

LA COMANDITA

Anonymous 17th century text adapted by Martín Bordenave

Javier Díez and Juan Uriagereka, Editors



Prince Phillip and a Dwarf, Rodrigo de Villandrando, Museo del Prado

The naked truth can be approached only rarely, particularly in the case of rulers, who, unless they search for it themselves in what has been written, never manage to find it.

[Philip IV of Spain](#)

LA COMANDITA

BY WAY OF PROLOGUE

In the fall of 1983, we attended the classes of Professor Martín Bordenave Mendiondo at the [University of Granada](#). We knew nothing about him when we arrived; Department of Hispanic Languages, little else. He introduced himself asking that we call him Borde;¹ "sooner or later," he said, "you'll do so anyway." Soon we saw that he was practically a genius, and took [Salinger](#)'s position to degree zero: he had never written a line. Even so, or perhaps therefore, he enjoyed enormous prestige throughout Latin America and the United States, reaching mythical proportions in Argentina. His classes, encyclopedic and fascinating - covering everything from [Joyce](#) to [Maradona](#), the [Roadrunner](#) and [Manolo Caracol](#), with no tape recorders or even note-taking allowed - never let us down. Not all our classmates understood him or were willing to try; we, however, were enchanted and went around imitating his accent, for want of better merits.

Out of that fervor there remains a small essay, which appeared in *Sintagma* (a journal edited by Borde's followers, in opposition to *Paradigma* whose mentor's name we ignore). A paper on the [Immaculate Conception of Mary](#) from an historical-generativist perspective, which the professor sent off for publication without our consent. With time, we were grateful to him, since it is our only critical work (and a thing we abandoned when Borde suddenly left the university, for reasons unknown).

Today we lead normal lives, far from an intelligentsia we can no longer understand - if we ever did. One day we were surprised by a sad and curious package addressed to us both and postmarked Havana, which arrived at the notary's office with no return address. We were amazed that they knew where to find us, because it had been over fifteen years since we were last in contact. The package included a terse obituary (clipped from a Cuban paper) and the manuscript that follows.

¹ *Borde*: [crude, excessive...] A Spanish neologism whose meaning is still evolving.

LA COMANDITA

Borde is dead. It would be hypocritical to say that we are sorry, because we hardly knew him. But thanks to him we had some magnificent, intense, and above all very fun times; the mind suffers, what with the deaths of [Cunqueiro](#), [Biyo](#)...

We are not sure what to say about the manuscript, who sent it or why, and to us of all people. Apparently, the professor was working on it and hadn't finished; the notes quickly scribbled, some mere musings, others unnecessary, almost always insufficient. Also the unfinished character guide, and a strange appendix for chess buffs. There is no way of knowing whether he wanted us to publish it. After studying the legalities of the matter and asking the opinion of friends Juan Felipe, Francis, Deanie, Cesar, Gurutze, Jesu, Viola), after giving it endless thought, we think we should bring it out and let history - or oblivion - decide.

So many issues could undoubtedly be raised. We just don't know. Bordenave was unwilling (or unable) to set us straight.

J.D. & J.U.

LA COMANDITA

EDITORS' FOREWORD

The professor's handwriting is impossible; unfortunately, his notes were scribbled (the text itself was typewritten, thank God, clearly on his old [Olivetti](#)). Thus, he seems to say ORE (perhaps MORE) WORD [NOTICE], and then: "Paper, inks, remains of seals are of that period (perhaps "are that, period"). He also seems to say something about analyses and the "presence of strange fauna in (illegible); " what can be made out is "evident co-existence with cadaver." From this and some initials, abbreviations, a surname, cryptic notes and/or digits that are clearly numbers (i.e., S. J.B., Vel. ACEDO 1808-1812), we deduce that the manuscript must have lain in a coffin deposited in the [Church of St. John the Baptist](#), the true Royal Chapel due to its proximity to the [Alcazar](#) [former Royal Palace in Madrid]. This is where [Velázquez](#) was buried, as was [Diego de Aedo](#). With the destruction of the church during the [French occupation](#), the text arrived in France as part of the war booty. [Centuries later] a French scholarship trainee working in a museum must have removed the dossier without weighing the importance of his act, allowing the papers to end up somehow in the hands of Bordenave. The trainee clearly did not have authorization to do so; but what is most important, perhaps, is that, in the words of Borde: "the text was hard worked" (sic). That is, the version reproduced here was translated by the professor (who knows whether with help?) into modern-day Spanish - amply revised, we hope and imagine. Where absolutely necessary, we have cautiously annotated the text with duly labeled editors' notes. In the English version, which we have taken the liberty of preparing to widen the readership of this important legacy, there are further notes to clarify certain ambiguous or otherwise obscure points. Some readers might be bothered by this, but it is the least we could do for someone who has left us so much.

LA COMANDITA

MEMORIAL

I

[Beginning indecipherable. Perhaps: "He looks around and hears the prayers". Justification for king's absence at service, including phrase "*La Comedia e finita*", last words of V. as he lay dying?]

AMIDST all the people, he spies [Juan Pareja](#), who sees him and smiles, sad as ever.

"Boost me up, Juan?"

