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She was a collector. From the day they'd met as children, he'd loved that about her. She showed him the shiny-backed beetles collected from the attic windowsill; the matchboxes recovered from her father's wastebasket; the cloudy chips of green glass from the shore at Sines; the seed-pods like miniature propellers.

When she was 15 and he 17, she showed him the thin strips of colored paper on which she'd written words that had caught in her ear. Words like *jonquil*. *Estuary*. *Infinitesimal*. *Howl*. Rolled tight and deposited for safe-keeping in cotton-lined matchboxes, each word nestled beside its own crisp beetle. For Tiá, solitary words, alone and unadorned by others, were perfect truth, pure and naked and unassailable. Assembled into sentences, she said they were at the mercy of their architect, too often constructed into ugliness and lies. Her father's legal briefs she'd pointed to as proof.

Beetles in matchboxes and words on pastel streamers had long since disappeared. But here, at the bottom of her rosewood jewelry box among random testaments to his wife's incorrigible magpie ways, were different words: letters wrapped in tissue and bound with string whiter than his hair.

He'd brought her jewelry box to the bed and propped himself up with his pillows, leaving Tiá's in place beside him, plump and smooth. Still unused to the idea that he'd be sleeping alone for the rest of his life, the pillows cushioned the distance between getting used to it and knowing it to be true. A distance as far from life as death.

In the filtered sunlight, Tiá's jewelry winked at him. Each had its own memory to share. The amethyst brooch her grandmother had sworn once belonged to the Duchess of Loulé: how she'd tilted her head just so to check her appearance in the mirror the last time she'd worn it. The pearl earrings he'd given her after Stefan was born: how brave she'd been—it had been a hard labor; he'd thought he was going to lose her. The tortoiseshell bracelet: how, despite rationalizing that the poor creature was already dead, she'd recited an apologetic prayer each time she wore it.

Nuno wondered if she'd kept the god-awful plastic charm bracelet the boys had given her the Christmas when Frank was two, and lifted the inset tray to find out.

He never imagined the letters still existed. Written over 65 years ago, when he was barely 20. His sons at that age had still seemed like children, and Nuno supposed he, too, had been just as innocent, none of them old enough to be capable of . . . what? War.

How little the world had changed.

Tuesday evening—18 (?) August 1936

Dear Tiá,

I have never known colder nights. Do you remember when we were seven, when you showed me how your teeth chattered when your parents took you to the mountains to see snow? Do you remember how I laughed at you? I am not laughing now and hope you can forgive me—all these years later—for not believing you.

The men complain that it is colder than the Devil, but I say the Devil would never venture this close to heaven. On the mountain, water, land, and sky remain—for the most part—undisturbed. I have never seen such beauty. From camp, the whole world spreads below me. Horse chestnut, oak, and pine cover the hills, and all conspire to remind me of home. So similar, yet . . . How is it that borders make one feel so far away?

A man named Esteban has befriended me. He's a strange, little man with the face of a ferret and the temperament of a dove. We talk at length (he talks, I listen) about his father's farm and how "bugs are not bad, just misunderstood." Even though I told him I had no use for it, he has entrusted me with his family's "secret recipe" for repelling insects without killing them, which he says is a sin against nature. When I asked him what he will do when called upon to kill a man, he said—I swear to you—men were sinners and deserved to be sent back to their Maker.

No doubt influenced by Esteban, or because I'm surrounded by mountains that turn the color of your favorite plums at sunset—how it pains me to write this! I know how much pleasure it will give you—I admit: you are right. You told me once that what is born under the sky is free of sin. That sin is man's creation, not God's. (Heaven help me, I swear I can see your smile.) Do you think men will ever live in peace? If you tell me yes, I will believe you.

~~This war~~ I have made a promise to myself: someday I will have land of my own and a house with a veranda where I can sit and count the eagles flying by.

I hope you are well. Your father's consent to Carlos's proposal of marriage is news all through camp. All marvel at his good fortune, including me. Especially me.

Now that you are engaged, I hope I may still write to you?

