BRIEF SPACE BETWEEN COLOR AND SHADE (fragment)

Cristovão Tezza

I know what's happening: it's the depression brought on by funerals. As a defense, I turn to the illusion of new begin- nings, as if the casket has taken away my own past. I displace my discomfort with a whispered sigh of relief for the eternity with which we are all momentarily intimate. Begin again! In the pres- ence of death, the commonplace gains strength and wisdom. Death itself is essentially commonplace. "Don't be inventive," it seems to be saying.

And I obey, accepting the simple initiation ritual that funer- als offer us. First, there is an internal twinge of feeling for my own sake, and then an external one, for the others there. It's a difficult balance—and no one is at ease, except death itself, and the man from the funeral home. At certain times, the line between laughter and pain is almost invisible; both are provocative. I look around; in their shared sadness, there are some who find their most natu- ral habitat in this moment. The entrepreneurs, the relatives who come from nothing and organize the funeral, from the choice of the casket to the consoling outing for the children (who pretend to not quite understand what is taking place, as I, myself, did upon the brutal death of my grandparents in an automobile crash). Who knows? Some may be concerned with the disputed distribution of the inheritance.

For me, this is not a funeral for a family member, but it has the same impact, for better or worse. It's my own past that is gone—the last residue, let's say—strengthening the illusion of a new beginning. I'm not even interested in finding out what actually killed Aníbal. The telephone message informed me that there was some uncer- tainty as to what had occurred after an unexpected hospitalization, then his death on the same day. I heard an indirect reference to AIDS, a dark statement that caused me consternation but provided an explanation—actually more explanation than consternation. I hadn't spoken to him for some time; I didn't even know the location of his new studio. He'd been evicted from his previous one, and, happily, he had stopped visiting mine. It doesn't matter if cocaine killed Aníbal (from which curse I had been freed more

than a year ago). The cause of death of my old painting instructor—my master, to be fair, at least for now—was that phony elegance that had con- taminated his life. One of the most refined painters in the country (I don't think I'm exaggerating when I say that) wound up founder- ing, month by month, each painting worse than the last, a victim of desperation, from the realization that his works more and more were fit only to be hung over the sofas of the middle class, at measly prices sufficient for Aníbal's spartan standards. I never said a word; I lacked the courage to do so. I simply stayed away. But I'm not going to pose as a hero attending the death of someone else. I didn't stay away because of his decline. In fact, his decline substantially improved *my* painting. I didn't stay away because of his cynicism; he knew what he was doing. I'm not going to take on the moral guard- ianship of the "fine arts." Nothing like that. I stayed away because I was sick of being lashed by his tongue: I would never amount to anything; my painting was soiled and descriptive, the figurative work of an upstart; I was incapable of a single *concept* ; my works, at best, would wind up as murals on the walls of a prison. *Do you know Basquiat?* I should forget everything and start over; I was reinvent- ing the wheel. Who knows? He may have been right.

He left the worst for last: I have no excuse, because I'm rich. With a poor artist, everything is forgiven, especially mediocrity. But for the rich: the kingdom of justice. He had never forgiven me for, on one occasion, kicking him out of my studio. His basis for classi- fying me as one of the evil rich was this: he raised his thumb, stained with green paint, and greedily looked around the room. "Do you know how much a studio like this one of yours would cost me per month?" he asked.

I own my studio. Or my mother does, to be accurate.

Now it was his yellow index finger that he raised. "On top of that, I have to eat, buy paint, buy marijuana, canvases, cocaine, whiskey. I have to help my ex-wife, who extorts my life's blood with the excuse that Patricia, who's in preschool, needs to see an analyst. Because of me, my daughter is antisocial."

I have a fixed income of about eighteen hundred dollars a month (yes, I

receive it in dollars). I pay no rent. I'm part of a healthy generation that doesn't need to put on weight or lose it. So, my anxieties and expenses are considerably reduced. I'm a man who's satisfied with his body and his soul.

He shook his paint-stained head and raised his middle finger, coated in blue. "Go fuck yourself, Tato Simmone! You'll never be a true artist. I'm telling you this for your own good."

So, I stayed away from Aníbal, my great and beloved master, for some time. Everything I know about painting I owe to him, even the fact that I take painting seriously, that I consider it my destiny, and that my fantasy is that I will paint until I die. My first exhi- bition, to which the world paid not the slightest bit of attention, was presented in three paragraphs by no less a person than Aníbal Marsotti. How many artists from here can say that? None. I know that this really doesn't mean anything, unless you take into account all the artists who *tried* to be presented by him, even when he had already become the little nothing that was now being returned to the earth. Fame is indelible. Even for Marsotti, that same blue-on- blue Marsotti who in the lower left corner of his canvases signed his name in short, elegant strokes like Chinese ideograms, and who is the center of attention on this bluest of mornings in Curitiba, a blueness that is unique to this place, cruel and mute, son of coldness and timidity. That much is clear in our point of view, the provin- cial point of view, because Aníbal was a self-sufficient artist in the mental and geographical sense. Metaphorically, he never went anywhere. Aníbal was a mediocre artist. This idea came to mind with force, aggressively, irresistibly, vindictively, and vilely, at the very moment when they began to move the casket, with a plangent hoisting and lowering device, toward eternal rest. Death changes nothing; it simply reveals. Not that it matters. The image of the casket descending, slowly and awkwardly, fills my eyes with tears. My feelings are really just for myself; I'm overcome with weeping. The landscape—the dozen people at the graveside, black against the vivid green lawn in this beautiful cemetery—is covered in fog, diffuse and soft. I hide my tears, though they still shroud my eyes, protecting me from the body that is being lowered at a deliberate pace. My emotion is discreet, though it may reverberate later with a pain that is heavier. No one but me is crying. We hear only the scratchy whine of the

rusty hoist, its handle being turned by the grave-digger, cutting indecently through the silence of the body.

“A great artist.”

Said in a neutral tone that reached me at a point where only I could hear it. I noticed a slight accent. Embarrassed by my tears, I didn’t turn my head. Blurry vision and the interminable metallic screech.

The voice was insistent: “You were a friend of his, weren’t you?” Through watery eyes, I nodded my head, without showing the least curiosity. I hoped the voice would disappear, and that I’d be left to myself.

“It’s funny,” whispered the voice.

The cranking came to a stop. I wiped my eyes, but again resisted turning my head. Someone tossed a flower into the grave, with the artificial clarity and the precise timing of a British film—the classi- cal, luminous elegance of such funerals. A gesture scissored from the scene, now etched in my memory.

“Your painting is so completely different from Marsotti’s. Yet . . .”