Raised high, he peers at the altar, the body flanked by twelve tall tapers in their silver holders. By the light of hundreds of white candles, he sees the scarlet cross glimmering on the black habit and decides it looks fine. Like a true [Knight of Santiago](#). The music starts in the Royal Chapel, the well-tempered violins and angelic voices rising sweet and mournful above the strains of [Patifio](#)'s organ, lifting the notes and words of the *Dominus Dedit*¹ into the air. Moved, he looks back towards the atrium and thinks he sees, there in the distance mingling with the crowd, the king himself, his face barely showing beneath a cape and wide-brimmed hat. Their eyes meet and he thinks, probably, that it is not the king, but the prince, looking young and frightened as he did, nearly forty years ago, when he'd come to him for help.

¹ Reads "Roman oratorio by [Carissimi](#)." Never heard of it. (Editors' note).

LA COMANDITA

II

THE window was narrow; he moved defensively, without looking at the board.

"Heaven help us," he ventured.

"Help us?" said the other, moving his knight.

"Through the storm, I mean. It's going to be a tempest to remember."

"Your move."

"Father Pedrosa said so himself: when rulers lie dying, all heaven is in turmoil."

"Balderdash. Move."

"How can you be thinking of playing at a time like this?" asked the prince, nonchalantly exchanging his pawn for its counterpart.

The other captured the pawn with his knight, provoking an immediate response from the prince. A flash of lightning lit up the board; the older player couldn't hide his irritation:

"Can't you see you should have moved your knight?"²

"Who knows what princes might be scheming...?"

"Your Highness, please, if you're not going to pay attention, we'd better quit. Now listen, Machiavelli: your knight must never be further from the king than your bishop."

The prince rose advancing his bishop and began pacing the room. His long strides sounded on the oaken floor; he made his play on the move, as he passed the board. His opponent, once the opening was over, advanced his queen's bishop and stifled a smile. The prince paused next to the chessboard.

"What more are you going to teach me?"

"Me?" asked the older player. "Why, everything I know I learned, along with you, from old Bautista."

² Borde's remark: "Serious match. Study." (Editors' note)

LA COMANDITA

"I don't mean the game," the youth said, opening his eyes. "Don't you remember what you said when you took me to the brothel?"

"Who cares? I must have been drunk."

"You said something about truth; the naked truth..."

"I might have said 'the hour of truth is at hand; disrobe her...' or something like that."

"That wasn't it."

"Close enough. I was drunk and you were scared, like now. Stop philosophizing and play."

Annoyed, the prince moved his bishop in front of the king, to which the other responded by capturing his knight. Check.

"I'm sixteen years old," he said.

"Not yet, you aren't. Do you want to keep playing?"

"Close enough. I know what's going to happen."

"Sure you do..."

"War. Can you imagine me in battle?" he asked, as he moved in with his bishop, taking the knight that had captured his own.

Outside there were voices. A huge raindrop or two and again flashes of lightning; an owl swooped past. They moved the pawns flanking the queen, enabling the older player to advance his; the future monarch moved his king back into the rook's corner.

"Keep your mind on what you're doing," complained his opponent.

"What do you think I have it on?" answered the prince indignantly.

"Do you think I haven't read the Council's report? Do you suppose I don't know why my father went to Portugal, and why he's dying this very moment? Do you think me unaware of Uceda's scheming?"

The other player retreated to his queen, which the prince acknowledged with his rook. Then his opponent attacked, which always

[The text that follows is illegible; only a few fragments can be deciphered:

...The prince advanced with his queen...

LA COMANDITA

...forcing the capture...

...and the black king...now out of danger.]

"Not bad, my boy. Didn't you like your queen?"

"Never say that - never. Move," he commanded, smugly. The older player moved his knight.

The younger one stretched, walked over to the candles and examined an impressive portrait framed in black adorning one of the whitewashed walls.

"I can tolerate Lerma at times... Gan you guess when?"

"Thought you admired him."

"Actually, he used to be fond of me. When I was little, he'd hold me on his lap, like his own child. Later he made a blunder."

"He made a lot."

"This one cost him dearly."

"Right. Leaving you in the hands of Guzman - a serious miscalculation."

"Do you know when I admire him most?"

"When you see him well portrayed."

"And do you know why I have him here, in my rooms?"

"They say it's out of gratitude, in spite of his disgrace."

"Is that what you think?"

"No."

"Then why do I have him here?"

"Because it's a Rubens."

"Damned right it's because it's a Rubens!" he exclaimed as he moved his rook to the knight's square, "and I swear... I swear I'd give my entire kingdom for a talent like Rubens!"

As he spoke, his opponent moved his rook to the king's square, and the youth began his charge: with his rook, with his bishop, the rook opening the way. The other's breathing became audible as he watched the

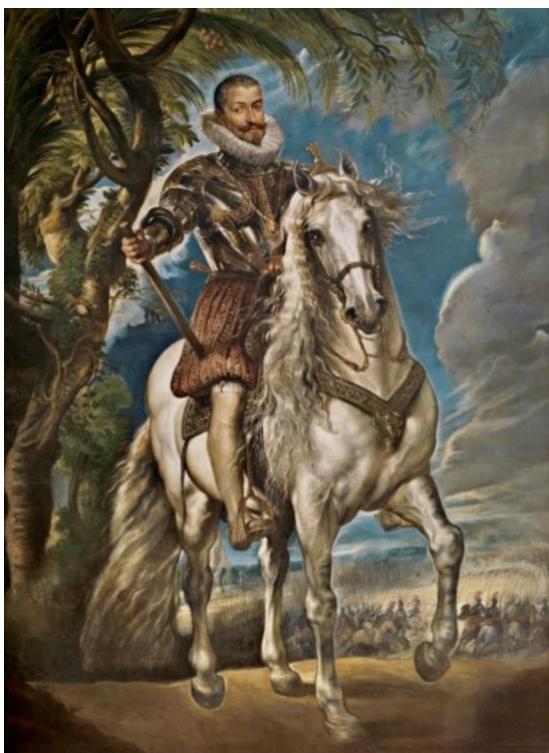


Figure I: *Duke of Lerma*, Rubens, El Prado

LA COMANDITA

board. Finding himself cornered with his king, holding his piece in peril, he challenged:

"Find it."