Your friend,

Nuno

P.S. When you see Adella, give her a hug from her big brother, and tell her it may be awhile before I can write again.

15 August 1936

My Darling,

I have discovered that only three others in our company have been to university. One, a fine fellow, tells me his uncle serves in Salazar's cabinet and has promised me an introduction. His is one back you can be certain I shall cover at all costs. Another, an engineer from Lisbon, is a wizard with explosives. The third, also from Lisbon, purports to be a student of economics, but his unsophisticated speech and sloppy thinking betray an unexceptional mind. His crude humor has garnered him the admiration of the rest of the men—it is true that water seeks its own level. He does, however, handle a rifle well.

What I wouldn't give for a hot bath and a clean shirt! Conditions are miserable. The food is barely edible, ammunition and communication are old and in short supply, and we are still waiting for the tanks Germany promised months ago. None of this troubles the rank and file—they bumble on and expect miracles.

Here I have observed for myself what your father refers to as "the ladder of fools." I am convinced now more than ever, Salazar's firm grip is the only way to maintain order at home. You have no idea how disheartening it is that these peasants hold men like me in contempt. Indolence is endemic. I try to stimulate the minds of the better men in our unit, but it is a strong tide against me. One would think they would be eager to learn history's lessons, but they fail to grasp the relevance and mock me behind my back. Imbeciles. If they are determined to ignore the lessons

of the past, then I will teach them one that is more timely: willfully ignorant soldiers are expendable.

We will win this war for Franco in spite of them.

Do not worry about me. I will be home to claim you as my bride before Christmas. I pray my letters reach you from this God-forsaken place.

Yours, as you are mine,

Carlos

It must be Sunday—I heard bells from across the valley

Dear Tiá,

How can I ever thank you for the photograph of my little Adellita? (It is also a very good likeness of you—the beret suits you.) How in the world did you manage to get my sister in front of a camera? I have known you forever, and still you never cease to amaze me.

We are several kilometers from the fighting, and there is grumbling in camp. The men are eager to be a part of it. I, for one, am happy to be right where we are. At night I wake to thunder only to realize it is drumfire from the valley that robs me of my dreams.

Yesterday I had the oddest experience. Perhaps you can divine its meaning. Here is what happened: five of us were patrolling the perimeter of camp. Everything that might have been green was almost invisible in the fading light. The scrub, covered with thorns the size of cobblers' needles, seemed intent on eating us alive. When we circled back I smelled something sweet, like those white flowers in your grandmother's garden. It was so strong, Tiá. I thought we had stumbled upon the enemy and held up my hand for the men to stop. But what soldier would be fool enough to wear cologne? A woman, then, fleeing disaster (or inviting it)? But there was no one. No man, no woman, no one. And here is what was so strange: none of the others smelled a thing. The men thought I was crazy. I cannot explain it.

You know my faith has never been as strong as yours, but I cannot help feeling as though someone—something—is watching over me.

I want nothing more than to come home to my sister and my friends. I have lost all sense that we have a legitimate reason for being here. Spain disintegrates from within, while Azaña and Franco each claim to be her salvation. Each embodies politics' moral wasteland. I fear our beloved Portugal is

not far behind. Were my parents still alive, they would be disappointed in me for saying such a thing, I know. Father especially. He thrived on conflict, sought it out. I do not. I hope you do not think me a coward. After all the bloody noses I've suffered (and inflicted) defending João, you had better not. How is he doing at university, by the way? A doctor, no less. For him, I can't think of a more fitting livelihood. I wish I could see my future with the same certainty that he sees his.

I do not mean to burden you—let me lighten the mood with this: a stray dog has adopted our ragged battalion. The men call him Nunito because the fur that stands up on the top of his head makes him look (they say) like me. I happen to think he is a very handsome hound.

Your friend,

Nuno

30 November 1936

Darling Girl,

Your quaint notion of politics has amused many around camp, not the least of whom General Fuentes (you put his name on the guest list as I instructed, didn't you?). He said your naiveté is charming beyond words and remarked how eloquently you reveal why women shouldn't concern themselves with the complexities of international affairs.