That caught my attention, of course, but I still didn’t turn toward the voice. I fixed my eyes, now dry—and already I was far from this gloomy morning, already impatient, wanting to flee once and for all, wanting to make a new beginning—upon the girl who had tossed the flower on my friend Marsotti. All in black—a long skirt that almost reached her feet and simple black shoes. She turned her eyes to me, as though trying to remember who I was. As if she was ready to greet a person she had seen many times but whose name she had inexplicably forgotten. It was a look of such curious intensity that she seemed unaware that staring so fixedly at someone would suggest aggressiveness. But then she appeared to realize what she was doing and turned back toward the casket, embarrassed, the blush of a sensitive person coming to her cheeks. She crossed her hands at her waist, without moving her feet, and bent her head slightly, like an angelic figure from the Renaissance. It was obvious that she was thinking about me and not the grave. At least that was what

I thought. Could I have been wrong? I always thought of myself as being more like others than different from them. She concentrated on my face, specifically on my eyes, rather than on my bow tie, which usually draws more attention. Now it was I who was embarrassed. In order to escape from that moment of confused emotions in the presence of Biba's body, my old friend and master, I said in a cracked voice, wanting the speaker to complete his thought, "And yet . . . ?"

But at the same moment, someone dressed as a clergyman—the cut of his jacket and the tight white collar were unmistakable— decided to say a few words. There was a slight murmuring from among those in attendance. "Who is he?" muttered some of the mourners. Everything had been going so well in the silence. The priest took a small black book from his pocket, opened it, and read two or three phrases that became mixed up in my head—"from dust we come," "who rises early," "oh, render unto Caesar," and "joy of the prodigal son." The man closed the book and began utter- ing banalities. I was moved from tears to laughter, remembering Aníbal's scorn and how he loved speaking ill of geniuses. All that was missing was a Dalí clock melting over the edge of the grave. But we, the true mourners at the funeral, adapted to the monot- ony of the utterances, thinking of other things. It was amusing. The last thing that an iconoclast the likes of Aníbal Marsotti would want to see at his own funeral was a clergyman, comme il faut, with proverbs, religious symbols, and a German accent. It seemed that the padre was reminding us that we must all give up the ghost, and there's no sense in protesting. After a few minutes, this clerical nuisance was absorbed by the universe of unavoidable things, like the creak of the hoist lowering my friend into the bosom of the earth. With normality momentarily restored, I decided to seek out the voice, which, even quieter than before and coming dangerously close, was able to finally complete the phrase:

"And yet, as I was saying, he spoke passionately about you and your painting."

The man lifted his eyes to the sky and wrinkled his forehead, with the concentration typical of a liar attempting to validate his invention using imitation and details. "Just last week, at the new studio, the last moment, he asked me, 'Have you seen Tato?'" The stranger lowered his head, his

voice becoming almost inau- dible. “Then Biba said, ‘That son of a bitch never comes to see me anymore.’”

It was supposed to be a good-humored imitation of Aníbal, but it offended me. It was an opportunistic insinuation of aban- donment at death’s door, and I felt an infantile urge to unmask the intruder.

“Last moment? You mean he died at home?” I asked, raising my voice, almost with joy. Though I knew little, I was certain that he died in the early morning at the hospital. My last comment once again drew a glance from the girl, who arranged her scarf with a strange gesture, as if she were reprimanding me in code for speaking so loudly, as if to say, “The padre is still speaking.” I saw the poorly dressed funeral employee, cap in hand, uncertain as to whether he should leave immediately or wait until the sermon had ended. I turned to the stranger. He was my height, and had a somewhat anachronistic elegance, with an attractive black cape covering his shoulders. If he had been wearing a top hat and carrying a cane, Aníbal would have said that this man would have looked at home in one of Manet’s parks.

After my outburst, the stranger shook his head in irritation, as if to say, “Don’t waste my time with tricks and nonsense. I’m talking about painting, and the essence of art.” His left hand adjusted the cape on his shoulders as his right hand scratched at his short, gray- ing, well-groomed beard.

I stared at him, awaiting a response, and suddenly he reminded me of an old uncle who had died of cirrhosis, and who, during the last years of his life, was unable to complete a full sentence. He would offset his lack of fluency with elegant, sometimes heroic, ges- tures and with sighs weighted with a vague sense of wisdom.

The intruder took his hand from his beard and lifted it into the air, where it hung for a moment, resembling a bouquet. “You know what I’m talking about. But, I’ll be getting along now.”

The girl again looked my way, her eyes pleading with me to accept the man’s departure. I turned my attention to the padre, who was now contemplating the heavens, arms spread, ending the farewell. We were

all at a loss, only dimly aware that the two men from the cemetery were lowering flagstones over the grave. A few people approached an elderly woman, surely Aníbal's mother, whom I knew only through his drawings. I wondered whether I should introduce myself to her. I didn't know anybody else who was there, which is an uncomfortable situation, especially at a funeral. Those who knew each other were gathered together, apparently try- ing to determine who we were—the stranger and I—and glancing obliquely my way. Since we gave them no clues, several of them approached us with a tentative inquisition. They began by praising the deceased, with more of an emotional murmur than a complete sentence. They asked about our relationship to Aníbal, and finally they asked my name. When I had introduced myself, they retreated quickly to rejoin their friends with their trophy. With a pang of nostalgia, I felt as if Aníbal were still there, flashing at me with his perpetual sarcasm, and I smiled inwardly. People die, but they don't go away.

I joined in the empty end-of-funeral ritual, where the world returns to normal, because that's life. But I was trying to puzzle out the identity of the man who had approached me and offered his hand, like a relative in mourning. He was giving me a key, begging my pardon. *You still have time. Think a bit.* There had been some- thing else implied in his tone. *Can I be of help to you?* Something even more than that. *I know, my boy, the breadth of your ambition.* He seemed to anticipate my thoughts. *Marsotti never wanted to be any greater than he was. He quit. And you?*

"And you are?"

He responded finally with a smile that was generous and com- forting. He held out his hands, almost in an emotional embrace, like someone who has at last come upon his most precious posses- sion: a great artist.

"If you've heard of Richard Constantin, that's who I am."