"Where?" asked the prince.

"Half the world is yours..."

"Space isn't the problem. Time is."

"No: only fear. If it weren't for your pride, you'd summon Lerma."

"I was talking about painting. How you love to annoy me!"

"All's fair in war."

The prince looked at the board. After a few concentrated moments of suspense, he mused nostalgically:

"Why do you suppose we can't be nursed?"

"Come again?"

"Princes, I mean...why can't they be nursed by the queen? Not even during those few hours when her breasts are so full they're about to burst and a maid has to force herself to do the suckling?"

"Have you been at the bottle again?"

"I adored her. I used to love it when they bathed her. I'd hide wherever I could, and if I couldn't get a peek at her, at least I could breathe in the aroma of the oils they rubbed on her heavenly body and listen to her angelic voice singing a love song."

"Me, I never saw my mother," said the other. "She must have had a woman's body, as angels don't have one."

"This angel did. I bet even the Virgin envied it (though she's incapable of that)."

"Well, she was a queen, the closest thing to a goddess."

"One day in autumn they took me in to say good-bye. 'Why?' I asked them. 'Where are we going?' 'Be a good boy,' she said, and they took me to El Pardo. When I'd ask for her, Nurse would tell me she'd be back, or that a prince... shouldn't behave like any ordinary child. 'Be a good boy,' she'd said. That was the last thing I heard."

"I know. I was there."

LA COMANDITA

"So you were," reflected the prince, falling silent. Then he moved his rook up behind the queen. "You weren't much older."

"Older enough. I'm going to capture your knight," said the maestro.

"Go ahead," responded his pupil. "My father gave me Guzman so he'd show me the world. And he took me to Burgos, to marry Isabel, then to Portugal, where the Cortes swore eternal allegiance. Can you imagine? It was all with the best of intentions, and I'm grateful of course, because I do know that he didn't really have time for me or for anything other than government. He was a good king."

"He still is."

"This evening he had us brought in and said, 'I've called you here to see... how it all ends.' He asked me to care for my brothers and sisters, to see to the welfare of Spain, and to protect our religion. And do you know what I was most affected by? 'The sorrow of it,' you'll say. But no. It was the smell of death. Perhaps because of the sacred relics or the lack of ventilation."

When the other thought the game was over, since the prince seemed lost in a labyrinth of gloom, there was a sudden move that looked quite strange but which turned out to be decisive: the prince moved his rook and captured the king knight's pawn, pinning the knight in place. Taken by surprise, the maestro said nothing, but moved back with his bishop to stand in front of his rook. The prince kept silent as well, but, taking advantage again of the knight's immobility, advanced his bishop. Sensing impending doom, the other moved his rook queenside.

"So you know what I think?" the prince concluded. "I'm all alone, my friend. Alone like the eagle that captures its prey and crushes it in its innocent talon, gazing off into space from its perch at the top of a tree."

After which, he plunged straight in with his bishop, leaving the maestro's rook, knight and bishop to watch from the sidelines.³ With this elegant maneuver, the game was rendered history.

³ Note seems to read "Allright, che! Reconstruct." (Editors' note)

LA COMANDITA

III

REMEMBERING, the painter feels tired, old and overcome, incapable even of crying. But a tear slips out anyway.

"Are you crying, Diego?" whispers the Moor.

"It's the music," he sighs, looking up from the portico at the stars.

"Just the music."

Inside, the solemn burial rites continue until, the oratorio over, the coffin is eased down onto the pallbearers' shoulders and carried slowly away to the [crypt of Fuensalida](#). The epitaph is read by the maestro's beloved and talented pupil [Juan de Alfaro](#), whose deep voice can be heard, even from the back rows, in the hushed stillness of the chapel:

"Illustrious maestro, whose life was devoted to the high and noble art of painting, under the zealous tutelage of [Francisco Pacheco](#), who wrote so eloquently on art. Alas, what sorrow...!"

Diego de Acedo leaves and, once outside, is surprised to feel again the heat of the evening air. The empty words continue to reverberate in the immensity of the vault, but as he makes his way into the night, they are soon muffled by street sounds, the noise of children playing, the clatter of horses, the leering and laughter of people watching him pass. He is used to being stared at and carries his dwarf's stature with dignity, but even so, with today's burden of sorrow, the shouts of derision are harder to bear.

"Where are you off to, Tom Thumb?" they jeer at the top of their lungs. "Watch out or you might get gobbled up by a goat!"

"Hush!" snickers one, "Don't you know his excellency is a relative of the king?"

"His son perhaps?"

"Sired while squatting over a whore?"

Diego crosses the street and hurries away under peals of laughter, hunching his back against a shower of stones. He trips and falls, which makes the attendance laugh even harder. He gets up and flees through the [Calle del Espejo](#).

