forget on Monday," Inés suggested, untying her kerchief and letting the wind whip her red hair.

"No." Gabriel put his arms around her. "A woman who enters my life identical to my life, the equivalent of the conditions of my life ..."

What did he mean? The words intrigued her, and for that reason Inés said nothing.

They drank coffee in the kitchen. The dawn was slow to come, this December day would be short. Inés began to notice what was around her, the simplicity of the house, the rough whitewashed brick. The few books in the living room—most of them French classics, some Italian literature, several editions of Leopardi, of Central European poets. A broken-down sofa. A rocking chair. A fireplace and on the mantel the photograph of a very young Gabriel, a late-teenager, maybe twenty, with his arm around a boy who was his exact opposite: quintessentially blond, wide smile, without mystery. The two youths weren't wearing shirts, and the photo stopped at their waists. It was a photograph of swaggering camaraderie, solemn but proud, with the pride of two people meeting and recognizing one another in their youth, appreciating the unique opportunity to face life head-on together. Never to be separated. Not ever.

In the living room two wooden stools were set apart at the distance—Inés calculated instinctively—of a body lying full-length. Gabriel explained that in rural houses like this in England twin stools were placed where the coffin of the deceased would be set during a wake. He had found the two stools like that when he took the house, and he hadn't moved them, well, out of superstition—he smiled—maybe not to disturb the ghosts.

"Who is he?" she asked, putting the steaming cup of coffee to her lips without taking her eyes from the photograph, indifferent to the maestro's asides on folklore.

"My brother," Gabriel answered simply, looking away from the funerary stools.

“You don’t look at all alike.”

“Well, I say ‘brother’ the way you might say ‘comrade.’”

“We women never call each other ‘sister’ or ‘comrade’ or things like that.”

“‘Love,’ ‘friend’ ...”

“Yes. I guess I shouldn’t press you. Sorry. I don’t mean to pry.”

“No, no. It’s just that my words have a price, Inés. If you want me to talk about myself—want, n—press—you’ll have to tell me about you.”

“All right.” She laughed, amused by the way Gabriel had turned things around.

The young maestro glanced around his no-frills cottage and said that if it were up to him the wouldn’t be a stick of furniture in it, nothing. In empty houses, echoes are the only things that flourish: voices flourish, if we know how to listen. He came here—he stared deep into Inés’s eyes—he hear the voice of his brother ...

“Your brother?”

“Yes, because most of all he was my companion. Companion, brother, *ceci, cela*, whatever ...”

“Where is he?”

Gabriel didn’t just look down. He looked ... down.

“I don’t know. He always liked long, mysterious disappearances.”

“Doesn’t he keep in touch with you?”

“Yes.”

“Then you do know where he is.”

“His letters have no date or return address.”

“Where are they mailed from?”

“I left him in France. That’s why I chose this place.”

“Who brings them to you?”

“Here I’m closer to France. I can see the coast of Normandy.”

“What does he say in the letters? Oh, I apologize ... I know you haven’t given me permission—”

“Yes, yes, don’t worry. Look, he likes to reminisce about our life as teenagers. Mmh, he remembers, I don’t know, how he envied me when I asked the prettiest girl to dance and showed her off on the dance floor. He confesses he was jealous of me, but being jealous just means making the person we’d like to have all to ourselves more important. Jealousy, Inés, not envy. Envy is poisonous and pointless, because we want to be a different person. Jealousy is generous—we want the other person to be ours.”

“What was he like? He didn’t dance?”

“No. He preferred to watch me dance and then tell me he was jealous. He was like that. He lived through me and I through him. We were comrades, can you understand? We had this deep tie that the world rarely understands and always tries to destroy: isolating us in jobs, ambition, women, habits we acquire on our own ... history.”

“Maybe it’s best that way, maestro.”

“Gabriel.”

“Gabriel. Maybe if that wonderful youthful friendship had been prolonged, it would have lost its luster.”

“Nostalgia preserves it, you mean?”

“Something like that, maestro ... Gabriel.”

“And you, Inés?” Atlan-Ferrara brusquely changed the subject.

“Nothing special. My name is Inés Rosenzweig. My uncle is a Mexican diplomat in London. Even since I was little, people have said I have a good voice. I went to the Conservatorio de Mexico, and now I’m in London”—she laughed—“sowing confusion among the chorus of *The Damnation of Faust*.”

and giving the celebrated young maestro Gabriel Atlan-Ferrara fits.”