I must caution you against being so outspoken. In this climate misconceptions fuel tragedy. While it is true this is Spain's war, there is, for Portugal, no neutrality when it comes to her fate. There are those who say they have Spain's best interest at heart, yet they condemn the Church, denouncing the very foundation of civilization. They stand at our doorstep, Tiá. Would you have us stand idle? Of course not. By protecting Spain's legitimate government—and the Church—we are protecting our own soil from bloodshed.

That acquaintance of yours that I met last Easter—Negreiros I think his name was—he is just the type I am speaking about: quick to curry favor with authority, only to turn around and bite the hand that feeds him. If your father hasn't told you already, avoid him. And his friends. I know you are attracted to their bohemian notion that art can change the world, but as you mature you will see it takes more than that. Have you actually read his poetry? The man is completely full of himself.

As my intended, it is important you understand my future depends not only on my actions but the actions of those around me—especially you. Make me proud, Tiá.

You needn't worry about me; I will be fine. Best you focus on things that make you happy: the wedding (which we will have as soon as I return), that lovely piano piece you played for me when we first met, and your riding (you are still riding, I hope?). There is, I think, nothing more appealing than a woman on horseback.

Remember me in your dreams,
Carlos

6 December 1936

Dear Adellita,

I need you to do something for me. I want you to sell the Miró (you hate it, anyway) to Sr. Vaz. Trust him; he will give you a fair price. If he asks, tell him it is to pay off your brother's gambling debt. I cannot say exactly when, but I will come for the money soon. Tell no one. Promise me you will burn this letter, Adella. No one must ever know. Please do this for me. You know I would not ask if it wasn't important.

Whatever you hear about me, Adella, it will probably be true. There is no other choice. I cannot live this way.

Your loving brother,
Nuno

Christmas Eve

My Love,

Did you think the men would not laugh behind my back? Did you think I would not discover your secret? You indulged in a dangerous game, Tiá, but it is over.

I forbid you to write to your "friend" Nuno, not even to explain. I have told him myself he will no longer be receiving letters from you. Your thoughts, your words, and your heart belong to me, Tiá. Tell me, why is it your letters made him smile as though an angel touches his heart? Everyone saw it. Obviously, you did not care what it would do to

my reputation. You will be my wife soon—it is time you started acting like it.

Carlos

All this time, thought Nuno, as he let the past evaporate into the orange grove's fragrant canopy, all this time Tía had held it close, reminding herself with every memento added to her jewelry box: the plastic charm bracelet, Ricardo's mutilated dog tags, Stefan's posthumous Purple Heart, and the "war is not healthy for children and other living things" button. With the photograph taken of her at her 65th birthday party.

With the results of her biopsy, just last year.

She hadn't wanted to forget. Not like him. He hadn't wanted to remember any of it, especially the dog, Nunito.

Wary of jumping shadows and flashlight beams, the dog, its body a serration of ribs, wandered into camp and made straight for Esteban, sitting before him as though it had received an engraved invitation to dinner.

Esteban held out a scrap of gristle and fat.

"Lose your hand for sure, doing that," said Amado from the shadows.

The dog stretched its neck and took the scrap as gently as plucking a petal from a rose.

"More where that comes from," Esteban said to the dog. "I got a whole plate, right here." It stared into Esteban's face, tail tip thumping the ground, trembling with hunger. Waiting.

Soon, others were sharing. Not so much for the dog's sake, but their own, feeding their starving souls an act of decency, even if only a small and inconsequential one. Too, it had been months since anyone—or anything—had shown them gratitude.

Almost as if it knew it would be in the way of human endeavors, during the day the dog disappeared, reappearing in the evening to accept handouts and always with the same impeccable manners. They called the dog Nunito, a sure sign of affection for both the dog and his namesake. For all but one.

"Write to Tiá again, and your balls will feed the buzzards," said Carlos as he leaned against the truck. His casual tone might just as easily have informed Nuno it was a fine day for fishing.