LA COMANDITA

IV

THE dogs raised their warning and were hurriedly hushed by the Master of the Hunt.

"My apologies, Your Majesty. They have forgotten what it is like to be out so early."

"It's not their fault," answered the king without dismounting.

The man handed him a staff and held out a *doncella*,⁵ which climbed obediently onto the leather glove protecting the king's left arm. The horse snorted.

"Release Cipión," said the king, pointing to a hound. "He's all I need."

"May Your Majesty forgive my humble suggestion," said the Hunt Master, "but would it not be better for me to come along, at least until dawn?"

"Don't insist," answered the monarch, spurring his horse. "I'll be back before anyone misses me, and meanwhile you can tell Mariana that she'll have partridges for dinner."

When they reached the woodlands, the horse slowed and the young king let him walk to a halt. Then he spoke over his shoulder.

"Still alive, Diego?"

"Barely!" came a muffled voice from beneath the cape.

"What's the problem, old man?"

"What do you think? The air pollution down here is unbelievable...!"

The king let out a burst of laughter, grabbed the dwarf and sat him on the front of the saddle.

"Heaven be praised!" sighed the little man. "Trapped in there with this old hen, I felt more like bagged prey than a hunter."

"Hush, Diego, don't make me laugh. It is not fitting."

⁵ The *doncella* is a Scandinavian peregrine falcon.

LA COMANDITA

"Not fitting, is it? And do you think it's fitting to sneak off like this before dawn, on the very day of the hunt, when the whole court is here and waiting?"

The youth handed the reins to the dwarf and spurred his mount again, heading further into the hills. As they climbed, there came a moment when they could feel, like lips brushing the napes of their necks, the first glimmerings of approaching daylight.

"The court doesn't need me; they're all asleep!"

"So what? What business does a king have, running around here in the brush, bounding from rock to rock, at such an ungodly hour?"

"Well, as the *Infante* said, 'when off on a chase, let the right hand carry a rod or other lance or staff, and the left a falcon.'"

"The rod is what we're going to get from Guzman."

"And this, one must do to accustom one's arms: the right, to learn true aim, and the left, to bear the shield. And one must learn to spur one's horse, sometimes to formidable heights, to shed all fear of peril and become a better horseman thereby.'"

"Yet when the age of posturing is past, the lesson that the knight must learn is to leave his mount to pasture at last, and himself unto the city return."

"He never said that!"

"...where seats there are more difficult to mount and prizes far more worthy of the chase."

"You're making that up."

"You're the expert in quotations. I'm just a lowly painter."

"Low is putting it mildly," laughed the king, as they reached the top of a rise.

Below them lay the brush-covered slopes slanting dark to the fields below, and beyond, traced in blue against the first October light, a line of hills rising up in the distance. A chill breeze stirred, wafting rosemary tinged with dew, their breath lending a touch of animal warmth to the gauzy morning. Suddenly the hound froze.

LA COMANDITA

"Stay!" the king commanded.

The dog looked up, nervous but still. Without dismounting, the king removed the hood from the falcon's head. The first thing the bird saw was Acedo; next it stared at the hound. Finally it peered over at the horizon, raising its beak, alert and fierce. The dog began to tremble, the king gave the order:

"Flush!"

The dog bounded into the brush and disappeared. In the stillness its barks became fainter and fainter; finally silence. The king eased his arm back, using the staff for support, his young temples feeling the pulse. The quarry starts! The king shouts the flush and casts off the bird; tail to the wind, bells jingling, winging high, she makes her sweep and plummets, striking her prey.

"Cipión!" shouts the king, calling the dog to his side.

As they ride up, the partridge still writhes in the falcon's clutch. They draw closer and the doncella steps away, sounding its bells. The king dismounts and, unsheathing a knife, beheads the fowl brought by the dwarf. Then he approaches the doncella, reward in hand, praising and feeding the bird while taking the quarry.

Thus they hunted 'til the sun came up, bagging three partridges and even a pheasant, to the king's great satisfaction. It was the first time in months that he'd been out with his prized falcon, ever since

[Here again the text becomes illegible. Something about birth / death of first daughter, disillusionment with politics:

...There were no more men to fill positions; just more positions for the same men to fill.

Rest unintelligible, although alludes to political transition / purge of the Sandovals (Lerma and Uceda). Following conversation refers to favorite of Duque de Lerma.]

LA COMANDITA



Figure II: *A Royal Boar Hunt*, Velázquez, National Gallery, London

"So who's coming on this august hunt?" asked the dwarf.

"Pass the wine. Guzman, Zúñiga, their wives, my siblings, and the whole gaggle of buffoons, idiots and fools that form their entourage."

"Hey, I'm one of those."

"I mean the big fools. The ones who only know how to hunt with firearms and come to show off, parading around and gossiping as though they were at a dance or a play."

"Speaking of which, were you pleased by the execution the other day?"

"Pass the omelet."

"Father Pedrosa can tell you all about it. He's the one who prayed over him at the end. The executioner was magnificent, begging the

LA COMANDITA

prisoner's pardon, embracing him and swearing true friendship as he peeled back the prisoner's clothing to reveal his neck. Then he had him lean his head back on the neck rest and slash! One slice and it was over. He barely twitched. Too bad that in the end the weather turned foul, and the body had to stay out in the open until late at night, when your permission came to bury him. They wrapped him in his shroud while still on the scaffold, so everyone saw his naked body full of wounds, bruised and beaten from the torment. Quite a penance that must have been."