She lifted her coffee cup as if it were a champagne flute. She burned her fingers. She was just going to ask the maestro again, “Who brings the letters?” but Gabriel beat her to the punch.

“Don’t you have a boyfriend? Didn’t you leave someone behind in Mexico?”

Inés shook her head no, and the movement highlighted the cherry tones in her hair. She rubbed her burned fingers discreetly on her skirt. Just at the thigh. The rising sun seemed to pale with envy as it struck the girl’s fiery aureole. But her eyes were for the photo of Gabriel and his brother-companion, a beautiful boy, as different from Gabriel as a canary from a crow.

“What was his name?”

“Is his name, Inés. He isn’t dead. He’s just disappeared.”

“But you get letters from him. Where do they come from? Europe is cut off—”

“You talk as if you would like to know him.”

“Of course. He’s interesting. And very beautiful.”

A Nordic beauty very different from Gabriel’s Latin looks. Was he really handsome or merely striking? Brother? Companion? Inés stopped fretting over the question. It was impossible to look at the photograph without feeling something for this boy: love, uneasiness, sexual desire, intimacy, maybe, or perhaps a certain icy disdain. Indifference? No. Not permitted by those eyes clear as lake water, never furrowed by any craft, straight blond hair like the wing of a splendid heron, slim muscular torso. The torso of the young blond corresponded to features sculpted so finely that one further touch to the nose, thin lips, or smooth cheekbones might have ruined, even erased them.

This nameless youth merited *attention*. That was what Inés told herself that early dawn. The love the brother or comrade demanded was *attentive* love. Don’t let an opportunity slip by. Don’t lose focus. Be there for him because he was there for you.

“Is that what this photo makes you feel?”

“I’ll be frank with you. It isn’t the photo, it’s him.”

“I’m in it too. He isn’t alone.”

“But you’re here beside me. I don’t need a photo to see you.”

“And him?”

“He is his image. I’ve never seen such a beautiful man.”

“I don’t know where he is,” Gabriel concluded, and looked at her with irritation and a kind of embarrassed pride. “If you want, you can believe that I write the letters myself. That they don’t come from anywhere. But don’t be surprised if one day he shows up.”

Inés didn’t want to back off or show surprise. It was obvious that one rule of getting along with Gabriel Atlan-Ferrara was precisely to affect normality in every situation except moments of great musical creativity. It wouldn’t be she who fed the fire of his domineering creativity, it wouldn’t be she who laughed at him when she went into the one bathroom without warning—the door was half open, she wasn’t violating any taboo—and found him before the mirror preening like a peacock capable of recognizing its own reflection. The laugh came from him, a forced laugh, as he quickly combed his hair, shrugging his shoulders to express disdain, and explaining:

“I’m the son of an Italian mother. I cultivate *la bella figura*. Don’t worry. It’s to impress other men, not women. That’s the secret of Italy.”

She was wearing nothing but a cotton robe she had hastily thrown into a weekend case. He was completely naked, and he walked toward her, excited, and embraced her. Inés held him away.

“I’m sorry, maestro. Do you think I came here, docile as a doe, just to answer your sexual summons?”

“You take the bedroom, please.”

“No, the sofa in the living room is fine.”

Inés dreamed that the house was crawling with spiders and all the doors were closed. She tried to escape from the dream but was stopped by the walls of the house, which were streaming blood. She couldn't find an open door. Invisible hands knocked on the walls, tap-tap-tap, tap-tap-tap ... She remembered that owls eat mice. She managed to get out of the dream but still could not distinguish reality. She saw herself walking toward a cliff and saw her shadow stretching across silvery sand. Except the shadow was looking at her, forcing her to run back to the house and through a rose garden where a macabre little girl crooning to a dead animal smiled, revealing perfect teeth that were dripping blood, and looked up at her, at Inés. The animal was a silver fox, newly created by the hand of God.

When she woke, Gabriel Atlan-Ferrara was sitting at her side, watching her sleep.

"It's easier to think when it's dark," he said in a normal voice, so normal that it seemed to be rehearsed. "Malebranche could write only when the curtains were closed. Democritus tore out his eye in order to be a true philosopher. Only when he was blind could Homer see the wine-dark sea. And only when he was blind could Milton recognize the figure of Adam, molded from clay, calling out to God:" ... it were but right / And equal to reduce me to my dust ..."