The legendary Richard Constantin. But hadn't he disappeared? He was a combination of art dealer and pirate who some time ago had been part of the city's plastic arts community, playing the same role as an elderly woman whose mission is to find redemption for all. There were barroom rumors about his having spent three or four, maybe even nine, years in a

Paris prison for dealing in Picassos that he himself had painted. He had the Midas touch, capable of transforming a housepainter into the marvel of the moment, with a short but lucrative life. At least one of his pupils landed at the Venice Orange Festival, it was said. My first impulse was to step back, but his cosmopolitan accent was irresistible, and he held out a hand to me, a painter who had never gone anywhere. A no-account painter, if that's important. A painter who—I'm trying to be hon- est about this—had just been to the funeral of his only real friend, even though I hadn't seen him for months, and when we last saw one another we exchanged blows. A painter—a man, to be more accurate—in need of direction. Someone who in his twenty-eight years, and working for a decade, has never had a decent exhibition, and who sold only a single painting, to his own mother, who left her purchase to gather dust in her son's studio. To tell the truth, no one had ever liked my paintings, except Marsotti, and he, only a few. Wasn't it time for a new beginning? Finally, I climbed down from my tower and accepted his hand, uncertain after all the time I had taken.

"I'm Constantin. Maybe you've—" "Oh, yes. Of course. Aníbal spoke of you often," I lied.

I tried to remember. Wasn't it Richard Constantin who had put together two or three groups of Marsotti's paintings for exhibition, and gotten a good price for him? Constantin's firm hand crushed the fingers of the hand I'd held out, but I smiled. Somehow, by a miracle, the whole funeral faded. We took a few steps along the path. When I looked back, like someone wanting to be certain that the final chapter of Aníbal had truly been closed, leaving nothing behind, I saw the girl with the gray scarf coming our way. She was not as young as she had first appeared. My perception of her as a girl brought back to life by a prince was replaced by the image of a pallid, adult, determined woman.

"You're Tato, aren't you?" "Yes." "My condolences. I know that you were close friends." "Yes. You are?" "I was a friend of Marsotti's. He often spoke of Tato Simmone." She spoke my name as if I were an important personage, but

I continued on the defensive. Who knew whether she wanted to accuse

me of abandonment? I could see that Constantin was rest- less, looking around, looking up, looking down at his shoes, clearly revealing his irritation. He obviously wanted the young woman to understand that she should leave, that he had important things to deal with. I tried to introduce him: “This is Richard.”

With a false smile, she responded quickly and shortly. “Yes, I know. How are you?”

He made an old-fashioned bow, replete with irony, but without being impolite. Having greeted her, he walked far enough away to leave us alone.

“I’d like very much to talk to you.”

I stood silent between the two strangers, not knowing what to say.

She tapped my arm and said, “Where can I meet with you?”

Her voice was low now, like a spy at work. “At my place.” I quickly gave her my address and telephone number, scribbled

on a slip of paper I’d found in my pocket. She got on her tiptoes and unexpectedly kissed my cheek. Then she left.

I felt a hand on my shoulder, the almost fatherly intimacy of Constantin. He said, “I know how you feel, my boy.”

I didn’t understand. How I felt about what? The woman? Aníbal? Him? It felt like the beginning of a discourse, one that was intimate, delivered in a low voice, convincing, affectionate, seduc- tive. With his hand still on my shoulder, he led me out of the rural cemetery, which was now almost completely empty. Those who were still there were climbing the path in the direction of Barigui Park.

“The solitude,” he explained. “You had a great friend, one of those friendships that was forever. Now he’s gone. I know you weren’t getting along recently, weren’t even on speaking terms, from what he told me.” Constantin stopped so he could emphasize what he was about to say, looking me directly in the eyes. “Look, Tato. I know he was a really

difficult person."

We heard the woman saying good-bye to someone, and then the slamming door of the last car and the ignition of its engine. I felt helpless, and for some absurd reason, I remembered an Italian friend of mine, a woman. There was a slight resemblance between the two, as if they were part of the same world. I was confused.

"I don't even know her name," I said.

Constantin smiled, patting me on the shoulder, in a way that was superior and condescending. He shook his head. I was in dan- ger, but fortunately, I could rely on him. That was the unspoken message.

"Her name is *opportunity*, Tato." I didn't understand.

"Opportunity, Tato." He wanted to appear concerned, but his approach seemed rehearsed. "You don't mind if I call you that, do you? Tato. That's what Biba called you, right? It's an interesting name, isn't it?"

"That's what you *should* call me. I often forget that my first name is Eduardo." I smiled, trying to play the game. "I'm like her. I don't have a real name yet."

"But you will." Pointing his imaginary cane at a spot in the woods ahead, he said, "She knows that. A month ago, she was hang- ing from Aníbal's throat, sucking every drop of blood and talent out of him. Now that he's dead, she's temporarily without her sup- ply. Did you notice how uncomfortable she felt, how starved she looked? Did you see how pale she is? She's a vampire. She's now going to throw herself on you with every talon. But I don't know why I'm telling you this. Clearly, you've already seen what it is that she wants."

I burst into laughter. It was the funniest thing I could have heard, walking away from a funeral. Funny and interesting. "A vam- pire? Well, now I'll wind up loving her."

He laughed, with his paternal hand again on my shoulder, this time as if to resolve some sort of logistical problem. He asked me if I'd come by taxi, and when I nodded, he immediately pulled me by the arm. "Well

then, let's go down on foot. I left my car down below." As we walked, he returned to the matter at hand. "The truth is, you are already in love with the vampire. The moment that our friend Aníbal went into the ground, her gaze fell on you, like a sharpened harpoon. I'm an observant guy, Tato. It's part of my job. If you survive this brief crisis of imagination you're going through— and believe me, all painters have this problem— I'll bet that in your next painting you are going to fixate on a girl in black casting a rose onto her lover's casket. Of course, you're going to paint her in your style. She'll be a small image lost within a magical constellation of figures. A kind of Bosch work, as imagined by Lichtenstein, but without any asepsis." He lowered his voice and leaned in, as if he were about to say something disagreeable but necessary. "On at least one point, Aníbal was correct. You are still only sort of a painter, sort of *soiled*, let's say. Too many things, too much scaffolding."

I was more astonished than irritated by this blade to my throat. "Am I right?" "I'm not worried about the girl with the rose," I said. "But what

do you mean by a crisis of imagination?" My heart was beating wildly, amazed at his description of

me. But, it also appeared to me that he was playing the role of the fortune-teller who senses a crisis in the client before he says a word. Indeed, I was going through a crisis of imagination. For months, I had been working on a single painting that I'd given the pretentious title *Immobilis sapientia*, or *Unshakeable Wisdom*. I had tried to convince myself that I couldn't possibly experience a crisis of imagination. Any other sort of crisis I would accept without concern, and I have plenty, but I decided to challenge him with his own rhetoric.

"Painters don't have crises of imagination. Their worst night- mare is blindness. All I have to do is look, and a new painting is born."

He smiled slightly, seeming to admire the hasty denial of a frightened disciple. "You're oversimplifying. That's not even true of sketches. What about abstract works?"

I was beginning to enjoy this silly game of words. "Sketches, abstract pieces. Look." I pointed to a gap in the foliage that revealed blue patches

of the sky. “Isn’t that a perfect Japanese abstraction?”