"Where are you heading?"

"Nowhere - in such moving times, it's best to sit still and keep quiet..."

"I had to sign that sentence."

"Even though he was innocent?"

"He was not!" bellowed the king, causing the dog to lift his head.

They ate in silence. The king and the dwarf: their omelets; the falcon: the chicken gizzard; the dog: the chicken's neck.

"So could you tell me what on earth he did?" asked the dwarf, finally.

"Bribery, absconding with funds... Hiding evidence..."

"Come on, why did you get rid of him?"

"I didn't get rid of him!" The dog raised his head again.

A royal belch was heard.

"Spain did. When he was put to the torment to confess..."

"Confess what?"

"Poisoning my mother."

"Oh Lord..."

"They heard him say that the queen was a witch. The son of a whore! If I had been there, I would have killed him myself."

"An excellent example of the king's justice: he who errs shall pay. And a very effective gesture, I must say."

"Leave me alone," grumbled the king.

He rose and called to his falcon, which hopped onto his wrist.

Looking skyward, the king cast the bird off, downwind, and the doncella

LA COMANDITA

began her climb. Striving, striding, reaching her pitch, she rode the daylight, wings wimpling in a lake of sun, until suddenly she hovered then made her plunge. The king called out as he mounted his horse:

"Get on!"

"I haven't finished my..." protested the dwarf.

"Get on, I say!" interrupted the king, grabbing him by the ruff and setting him on the saddle as he galloped off to where the bird had stooped.

The dog followed and before the horse had come to a halt, the young king was dismounting. It was a hare, caught outside its warren, writhing, its eyes still astonished at the grip of the talons. The king, his hands trembling, made the bird release its prey and sensed - knew by the cry of the falcon - that something was wrong. He removed his glove and fearlessly turned the bird on its side, probing barehanded under the wings. It was the left one, broken where it hurts the most.

"Shit," said the king.

LA COMANDITA

V

HE climbs the hill to [El Barquillo](#), seeking company. When they look out the door after someone has knocked and can't see anybody, they know it's Diego. And if it's Madame who opens, she picks him up and smothers him with kisses, which he normally objects to. [La Margaritona](#) is old now and has whiskers, so for a number of years he has been somewhat repelled by her touch.

But she adores and pampers him, offers him food and drink, hot chocolate with schnapps if he comes in the late afternoon, and, if he arrives at dinner time as he does now, the house specialty: pickled trout.

"Don't go feeling sorry," counsels the woman. "What was he to you? It's not like you've lost your father or brother ... or a child, or anything of the sort. Besides, don't I know he owed you money? After all you did for him - and all those honors! Come on now, eat up. You've still got the king, haven't you? Doesn't everyone say you're his relative and call you *El Primo*?"⁶

"Prime fool, that's what I am."

La Margaritona beckons to the girls to serve him more fish. The dwarf must be hungry. With all the activity and commotion that go on before a funeral, people work up a huge appetite by the time the burial is over. A gaunt old man is eating at the same table.

"Who's that?" Diego asks.

"Fellow can't see or hear. Some folks brought him in and just left him sitting there. He says they're from Seville, like the deceased. Looks older than hunger."

When all the trout is finished, the girls bring out fruit, sweets and pastries, candied fruit, cheese and olives, causing the old man to smile and shake his head. The women try to encourage him:

⁶ *El Primo*: Cousin, in Spanish; but as a nickname, it can also mean dupe or sucker.

LA COMANDITA

"Come on, Grampa! You've got room for more. Besides, you'll need it. We never let people go to bed hungry!"

But the old man just sits there, smiling back, and doesn't lift a finger to eat or drink, until someone offers him the brandy jug. Then he drinks.

Everyone is talking, the girls faster than La Margaritona, drinking and devouring sweets, flirting with the dwarf, who still doesn't feel like responding. Suddenly the old man begins to sing. Perhaps it's his offering, in exchange for dinner. Everyone stops talking:

Ay...

Maresita mía

Yo no sé por dónde

Al espejito donde me miraba

*Se le fue el azogue.*⁷

The voice is full of gravel, the brandy glass feels like a well in his hand, and the dwarf hunches down into the depths of his soul. Then he remembers: "*¿A dónde te escondiste, amado?*"⁸

⁷ Ay... *Maresita mía...*: [Ay... / Maresita mía / I don't know where or why / the little glass that used to watch me back / suddenly lost its shine]

⁸ *¿A dónde te escondiste, amado?*: [Where did you hide / Beloved?] First line of the *Cántico* by San Juan de la Cruz.

LA COMANDITA

VI

SNEAKING down back corridors and secret passageways, the king made his way to the studio in the [Casa del Tesoro](#) - the Alcazar being wonderful for this and other matters requiring secrecy and discretion. Diego, meanwhile, was bustling about industriously, balancing a trunk on a bench in front of an enormous blank canvas. Hearing the key creaking in the lock, he shouted, "It's about time! Didn't you say at eleven?" just as an enormous crash came from the other side of the canvas.

"For the love of..."

Peering around the canvas, the dwarf saw His Majesty sitting on the floor amidst three swords, a helmet, two hats, a lance, a crossbow, a shield, a hazelwood staff, a long cape, a shorter one, a half-suit of armor, a laurel crown, a globe, and, to top it all off, a falcon frantically flying around the room looking for a perch.