He relaxed his savage black eyebrows. "No one asked to be brought into the world, Inés."

After a frugal breakfast of eggs and sausage, they went out for a walk by the sea. He in his turtle-neck pullover and wool trousers, she in a heavy gray wool suit, with the kerchief tied around her head. He told her, jokingly, that this was capital country for hunting. "If you pay attention, you will see flocks of shorebirds with those long beaks for routing out food, and if you look toward land you will see red woodcocks searching for their breakfast of heather, red-footed partridges, sleek pheasants, mallards and teal ... Yet all I have to offer you, like Don Quixote's routine Saturday diet, is 'scrap and scrapings.'"

He asked her to forgive him for what had happened the night before. He wanted her to understand. Every artist sometimes has the problem of not distinguishing between what passes for everyday normality and *creativity*—which is also everyday, and not exceptional. It's a well-known fact that the artist who sits around waiting for "inspiration" dies in the waiting, watching the woodcock wing beat and ending up with a fried egg and half a sausage. For him, for Gabriel Atlan-Ferrara, the universe was alive in every moment and in every object. From a stone to a star.

Inés was gazing with hypnotic, instinctive fascination toward the distant island she could see on the ocean horizon. The moon was late going to bed and was precisely above their heads.

"Have you seen the moon during the day before?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied without a smile. "Often."

"Do you know why the tide is so high today?"

She shook her head, and he elaborated: because the moon was exactly overhead and at the moment of its most powerful magnetic attraction. "The moon makes two orbits around the earth every twenty-four hours and fifty minutes. That's why there are two high tides and two low tides every day."

She looked at him, amused, curious, impertinent, asking him silently, And where is all this going?

"To conduct a work like *The Damnation of Faust* requires me to convoke all the powers of nature. You have to keep in mind the nebula of the beginning, you have to imagine a sun, twin to ours, that one day exploded and scattered into planets, you must imagine the entire universe as one enormous tide without beginning or end, in perpetual expansion, you have to feel pain for the sun, which in some five billion years will be an orphan, with no oxygen, shriveled like a child's deflated balloon ..."

He talked as if he were conducting, convoking acoustic powers with one arm extended and one fist closed.

"You have to imprison the opera inside a nebula that conceals an object invisible from the outside, the music of Berlioz deep in the luminous center of a dark galaxy. It will reveal its light only through

the luminosity of the singing, the orchestra, the hand of the conductor ... revealed thanks to you and me.”

He was silent for a brief moment, and then again he smiled at Inés.

“Every time the tide rises at this point where we are standing on the English coast, Inés, it falls at a place in the world exactly opposite from here. I ask myself, and I ask you, does time appear and reappear the way the tide rises and falls so punctually at two opposite points on the earth? Is history replicated and reflected in the opposing mirror of time, only to disappear and reappear by chance?”

He picked up a pebble and skipped it, swift and cutting, arrow and dagger, across the surface of the water.

“And if at times I’m sad, what does it matter that there’s no joy in me if there is joy in the universe? Listen to the sea, Inés, listen with the ear of the music I conduct and you sing. Do we hear what the fisherman or the barmaid hears? Maybe not, because the fisherman has to know how to get the jump on the early bird, and the waitress how to cut an abusive client off short. No, because you and I are obliged to recognize the silence in the beauty of nature that becomes noise when you compare it with the silence of God. That is true silence.”

He skipped another pebble.

“Music is the midpoint between nature and God. With luck it connects the two. And along with art, we musicians are intermediaries between God and nature. Are you listening? You’re a million miles away. What are you thinking about? Look at me. Don’t gaze off into the distance like that. There’s nothing there.”

“There’s an island hidden in the fog.”

“There’s nothing.”

“I’m seeing it for the first time. It’s as if it had been born during the night.”

“Nothing, I say.”

“There’s France,” Inés said finally. “You told me that yourself yesterday. You live here because from here you can see the coast of France. But I don’t know what ‘France’ is. When I came here, France had already surrendered. What is France?”

“It’s my country,” Gabriel said, with no change in tone. “And one’s country is loyalty or the lack of it. Look, I’m conducting Berlioz because his music is a cultural specific of the territorial specific we call France.”