He was silent for a few moments before saying, “Don’t give me that nonsense. All that proves is that you’re an artist who is congeni- tally unable to deal in abstraction. There’s nothing wrong with that, but it’s always a limitation.”

I felt as if Aníbal had come back to life in order to recite the universe of my limitations: *You have no* concept. But there was an important difference. I was not competing with Richard Constantin. By tacit agreement, I granted him the right to give me lessons. I knew that I needed them.

I answered him softly. “Perhaps. But to say this is a defect is beside the point. My resistance to abstract art is of a different nature. It’s a question of the conception of painting.”

“Yes, yes. Of course,” my new friend said, with a pat on my shoulder. “I exaggerated a bit. I understand what you mean. But you must see that in this regard, or I should say *also* in this regard, whether you like it or not, you have both been very much like each other.”

Few things irritated me as much as being compared with Aníbal, even with him dead. But there was something that morn- ing, on that stroll, and with that man—perhaps the residue of the distress at saying good-bye, or perhaps the ambiguous feeling of a life undergoing renewal—that made me accept the comparison. So, as he enumerated the points of view we had in common and those upon which we differed, some in my favor and some not, I, with the coolness of a good professor, only nodded my head, attempting to mask my surprise. Did he really know me? Of course not. But since Constantin had spent several weeks talking about me with Aníbal, I now became a double, receiving an education in Tato Simmone, guided by the expert and elegant voice of Richard Constantin. At one point, in response to a defensive question I asked of him—Can you really judge a painter by a single painting?—he explained to me his criteria for critical evaluation.

“Works of art obey the laws of DNA. One little piece potentially contains all of the rest.” He stopped and grasped my shoulder—a very

Brazilian gesture for someone with his accent—and looked upward with a programmed sequence of gestures that I was beginning to understand was his signal for a revelation discovered just that moment. “I think this is true in all of the arts. In literature, for example, Kafka had a habit of not finishing books. He didn’t need to. Any part contained the whole. And Dostoyevsky? He didn’t have any idea in the morning what he would write in the afternoon. But his DNA is visible in every line.”

Just an instant of reflection, and then we continued along the path to the park below, following the curves of the paving stones, surrounded by trees and by silence. *Empathy*—that was the word that came to me. Conversing with Richard Constantin was calm- ing. There was much I could learn from him. In the idyll of that morning, having bid farewell to Aníbal and embarked upon my precarious new beginning, listening to my new friend’s lectures, a flash of memory brought to my mind Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain*. It was a vivid recollection of my first adult readings under the tutelage of my mother, remembering the intellectual duels of Settembrini during his long, interminable days in the sanatorium. At one point, Constantin tugged me back from the road; a car had appeared out of nowhere, then vanished. He asked me if I owned a car, and I shook my head.

“I have a Japanese automobile, though the Japanese should only produce engravings and daggers. I parked the car down below in the park, forcing myself to take a walk.”

I hate cars, and I was already thinking of something else. Thinking about my mother reminded me again about painting. Where could it be that Richard Constantin had gathered so much information about my work?

“Are your thoughts about my painting based only on Aníbal’s comments?”

“No, of course not. I’ve never met anybody who was so inca- pable of talking about painting as he was. He was intuitive, but in an uncultured way. On the one hand, that can be a big help to a painter—ignorance, and affection for black magic and horoscopes, all of the medieval garbage that survives *per omnia saecula saeculo- rum*. One who only observes will accept anything. The world is an image. On the other hand, such an

approach is limiting, because an intuitive person is not able to think. You knew Aníbal well. You know that he was an immovable block of stone, without a single spark of intelligence. When he was just painting, you could bear with him. At times, he was good, maybe very good here and there." He stopped suddenly, his hand clutching my shoulder in concern. "I'm sorry, this is no way to be speaking, but I don't know how to speak in any other way. I like to be faithful to my friends, and, mainly, to myself."

I was amused by his false sense of guilt, his pose, and his theatri- cal style. He was a funny man. Older people especially seem to like to proclaim their moral qualities. They want to make it known that they are not like all the others.

"I understand," I said. "Aníbal felt the same way." "Yes, but he was that way because he didn't think. It's different." "To the listener the effect is the same." I smiled, remembering the blows he had delivered over the long

years of friendship and dependence. There was something difficult that remained with me—perhaps the excessive solitude and insular- ity had left me somehow unable to connect with others. It's also possible that the drugs had affected a considerable part of my brain. I was feeling a minor surge of anxiety. It always comes to me in droplets, when I think of everything that Aníbal and I had never managed to discuss. It's too late now, and I could already foresee the time when Richard Constantin would no longer say anything to me. I envisioned it happening when we reached his car, him leaving me there to look at the ducks on the lagoon. At home, there would probably be a message from my father on the answering machine. A call from Dora, anxious to know whether I needed anything. No, I didn't need anything. If only she were thinner. No, if only she were more feminine, maybe that's it. Who knows, perhaps less authori- tarian, is that the word? My pictures remained unfinished, but I preferred reading the ads for escorts in the paper to working in the studio. At least on this day.

"I bought one of your paintings."

“But I’ve never sold a painting. I mean, I sold one to my mother, but it’s still there at home.”

“I bought it from Aníbal.”

I felt the cold betrayal of my dead friend who, from beneath the ground, continued to attack me. Perhaps Constantin was lying. Maybe he had me confused with someone else, which would be strange.

“Which one? Do you mean a drawing?”

“No. A painting. *Children*. A huge oil almost three feet by six feet in size.”

I stopped and grasped his arm. This ridiculous detail weighed more heavily on my life than Aníbal’s death. The embarrassment of public exposure, an affliction no adult painter can experience, left me feeling dizzy. Moreover, I was overcome by the shame of betrayal. I would never have parted with *Chaos 86* or *Blue VII*, which I bought from Biba for a lot of money. Constantin noticed my silence, and he wrinkled his brow looking at the sky, the signal of his reflections.

Finally, he tapped his index finger on my chest and said, “I think I know what you’re thinking. Do you want some advice? No, I don’t mean advice. A painter such as you doesn’t need advice, but a gratuitous observation for your own use. It’s very simple, Tato.” He lowered his voice and leaned in toward me, another sign of a great revelation. “Everybody knows this, but it’s worth repeating. An art- ist has no scruples. Character, he should always have. Character is what is evident in what he does, whether it’s music, theater, paint- ing, literature, dance, or even science, which, after all, is the most sophisticated of the arts, because more than any of the others, it has a clear appearance of truth.” He smiled slightly. “Character, yes; scruples, no. Scruples, never. Sell your mother if you have to. Betray a friend when it’s necessary. If you have to, commit murder. Don’t let anyone even touch your paintings. They may step on you, which is unimportant, but not on your works of art. Those are your life. Most people have friends, friends who eat, run, pay their bills, have neighbors, drink. But artists have no friends. They are brutally nar- cissistic, and they stomp on everything around them.