"Don't just stand there, help me!" howled the king.

"But how is it you brought all this?" said Acedo as he pulled the king out from under the pile of things.

"Well," grumbled the king, "the helmet, hat and crown on my head; the capes and armor on my front and back; the swords and crossbow in my right hand; the lance and staff in my left; the globe on the floor, ahead of my foot. And the fucking falcon-"

"No, no," interrupted the dwarf. "I meant: how come you brought all this stuff?"

"Because it is our first portrait and I don't want anything to be missing. Aren't you excited, for God's sake?"

"More like tired from waiting."

"I have been busy, Diego. Receiving, talking, reading, signing - you know, reigning in my own realm and conspiring in all others. Isn't that more important than posing?"

LA COMANDITA

"No. For public affairs there are always your *privados*,"⁹ rejoined Acedo, giving the king a hand to help him up.

"I do not have any of those and anyway, knock it off," snapped the king. "I'm not in the mood after the fiesta in Aranjuez."

"I've heard it was lively."

"Villamediana pretending to be Italian, since he doesn't write really, stage machinery everywhere."

"Your father knew what he was doing, having him exiled."

"How shall I pose? With the bird here on my arm, lost in thought? With the staff or the sword?"

"With that look of genius. Leave the rest to me."

The king breathed in the studio's ancient alchemy, relishing again the smell of oil, turpentine, chalk, the sight of sketches carpeting the floor like ideas waiting to be grazed, the damp air full of spirits, the open windows, the light.

"If you'd only seen the contrivance he made Fontana set up! Fourteen Doric arches holding up the canopy of heaven, all festooned with stars and wisps of cloud, and adorned with statues and glass balls."

"What an exhibition!"

"And me with my mouth open. Mythological figures on glass chariots, trees that moved to make way for singing nymphs, a muse flying on the back of a golden eagle."

"And the queen?"

"Wait. Just when everything came to a head, a mountain opened up revealing a sumptuous gold palace full of mirrors, with the goddess of beauty glittering on her throne."

"Virgin Mary!"

⁹ *Privados*: Private ministers of the king.

LA COMANDITA

"No, no! The queen..." The dwarf went back to the canvas hiding a smile, and as he climbed up onto his bench, the king went on with his story.

"But listen to this! A torch fell on a canopy and set the whole stage on fire before you could blink!"

"What will Fontana think of next?"

"No, you idiot, that was an accident. What did happen was that Isabel, of course, fainted and - who do you think saved her from the fire?"

Silence ensued while the dwarf worked on the face, lightly sketched in at the top of the canvas. He smeared some gray on his palette, then yellow, and added a touch of oil. Glancing one more time at the king, he finally began applying color, with sweeping brush strokes, like a musician caressing his beloved viola da gamba. Since the dwarf still didn't say a thing, the king mused aloud:

"What could that asshole know about Italy or anything?"

At last, he relaxed. Gazing at the empty ceilings of the studio, he recalled [Monterrey](#)'s account and, abandoning himself to the marvels conjured up by his imagination, lost his pose.

"Felipe!" complained the dwarf. "Pose for heaven's sake!"

"Sorry; I was dreaming."

"About Villamediana?" said the dwarf to keep him alert.

"You jerk. About Rome."

"Want to conquer the Vatican?"

"I don't want to conquer anything! I have everything already," he said, pausing dramatically. "I only want to be."

"Be what?"

"To be; just be whatever comes into my head, like [Raphael](#) said."

"Raphael said 'whatever comes into my mind!'"

"*Io pinto una certa cosa che mi viene in mente.*' You're right. You are always right."

From where the king was standing, the only thing to be seen was the dwarf working and the back of the canvas. There is nothing so provoking

LA COMANDITA

as the back of a canvas. He began to get bored. His prominent chin began to itch. To get it moving, he said: "Raphael, Leonardo, Veronese, Titian..."

"What?"

"Who have I got now? Carducho? Cajés? That rustic Morán? Or, Heaven help me, Father Maíno?"

"Hold still, dash it!" repeated the dwarf, adding, "And let's have a bit of respect for your maestro. He is better at drawing than I am."

"Pope Barberini doesn't waste time; he's already recruiting talents from everywhere, including possessions of ours..."

"If your great grandfather were alive, we'd ransack Rome and give old Urban a lesson in urbanity."

"I mean it," complained the king.

"You'll have to agree," added the dwarf, peering around from behind his canvas, "that compared to Rome, Madrid is pretty pitiful - a village with next to nothing to boast for itself. No cathedral, no university, no anything. Madrid is still waiting to be built."

"Just what I was saying! All we have here are plasterers and procession float artists."

"Right now, just don't budge: put on your Planet King expression and hold the pose for a while."

"How is it going? Are you feeling content?"

"Groping for content is more like it, for the moment - I'm just filling in the background."

"Come on, is it a good likeness?"

"Well, it's a funny thing. I have known you since you were born, and now that I'm painting you, I look at you and see something different."

"What's different?"

"Remember Rubens?"

"I don't get it."

"That 'ineffable majesty' business?"

"Shall I put on my crown?" asked the young monarch.