“And your brother, or comrade?”

“Has disappeared.”

“He isn’t in France?”

“Possibly. Do you realize, Inés, that when you don’t have any information about someone you love, you imagine him in every possible situation?”

“No, I don’t believe that. If you know a person, you know what ... let’s say ... what his repertory of possibilities is. Dog doesn’t eat dog, dolphin doesn’t kill dolphin.”

“He was very calm as a boy. All I have to do is think of that serenity to believe that it’s what destroyed him. His bliss. His serenity.” He laughed. “Maybe my excesses are an inevitable reaction to the danger posed by angels.”

“Aren’t you ever going to tell me his name?”

“Let’s say his name is Scholom, or Solomon—Hills, or Hearth. Give him whatever name you want. The important thing about him wasn’t the name, but his instinct. Do you understand? I have transformed my instinct into art. I want music to speak for me, although I know perfectly well that music speaks only of itself, even when it demands that we enter it and become a part of it. We can’t see it if we stay outside, because then we wouldn’t exist for the music.”

“Him, talk to me about him,” Inés urged impatiently.

“Him. Chaim. Any name that suits you.” Gabriel smiled back at the nervous girl. “He was constantly remaining in his instincts. He’d tediously revise everything he’d just done or said. And that’s why it’s impossible to know his fate. He was uncomfortable in the modern world, which forced him to reflect, stop, exercise the caution of the survivor. I think he longed for a free and natural world that wasn’t burdened with oppressive rules. I told him nothing like that had ever existed. The freedom he wanted was the search for freedom, something that we never achieve but that makes us free as we fight for it.”

“You’re saying there is no destiny without instinct?”

“No. Without instinct you can be beautiful, but you will also be petrified, like a statue.”

“The opposite of you.”

“I don’t know. Where does inspiration come from, energy, the unexpected *vision* you need for singing, composing, conducting? Do you know?”

“No.”

Gabriel opened his eyes with mocking amazement. “And I who always believed that every woman is born with more innate experience than a man can acquire in a lifetime.”

“That’s called instinct?” said Inés, more calmly.

“No!” exclaimed Gabriel. “I assure you that a *chef d’orchestre* needs more than instinct. He needs more personality, more strength, more discipline, precisely because he isn’t a creator.”

“And your brother?” Inés insisted, with no fear now of a forbidden suspicion.

“Elsewhere,” Gabriel answered simply.

This affirmation opened a broad horizon of free associations for Inés. She kept to herself the most secret one, which was about the boy’s physical beauty. She gave voice to the most obvious one: France, the lost war, the German occupation.

“Hero or traitor, Gabriel? If he stayed in France—”

“Oh, a hero, obviously. He was too noble, too committed. He didn’t think about himself, he thought about serving ... even if simply to resist, without acting.”

“Then I can imagine him dead.”

“No, I imagine him a prisoner. I would rather think he’s been captured. Yes. You know, as boys we were fascinated with maps of the world, and globes, and we’d throw dice to see who won Canada, Spain or China. When one of us won some territory or other, we’d yell and shout, you know, Inés, like those terrible cries in *Faust* I was demanding from all of you yesterday, we’d scream like animals like screeching monkeys marking their territory and communicating its boundaries to the other monkeys in the jungle. Here am I. This is my land. This is my space.”

“Then maybe your brother’s space is a cell.”

“Or a cage. Sometimes I imagine him in a cage. I’ll go further. Sometimes I imagine that he chose the cage himself and has confused it with freedom.” Gabriel’s dark eyes looked toward the other side of the Channel.

The retreating sea was gradually giving up the land it had won. It was a cold, gray afternoon. Inés was cross with herself for not having brought a muffler.

“I hope that like a captive animal my brother defends his space—by that I mean the territory and the culture of France. Against Nazi Germany. An alien and diabolical enemy.”

Winter birds flew by. Gabriel looked at them with curiosity. “Who teaches a bird to sing? Its progenitors? Or are its instincts randomly organized? It inherits nothing, and has to learn everything from scratch?”

Again he put his arms around her, this time roughly, a disagreeable roughness she read as fierce machismo, the decision not to take her back alive to the corral ... The worst of it was that he disguised it, masked his sexual appetite as artistic zeal and fraternal feeling.

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