They don't look back." Here, he lifted his beard toward the overhanging trees as if to complain to the heavens. A small cloud had covered the sun for a few seconds. "A great artist provides a precarious balance between the civility that is shown in his works and the savagery that he wreaks upon others."

Constantin now hid within his silence. He possessed all of the gifts of an accomplished actor. His timing was exact. His words, like small, delicate birds, fell to the ground, one by one, brim- ming with significance. I looked down at my feet for a few seconds, but we were forced to separate, one of us to each side of the path, because along the curve, a new funeral procession approached, slow, lengthy, and unremitting. As we awaited the passage of the long line of automobiles climbing the hill, I was thinking about the rela- tionship, or the lack of a relationship, between art and morality, while he was probably thinking about his romantic discourse. In his manner, I glimpsed echoes of Nazism—in his accent and in his conviction—probably arising out of his genetic roots, and his sense of invincible superiority over others. Despite that, he showed an attractive sophistry, which to me, at that moment, made him irre- sistible. No scruples at all. One needed to be wary.

Distracted by the procession as it left us in its wake, I was thinking back on things. A dead friend. A vampire interested in me, presumably to suck out the last drop of my blood. And now, Mr. Satan, devilishly seductive, ready to buy my soul for the right price. It was just a matter of bargaining intelligently. I missed my mother. What would she say about this man? Trustworthy? Untrustworthy?

"Look, Tato. What do I care if Goya, let's say, fawned over the nobility, or if Giotto was a loan shark, or if Monet stepped on the heads of his friends, or if Picasso butchered five hundred women in his life, or that Céline was a staunch Nazi? History couldn't care less about morality, because the merely moral individual doesn't count. What counts in the end is the work. All the rest is simply biographi- cal curiosity. I'm not interested at all in whether so-and-so ate his mother, or if whojamacallit killed his brother. Such things are irrele- vant crumbs, made even more irrelevant by the passing of time." He paused, looked at me severely, obviously with an extremely impor- tant question on his mind. "Was

Homer a homosexual?"

I hesitated for a moment, thinking it was a strange question. He seemed to have drawn a parallel between *homosexual* and *crimi- nal*. These are very different categories—except possibly within his value system. But he was laughing. The devil is an old, conservative man. He enjoys being convincing, and seeing confirmation that he has been persuasive.

But now, appearing to be more serious, he said, "Isn't the ques- tion of whether Homer was a homosexual absolutely and totally irrelevant?"

I agreed. *Now* he was right.

We continued to make our way down the curved, cobblestone path. I could almost hear the master's mental gears grinding as he prepared to resume his lecture. I, however, thought back to my dead friend's betrayal. If he needed money, why didn't he talk to me? True, I had broken away from him completely. I'd had no choice but to do so. It's not easy for a painter to hear someone say, *Your painting is garbage*, especially when the motivation for such a statement is born out of nothing more than contempt. The cold statement of an older man. The more lightly uttered such a statement is, and the less true it is, the more it becomes a ruse, concealing the wounds of the person making the accusations. What was I to do?

Now, pointing his finger at me: "Look, Tato. Art has always been a high-risk bet, with no way to take back the wager. Morality is irrelevant if, and only if, the painting is great and the artist has talent. Modest talent won't do it. Not even three-quarters talent will. No. The gift has to be total, a blank check from God. It's a ter- rible bet, because, after all, who guarantees us anything? God grants us life. Everything else be damned!" He paused, looked up at the sky, and snapped his fingers as if he'd made an obvious discovery. "This is more practical and useful for someone who believes in it. Who tells us, for example, that Mondrian was a genius, and not a monotonous painter of tiles? On his own, who can keep genius alive? No, at the most, cut off an ear. Two hundred years from now, we'll understand the true importance of Mondrian, just as today we can appreciate the stature of Michelangelo, which may not have been easily seen in his day, with all those monsters being reborn. But, in the

end, a tile is just a tile. It's not the re-creation of the world, if you see what I mean. Do you want to paint the world or a wall?"

I didn't bother to answer, so enchanted was I with the extrava- gant pronouncements of my new friend. The voluptuousness of his arguments and his rhetoric—how beautiful when it's done in style. But he was waiting for my answer, suspended in his silence. Once again, he touched me on the shoulder.

I gestured that he should take a step, and I said, "I think I've always wanted to paint the world."

"Great! It's great, and it's beautiful. Your desire is essential to the creation of art, and so is your anxiety."

I wanted to add that perhaps that was the reason Aníbal and I had fought for so long. Of late, he'd only wanted to paint walls. Constantin went on. "No one has asked you to paint, just as no one has asked you to write. What the world wants are lawyers, doctors, doormen, housekeepers, and plumbers. An electrician is much more useful than Shakespeare. But here's rule number one in these decades of liberalism: don't complain to the government if something goes wrong. You're better off dealing with the devil, who has nothing to do with eternity but who understands vanity, which is the most visible face of art. If you think about it, it's the face that's the most interesting, if it's seen from a distance." He stopped to adjust my bow tie, like an elderly uncle proud of his adolescent nephew's first new outfit.

An icy breeze climbed the street, a typical Curitiba betrayal— the sun was hidden for a few moments, and the humidity of the nearby woods spread. It had been a lovely stroll. I was still some- what moved, which always makes life a little better.

Richard Constantin raised his imaginary walking stick. "Where was I?"

"Vanity is the most visible face of art."

"Yes, exactly. Tato, look, the desire to be an artist is an endless voyage. Putting morality aside as a principle, what remains is the work of art. If there is no work of art, or if the work of art is medio- cre, what's left is

simply the lack of morality. Without that magic mountain of the counterculture, *Journey to the End of the Night*, Céline would have eaten rats in the hell of some forgotten cell until he died, adding to the already sticky broth of the French collabora- tors. Picasso, with only a minor variation in the luck of the draw, would have wound up one of the most ridiculous, hilarious mod- ernists, just another figure in the huge list of cubists, alongside Juan Gris and Torres Campalans. Van Gogh, that classical wrongdoer, would be a figure only in the medical literature of the end of the nineteenth century, included and typified as a crystalline example of dementia. Were it not for their talent, the great painters would merely be a succession of toadies, hoodlums, rapists, raving luna- tics, bums, egotists, and cowards, licking the boots of the first king, prince, or pope that came near them. Not very different from every- body else, it's true—but artists, at some point in their lives, join the parade into eternity, at times forcing their way. The price is high for those who are bound for greatness. For those who aren't, all is small, and nothing makes a difference."