LA COMANDITA

Again there was silence. So the king imagined what he would look like in the picture, and reaffirmed his ancient pose. He thought again of the frescoes that the count had told him about, the Carraccis in the Farnese Palace, the ones by Romano in the Tea Palace and by Mantegna in the Palace of the Duke of Mantua, the incredible Michelangelos in the Vatican, which although (or perhaps because) he hadn't seen them, seemed to him so divine that God on high, in His infinite wisdom, must have punished the Florentine with earthly ugliness, reserving beauty for jackanapes like Villamediana.

"What about Ribera?" asked the monarch, breaking the silence.

"Not a chance. You'd have to arrest him to get him back. He has married in Naples, and..., you know how it is ..."

"What do you mean?"

"Ribera's fine as he is, as the head of his familia."

"There is another one that interests me."

"Who?"

"Cotán."

"The Obscure? You don't know what you're asking for."

"Have you seen his still-lifes?"

"Of course I've seen them. They're from the tum of the century..."

"So ...?"

"So he's stopped painting. And speaking. He's entered a monastery."

"So what?" shrugged the king.

"So nothing. That's just it. He's always lived in a trance. Like Fray Juan de la Cruz... remember him?"

"I know his *Cántico* by heart," answered the king with feeling, adding in a high voice: "*A Dónde te escondiste, amado...*"

"Right, right....Don't forget I'm the one who gave you the book and showed you - remember? - his only drawing..."

"What a Crucifixion! And that just goes to show," began the king, gesturing again.

LA COMANDITA

"Don't get carried away. Those people are special..., rare," said the dwarf as he climbed down off the bench. "You can't offer them a salary. Their genius isn't compatible with discipline, and they may never do more than one thing in their whole life - a poem, three paintings. They may have no equal, but they are not what you need."

"So what is it I need, eh? Aren't you going to continue painting?"

"I can't when you're wearing that expression. Forget Cotán."

"Can I look?"

"No. Listen. They say that for every line of his *Cántico*, Fray Juan de la Cruz wrote hundreds, until he found just the right word."

"Really, please let me look."

"No, I won't let you. You'll ruin it. So much passion for poetry appeared suspicious, so he wrote some theological notes to keep the you-know-whos happy."

"You don't mean people like me, of course...?"

"Cotán, if you'll recall, painted a still life of a thistle stalk and four carrots in one of those windows; and they say that if he'd continued, he'd have eliminated the stalk and the carrots too. The window: a black surface framed in gray. It makes me shiver just to think of it."

"Me too. Which is why I want him."

"He's an old man, Felipe; he doesn't paint anymore. He won't come, so don't insist."

"What do you mean he won't come? I am the King. He'll have to come. I am going to send Maíno and Crescenzi with an order written in my own hand. He cannot refuse!"

"Right, you're the King. And a right royal pain. So do whatever you royally want to..."

"*'Salí tras ti, clamando, y eras ido,*" recited the monarch. The dwarf gathered up his things, shaking his head.

LA COMANDITA

A few weeks later, the royal emissaries returned, bearing a small piece of paper, which they delivered to His Majesty. It was a note from old Cotán. "I would prefer not to," it said. He hadn't bothered to sign it.



Figure IV: *Still Life*, Cotán, Granada Museum of Fine Arts

LA COMANDITA

VII

THE players arrive; he rises to go.

"Where are you going...?" says Madame.

"Home."

"What do you mean 'home'? This is your home, love."

As she pulls out a deck of cards, she beckons to one of the new girls and whispers to the dwarf - "Wait 'til you see how sweet this one is. She's from Galicia" - and sends them off to her own room.

He must like this room very much, not only because he's slept in it before, or because of its beguiling perfumes and handsome furnishings. He likes it above all because, for nearly twenty-five years, a portrait of his has hung on one of the walls. La Margaritona's daughter, bent over her sewing, mending his shirt - a small painting that he left unfinished. For many years the mother has begged him to finish it, but he has always said no, that it is better like that, her hands just suggested and her soft breasts gleaming. Surely he still remembers the first layer of background gray, and the touch of green that he added while gazing at the girl bowed over her work, having drawn her entirely in his mind before sketching her in and beginning to apply color. Then the seamstress had risen and never caught the pose again. He'd had to touch up certain areas, correcting the composition. He'd eliminated part of the left side and changed her position, making her tum slightly. And there it was.

"Sir...?" says the girl, again.

"Eh, what? Sorry, darling."

The girl undresses and the dwarf does too, both without speaking. The shoes and stockings, the ruff, the buttoned black garments, the breeches. When the girl has only her bodice left and the dwarf his shirt, she says: "Don Diego, are you a womanizer?"

LA COMANDITA

VIII

CÁRDENAS stood waiting in the Diamond Room. Because of the importance of this interview, he'd had to forego his usual clothing, putting on instead the black costume bearing the Cross of Calatrava that the monarch had provided him with. The visitor was ushered in. Cárdenas looked him over as carefully as he would a fighting bull he examined for the king. Coat of black and head held high, somewhat narrow in the withers but formidable nonetheless. Should turn in a good performance.

"According to my sources," began Cárdenas, gravely, "you are Diego Silva Velázquez, born in Seville on June fifth, fifteen hundred and ninety-nine, legitimate son of Juan Rodríguez de Silva and Jerónima Velázquez, son-in-law of Francisco Pacheco, and presently seeking the post of Court Painter, under the recommendation of Don Juan de Fonseca. Is this correct?"