"I know you're engaged," said Nuno, retracting himself from under the hood. "Tiá and I have been friends since childhood." Pulling a rag black with oil from his back pocket, he wiped the grease from his hands. "That's all."

Carlos hooked his right heel onto the truck, regarded Nuno. "Since you are her friend—" He lit his cigarette—"I will let it go." Smoke curled from his nostrils. "This time."

"*Dear Tiá,*

The fighting is closer than ever before. I have made whatever peace I can with that part of myself that must not—cannot—hesitate to kill."

From behind, the words of his letter burned into Nuno's ear.

"Shall I tell you how the rest of it goes?" Under Carlos's polished boot, the bench gave slightly. His toe poked into Nuno's thigh. Carlos leaned closer, his voice soft. "*Without your letters there is no refuge. You are my one, true friend, Tiá, do you know that?*" That's what it says, doesn't it? After I told you no more."

Nuno continued eating, stabbing the soft flesh of the beans swimming in his plate with his fork, each time a miniature bayonet. Swallowing sand would have been easier.

"I thought I'd made myself plain, but perhaps not plain enough. This time I believe my message will be clear. Even for you."

With a *companheiro's* slap on the back, as though they had been discussing maneuvers or materiel, Carlos left Nuno sitting at the table, surrounded by the stink of burnt coffee and cabbage.

Later that evening Esteban returned to camp after patrol. He carried Nunito. The dog's throat had been cut.

How easily it unfolded, moment by moment, like a plan gone right. If the finger of God himself had descended from the clouds to point the way, it wouldn't have surprised Nuno at all.

Heavy mist had been falling all morning. As the company approached a small village outside of Santiago de Campostela, rifle reports from the center of town sent the men diving for cover. Chickens scattered from the scrub. Beside Nuno, a cloud of flies erupted from the shattered face of a mule.

At the all clear, the captain signaled for Carlos, Amado, and Louis to split off, and proceed into town from the right. By the time the captain waved Nuno and Esteban to follow, Carlos and his men were 50 yards down a side street strewn with bricks and ragged timber. But for the random bark of bullets, the town appeared deserted.

Between the bakery and dry goods store, Carlos motioned for Amado and Louis to advance; he began his creep in the opposite direction and took cover behind the bakery. To the north, an exchange of shots; four, maybe five. The falling whistle of heavier artillery sent Nuno and Esteban scrambling for cover behind the churchyard's tumbled wall. Shock waves ruptured the air.

From behind the ruined wall, Nuno watched Carlos wave Amado and Louis toward the store's recessed doorway. Rain darkened Carlos's jacket, like black wings unfolding down his back.

"It is a clean shot," whispered Esteban. "Take it."

Pressure in his ears amplified his stampeding heart. His pulse tapped the trigger beneath his finger. "He's a man, Esteban."

"He's a shit who'll kill you first chance he gets." Esteban snaked closer to the break in the wall. "For Nunito, then," whispered Esteban.

So close that Nuno heard its wings urging the air aside, a frenzied pigeon climbed the bell tower, lighting on the ledge just long enough for Nuno to see, in the shadow of the bell, the tip of the rifle taking aim at the back of the bakery.

Dearest Tía,

How many times have you reminded me to consider all consequences before making an important decision? I have made the most important decision of my life, and there is only one consequence now that truly matters.

I am going to America.

Come with me. Be my wife. I have loved you since we were children. Not just as friends, but as a man loves a woman. I believe you love me too.

I write not because I am afraid to ask you in person, but because I want you to think about your answer. I will know it the moment I see you—your eyes have never lied to me.

If you will come with me—and I pray you will—you must be ready to leave at a moment's notice. Adella will let you know when I am coming.

If it is not to be, if I have presumed too much of your affection, my heart will be glad just for having your friendship, and I will continue to love you every day of my life.

Forever and with all my heart, eu te amo,

Nuno

He folded the letters back into their tissue paper and retied the string as best he could. How much more nimble her fingers were than his! His clever Tía: she knew all along the money to come to America came from the Miró.

Memories, Nuno decided, were like words: some were best left detached from others.

He was glad she never knew what became of the dog.