At this point, he paused and assumed a solemn pose for the conclusion of his discourse—but his voice, in contrast with his ges- ture, fell to a whisper, like someone willingly offering a pardon on a silver tray: "In the face of all that, you're offended because Aníbal sold one of your paintings?"

I didn't respond immediately. I continued walking—we had almost reached Barigui Park, with its grand old trees and lawns. I was thinking about, actually fascinated by, Richard Constantin. He was extraordinary, and the fact that Aníbal had never men- tioned him to me was yet another proof of my master's congenital meanness.

"It's not really about his having sold it," I lied. "I would like to know how much he sold it for."

Constantin kicked a stone, and, like a child, watched it jump from the grass to the asphalt. "Two hundred and fifty or three hun- dred dollars. Something like that. Half of his rent, he told me."

Son of a bitch. I would have paid ten times that to recover my painting.

“That’s not what bothers me,” I said, but my strained voice gave me away. “It’s just that my dedication was written in oil, on the face of the painting, and it was the size of a hand in the left corner. It was an absolutely personal present. The entire conception of it was the outcome of a long conversation between us.”

“If that’s what concerns you, he had at least one scruple. He removed the dedication.”

“How?”

“He covered it with paint, capriciously, a perfect exercise in falsification. If you were to look at it closely, you wouldn’t know that the picture had been modified. He captured the exact shade, that dark green mixed with magenta. It was as if the tip of your brush, hair by hair, followed the strokes of his brush. The work of a master.”

“He was very good in the technical sense.” From the way that I spoke, it sounded as if *the technical sense* was of greater importance than any other quality.

Constantin didn’t reply, but I didn’t think that was because of what I had said. We could now see the lake in the park, and he contemplated it, breathing deeply. I was apprehensive. Our conver- sation appeared to be coming to an end, and there I would be, a bit older and dried out, alone. I was anticipating his farewell, and held out my hand, but he waved it aside.

“Where are you going?” “I’m going to walk for a while, over to the terminal.” “I’ll drive you home. Where do you live?” “Mateus Leme Street, near the mall.” He didn’t answer me, but he took me by the arm toward the

parking lot, another good walk. The brightness of the day and the fresh air had left us more relaxed. Death already seemed remote, buried up the hill.

“Why did you purchase my painting?”

“You’re good, good in a way that Marsotti didn’t even perceive. He was already in the process of discovering things about himself, and he wasn’t able to think about anything else.”

I was feeling even better, but I didn’t want to let Constantin know that. I demurred, one of my defense mechanisms. “Thank you. I’m immature, I know that. But what were you saying about the painting?”

He stopped and wrinkled his forehead, perhaps wondering whether it was worth his while to, let’s say, destroy me during our first encounter. Wondering whether I was strong enough to take it, maybe? He lowered his voice, which worried me, because I had learned that he used the loudness of his voice as an indicator—the lower the volume, the more import to what he said.

“Look, Tato. The conception of your painting is grand, but its execution is a failure. You have your own world, but you don’t have the language. The brushstroke, when it’s right, is brilliant. The smashed automobile in the center of the painting is brilliant, an image created by a master. I know how difficult it is to place a car in a picture. A car is an ungainly object, horrible. Great artists tend to ignore it as an object. Do you know of any automobile that appears in a Picasso? The Americans are good at that, it’s true, but, at second glance, your painting looks like an old Ford advertise- ment. American artists always seem to be saying, *Look, Mom! Look at how well I paint*. Lichtenstein is an exception, of course, but he doesn’t fully commit, he only comments. Artists like Oldenburg and Warhol—all of their jokey pop paintings—they only represent the socialistic realism of the United States, annoyances filled with poorly disguised messages of edification. If I were asked to com- ment on American artists, I’d say that they are more efficient, more direct, more objective, and more clear. But painting has other aims. Or none. There are one or two cars in Hopper’s paintings, yes. He always got it right, but, if you look closely at the end of the street, there’s an advertisement there. The artist who best painted cars here and there was Dérain. Do you know him? There are lovely automo- biles skidding through his paranoiac red, like the splashes of van Gogh. He painted cars as if they were trees, and the trick worked. So, your smashed car is great. In a way, it adds a dimension to the painting, and it’s the spatial axis. It’s not

possible to not look at it. Everything converges on it, as with the tricks of the old masters.

But you are a lazy painter, Tato. You painted in the car, but were lazy with all the rest. You do very well at drawing, but that may ruin your painting, because you take comfort in your facility with lines. A flying boy is a pastiche. After Chagall, no one else succeeded in flying so naturally." Again, he raised his eyes to the sky, the gesture of another insight. "Tiepelo! Tiepolo knew how to fly, too. But in those days, it was easier. They believed in angels.

"Back to your painting. Each child in it has a trademark, from Botero, seen in that chubby girl, to Picasso, in the way you ren- dered the two-headed boy. But what could be an elegant allusion was transformed into lazy collage, a pretentious joke. The painting lost its way. You didn't have the technique for sustaining the proj- ect. Basically, you wanted to provide a footprint more than the leg. That's good, looking for greatness, but it has its demands. The false step, which is awful in life, is unpardonable in art. The adult, that figure to the left, remember? It's horrible. It destroys the painting. It's not a matter of perspective, which, as I said, is well resolved. It's a question of the balance of the volumes. The observer has the urge to go over to the wall and straighten the painting, even though it's already perfectly vertical. Now, there are rascals who think that the century's best works of art are just provocations. If that was your idea, Tato, a purely optical illusion, I would accept it, although the rest of the piece would have to be redone completely, because, over the centuries of art, nothing better than the concept of unity has been invented. But clearly, that was not the idea. Your concep- tion of the world is conservative in a balanced way. In art, even if you assume the blank face of Francis Bacon trying to converse with History, this eventually leads to unexpected masterpieces."

We finally arrived at Constantin's beautiful Japanese car, immac- ulately blue, its bold, aerodynamic curves gleaming in the sun—a shooting star. He took a one-*real* note from his wallet and handed it to the ragamuffin who watched over the parked cars. He opened the door, somewhat distracted, and the alarm went off, strident as a goose. He finally found the right button on the remote and turned it off. We settled into the air-

conditioned car in silence. Constantin appeared to be absorbed in what was likely to be the conclusion of his, for me, fascinating critique, which I was drinking in, word for word, ready to object to every defect he might find in the next painting of mine that he saw. I'm not being sarcastic—I was mes- merized by him. But the only things on his mind as he drove me to my place were the horrible traffic jams. Which were part of how the city had been destroyed—by obscene numbers of building permits, for buildings everywhere, and by stupid, bearded—imbecile!— drivers, who were let loose, absolutely demented, in every quarter of the city. It was criminal.

So, Richard Constantin, completely crazed by the traffic— moments before, he had swerved abruptly away from a truck, and then almost rear-ended a police car, its siren blaring—let me off at my house, double-parked. After anxiously handing me his calling card—a card that, from the way in which it had been scrunched, seemed to object to being withdrawn from the inside pocket of his jacket—he said, "Don't forget about Saturday night. I'm expecting you!" He almost pushed me out of the car, pulling into the street, ignoring the car horns shrieking at him.

From the sidewalk, I waved a good-bye to him, which, of course, he couldn't see, disappearing as he was in an almost suicidal fashion. I sighed. He was a fascinating person, this *Mr. Richard Constantin, PhD, Commercial Representative, Curitiba—São Paulo—London— Rome—Paris*. There was also an international fax number on the card, along with some domestic addresses. It was difficult to cross the street, which had been less congested when I was a child. I was thinking about that treatise on aesthetics that Constantin had sub- jected me to on this day of my friend's burial. Aníbal's body had hardly gone cold when I ran into another master, someone who tells you what you are. For someone as obtuse as I am, such commen- tary amounts to direction, and serves as a reference. I was happy about having met Constantin. But, when he had accused me of weakness of character, I argued to myself that I didn't have to agree with him—with someone who, in telling me what I am, became my master. But the fact that I disagreed with him on its own revealed something about myself. The only minor despair in my life had related to my solitude, and, since my work is unconventional, I'm concerned that I might lose my ability to take the measure of things from

my own perspective. There's nothing more pathetic than a crazy artist, though artists are almost always at least a little bit crazy.

I finally managed to make my way across the street, thinking about how I was going to arrange my paintings for a private exhibition for Constantin. The day had begun well—or it was rebeginning well, since, with the death of Aníbal, I had decided that I would start all over, again, which would require working on a new painting. Perhaps, as my new friend had predicted, a picture that centered upon that pallid figure who had thrown a rose onto the casket and had kissed me. The rest would organize itself with no problem, like a medieval representation of the world. I would fill the painting with angels, the ones at the top playing trumpets. Below the angels would be Constantin's beautiful Japanese car, lit like a photograph taken with a blue filter and mounted on coated paper. I began to laugh at the idea as I climbed the stairs to my apartment. I was thinking that perhaps I should go to the studio first, to review my work, as one should do as part of a new begin- ning. I stopped on the outside stairs, now missing the handsome iron banister that had been stolen piecemeal over the years, leaving rusty stumps in its stead. Should I go down to the studio now? No, I was feeling too lazy to open up my garage after a week away from it. Every time I entered it, the almost fifteen-foot ceiling swallowed me. *You're a millionaire,* Aníbal had said. *A 2600-square-foot studio, a 184-square-foot penthouse apartment with no landlord or neigh- bors to worry about*. And then there was the shop on the ground floor that sells belts, pulleys, ratchets, and bearings, which closes religiously at six o'clock and opens quietly at eight the next day. Though the rent is always late, it generates a profit, which goes right into my mother's account.

What a weirdly peaceful feeling, arriving home on an entirely blue day—the blue that Biba had lost more than a year ago—and with my head filled with new images. I am nourished by images, and the last one is of that Englishman from another era, who crossed paths with me at the funeral with such certainty, elegance, and propriety in order to indicate the path that opened to my artis- tic salvation. Because, after all, without my paintings, what am I? I don't even pay taxes. I am an irrelevant person, a man without qualities, and also without even the minimum marks of a European, say, who has no limits, who creates both the Sistine

Chapel and Treblinka, the EU's internal market and the Bosnian War. Only my pictures tell me who I am—the pictures and, now, Constantin. Searching for my key, I find it all amusing until I see that my apart- ment door is already open.

Worriedly, I enter and walk down the hallway. Dora is in the living room, rising from a crouch. She has picked something up.

"Tato! What happened?"

Like an idiot, I look around the room. There are small indi- cations that everything's different. Someone had been rummaging through everything, except the paintings, which are all perfectly aligned. Dora takes my hands in hers—her hands are always warm.

"I got here a little while ago. I heard about Aníbal's death, and I wanted to talk to you. The door was open. Then I saw that you weren't here, but someone had tossed the place."

I started to check things out. On the answering machine, two messages. I walked around the room, Dora at my heels.

"I tried to rearrange things as best I could."

The television, the video player, the fax machine—all still there. The clothes closet open, bureau drawers in a jumble. Apparently, nothing was missing. In my office, the computer and monitor were undisturbed. In the bookcase, some books had been pushed to the wall.

Behind me, Dora said, "They didn't do anything in the kitchen."

I checked the door: no sign of any damage. I closed my eyes, thinking back. I was absolutely certain that I had locked the door on my way out. Then it clicked. "My paintings!"

I shot down the stairs, almost knocking Dora over, heading for my studio. Locked. I opened the door and was met by the odor of paint, cold air, and the intactness of the paintings, the shelves, the paints, my belongings, sculptures, and books. I took a deep breath. As Constantin had said, this was my narrow door to eternity, at times, my only source

of peace, which is invaluable. I was provision- ally saved, but I had a feeling of fragility. I was startled by Dora's anguished cry from behind me.

"Did they get at anything?" "No. I don't think so." "What a beautiful painting, Tato." There in the gloom was the second part of *Immobilis sapientia*,

always incomplete. Without turning on the lights, I went to the back window and checked the shrubbery in the small backyard, now in the shadow of a building under construction, a concrete skeleton. I heard Dora's breathing behind me.

"No one got into the studio. But I'm going to get a better padlock."

Climbing back up the stairs, I was trying to understand an invasion in which nothing was taken, apparently nothing. I felt a flash of remorse for not having even looked at my friend Dora, who was following me everywhere, concerned and attentive.

"When are you going to put a handrail here?" she asked.

She is almost a member of my family, which is sometimes comforting, because it's good to have someone really close, and sometimes a bother. No matter how good it is, a family is always a burden. Back in the living room, I finally hugged her.

"Thank you, Dora." "For what? I didn't do anything." "You were here when I arrived. If I were alone, it would have

been worse." "Should you call the police?" "No, no, no! I'll think about that later." I was remembering my

new master, and fantasizing that he and Dora would get along well. I began laughing just at the thought of him. "I'm going to ask my new friend, Richard Constantin, what I should do. Do you know him?"

"Who? Who is he?"

I stood up, and my gaze fell on one of Marsotti's paintings hanging on

the opposite wall.

“An art dealer I met at Biba’s funeral. He has a Japanese car that he drives terribly, and he knows everything about painting. A master. Better still, he knows my paintings. At least one of them.”

“Oh yes, the funeral. I knew him only a bit.” She sat down by my side. “What a sad thing, isn’t it? So young.”

“He was no longer young, and he wasn’t my friend. He sold my best picture, on which I had made a personal dedication. What’s more, he painted over the dedication. He was a son of a bitch.”

One of Dora’s qualities was that she never took part in discus- sions that I have with myself. She simply observed me, as if she were watching an interesting film. It moved me. I was stupid, gross, and spoiled—an awkward man. I wasn’t even a man, exactly. Just a small project. A work in progress. An artist who, bit by bit, was beginning to resemble a member of the human species. Not even thirty years old. Dora said nothing, and that’s the way we stayed, separated from each other, with me trying to understand where my life was going, and her trying to fill the gap between us, which was growing uncomfortable.

“I came here to invite you out to lunch. At the vegetarian place you like.”

“But you hate it.” “I have to slim down.” I really like Dora’s lips. They look as if they’ve been drawn

meticulously in India ink. They are expansive, fluid, and generous, filled in with a red shade, which at times she reinforces in a provoca- tive fashion. She runs risks, giving them a brilliance that borders on vulgarity. It is just a suggestion of a grand yet simple happiness, behind a drawn curtain. Her teeth are perfect. All in all, she is a sweet person.

She went to the window, saying, “The sun is hitting your paint- ings.” She closed the curtains, leaving us in a luminous half-light of dampened clarity.

Thinking about the invasion, I imagined my father the culprit, which caused a stab of anxiety. I noticed the blinking red light on the answering

machine, reminding me that there were two messages. I was certain there had been a call from my father. As though reading my mind, Dora said, "There's a message for you." As if she, for some absurd reason, feared my distrust, she added, "The light was blink- ing when I arrived." Meaning, *I didn't hear anything*. She walked to the opposite wall, stopping beneath Aníbal's still life. Looking at that conventional bottle standing on some kind of slippery embroi- dery atop the tilted table, I realized that his technical expertise was also one of his limitations. A well-resolved brushstroke was enough to satisfy him fully—nothing more.

"Do you have any idea who would break into my house, Dora?" I said, more to myself than to her.

"I have no idea," she said, smiling before turning serious. "You're pale."

I wanted to listen to the messages on the answering machine, but I wanted to be alone when I did so. I knew that the first mes- sage was from my father. When I'd closed the door this morning, I'd heard part of his message. I fantasized that the second message was from my vampire.

"Pale?"

I looked at my hands, which were trembling. Dora held them like a good nurse.

"Your hands are cold. Low blood pressure. You need salt." Without releasing my hands, she asked, "How about going out to lunch?"

"Let's walk over to the promenade. Today's the day for walks."

She squeezed my hands again, saying, "Aren't you tired? I've got the VW. Diana went to São Paulo, and she risked leaving the car with me."

"I've been close enough to death already today." I laughed.

What I really wanted was to be alone. I contemplated the wall, covered with my pen-and-ink drawings. My strength lies more in drawing than in painting. For me, the world is an infinite tangle of lines, and it is those lines that define objects, beings, and ideas more than anything else. More

than color. More than volume. Drawing is mathematical. The line is the most complete realization of abstrac- tion—though not pure abstraction. Pure abstraction doesn't exist. For it to exist, we would have to imagine a being without memory, without past or future, and without walls, a transparent puff, drop- ping nothing on nothing. It is a great deal of absence occupying the same lack of space. But at this point, I had a feeling of despera- tion, and the escapist desire to draw. For me, painting is the most complete drawing in the world. I leave the thought process and explanations to the likes of Richard Constantin.

Intuition is my material—I like to hear and obey, and I like masters, and people who point the way, and who tell me what I am and what I should do, very probably because I don't *need* to obey anyone. I am not even insecure, but I need the company of oth- ers, and people are most happy when they feel useful, important, intelligent, effective, and influential, like Constantin on our long walk. There is a fault in my character that denies me the pleasure of solitude. I only grant it to myself when actually painting, and from that arises my love for interminable paintings, which drag on for months on end, which are never ready, and which, even when they are ready, like my only present to Aníbal, continue to be trans- formed. This codependency of mine, which is mistaken sometimes for bonhomie, becomes more enriched with the passage of time, and meanwhile, perhaps I'm a person who—

"I don't have one painting of yours."

Dora's voice interrupted my daydreaming. Before our eyes were seventeen drawings, haphazardly framed and distributed. I took down *Lips of May*, a study of a woman's face. The lips are Dora's, the face, that of a female college classmate whom I'd admired platonically.

"Do you want this one?" "Are you weeping?" I smiled, drying my eyes with trembling hands. "No. It's just

something in my eye." I was very close to collapse. Dora embraced me in a way that

began as simple affection but then became a thank-you. I didn't respond, engrossed as I was by Aníbal's still life.

“Thank you for the drawing. It’s lovely,” she said, rubbing my hand. “You need some salt.”

She left the picture on the table and ran into the kitchen. I noticed that even the table had been moved. Who could have searched my apartment? Should I really call the police?

“Open your mouth.”

She opened her mouth, demonstrating what she wanted me to do. I obeyed. She placed a spoonful of salt on my tongue, and, with my eyes closed, I accepted it with the devotion of someone receiving Holy Communion. There was a sound from outside, and I thought of my housekeeper.

“She has a key.” “Who does?” “The housekeeper.” Dora tuned in to my new channel. “Could be. Is she young?”

“She’s old, fat, and ugly. She’s been around since I was born. Ridiculous. Don’t even think about it.”

Returning the spoon to the kitchen, Dora shouted, “Could it have been someone close to her? Her son? A neighbor?”

“To take what? There’s nothing missing. Let’s go. I feel like tak- ing a walk, getting away from this place.”

“Let’s go to lunch. I need to talk to you.”

Her face was reddening for some reason. To avoid the subject, Dora fussed with my bow tie, and smiled.

“You’re a funny person, Tato.”

“Wouldn’t it be better if I took off the bow tie? It’s more appro- priate for a wedding than a vegetarian lunch.”

“A wedding or a funeral?” She took my hands away from the tie. “No, don’t take it off. I think your tie is pretty. It’s your trade- mark. I’m going to buy you a blue one.” She felt my hands. “You’re not trembling anymore, and your hands have warmed up. The salt worked, didn’t it?

But you've got to cut your fingernails. They're always stained with paint."

"Stained with blood," I joked, remembering the vampire.

From Brief space between color and shade.
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Translated by Alan R. Clarke