What Cárdenas didn't ask was who in the world this painter thought he was to come blithely up from the south and ask to do the king's portrait, after having summarily rendered an embittered portrait of Góngora complete with a crown of laurels.

"Entirely correct, your grace," answered Velázquez, courteously.

Cárdenas went over to a table and sat down, gesturing for Velázquez to be seated. On the chestnut table were a jug and two wine glasses.

"*Vino de Ávila, idioma*," began Cárdenas, filling the glasses, "*de San Esteban del Valle. Color de miel, el detalle... se las trae. ¡Y qué aroma!*"¹⁰

In an adjacent room, his ear pressed to one of the peepholes devised by Crescenzi, the king grew impatient and whispered to the dwarf:

10 *Vino de Ávila...*: As he serves the wine, the jester produces a quatrain whose first line plays on the ambiguity of the word *vino*. [Wine of Avila (or verb: From Avila came the language) / of St. Stephen of the Valley / Honey-colored, the detail / and aroma, superb!]

LA COMANDITA

"Cárdenas is too much of a ham for this play," he hissed.

To give the young monarch something to do, Acedo suggested that he write some poetry of his own, while the two of them listened.

"Well then, Velázquez," they heard Cárdenas say, "you must be wondering to whom you are speaking. The answer is this: I am Don Juan de Cárdenas - let us dispense with the rest of my name, for we haven't got all day, have we? I am... how should I phrase this?... His Majesty's right-hand man, and someone - between you and me - who is much closer to the king than even his *privado*. Consequently, therefore, I am the one to whom he entrusts matters requiring exquisite tact and the very utmost in discretion. I am, you see, the king's kid glove, if you follow me. Do you follow?"

The king gripped his pen furiously, penning in bold strokes:

*"Mentidero de la grey/ ¿Sabes quién es el artista? / Yo te daré alguna pista."*¹¹

"Yes, of course, your grace," answered Velázquez promptly.

"Well then, let's get down to business. You know that our court painter, Don Rodrigo de Villaldrando, died last December. There is, therefore, a vacancy (in the bureaucratic sense only, of course)," pronounced Cárdenas in all seriousness, provoking a huge splat from the pen of the king, "and His Majesty has asked me to inform you of the current conditions attending that position, as well as the qualities that the successful candidate must have. I shall, therefore, be entirely sincere with you. Do you like to paint?"

"Naturally, your grace," responded Velázquez, pleased at the suggestion.

"Are you discreet? Can you keep your mouth shut? Are you unassuming? And most of all, are you a womanizer?"

¹¹ *Mentidero de la grey...: [Rumor mongers in your lair, / name the artist if you can. / Need a clue? I'll lend a hand.]*

LA COMANDITA

"I would say I am discreet, unassuming, reserved, and happily married."

"The question was, are you a womanizer? Between women and discretion, there is a *contradiccio in terminis*."

"I can be trusted completely," responded Velázquez, solemnly.

"In that case, let us continue," said Cárdenas, serving him another glass of wine.

After the fiasco with Cotán, the king had sent Acedo to Seville, to observe the brilliant young artist who had seduced Pacheco - and Pacheco's daughter, [Juana](#). What Acedo had found was a decent painter, good at details, with a sense of humor and a fine eye for everyday scenes. He apparently enjoyed celebrity and did not hide his ambition. New lines were added to the poem: "*Un caballero de ley que mandó a buscar el rey / por ser grande sevillano*"¹²

"His Majesty," continued the jester, "has decided to have the position of royal portrait painter dually covered. A painter exists, you see, but circumstances require that he be cloaked in anonymity. What the king seeks, therefore, is someone willing to provide that coverage. And this is where you come in."

"I'm sorry, your grace; I don't quite see."

"And yet my words are plain as can be," retorted Cárdenas, leaning back in his chair. "You must pretend to be His Majesty's painter, complete with salary and privileges, but without the duties; that is, you will not have to paint the King, nor Her Majesty the Queen, nor anything in fact. You will, quite simply, have to pretend and, to the extent you can, prosper here at court."

12 *Un caballero de ley...*: [A gentleman of talents rare / found by the king beyond compare, / because Sevillian and grandee.]

LA COMANDITA

A curious proposition, and risky.¹³ For weeks, the king and Acedo had debated whether to approach [Diego Melgar](#) instead. As a pupil of Velázquez's, he was younger and far humbler. In the end, however, they had decided on the famous Diego, since they needed someone more experienced to keep up appearances. "*Aquí comienza el arcano / que esta décima revela,*" wrote the king, "*pues si lees con cautela / sabrás que pinta. ¿Suena? No.*"¹⁴ Velázquez took a long drink of the wine and said, somewhat pained, "But your grace, I love to paint. I want to paint. I am a painter."

"Yes, of course. I know you are a painter. And you will be allowed to paint at court - in the atelier. But there will be other works that will be attributed to you, you see. Official works, let us say. I believe, although I can't say for certain, that you will be allowed to help the painter."

"The painter? I thought that there were several in His Majesty's service."

"There are indeed, but the vacancy left by Villaldrando has been reserved for a special one, whom you will be introduced to in due time."

"I don't know... I'll have to think about it... talk it over..."

"Not on your life, Velázquez!" warned Cárdenas. "Not a single word to anyone. This is top secret, a matter of State. King's orders. The decision is up to you, and you alone. His Majesty would consider any indiscretion on your part as... Need I go on?"

"Wh... what?" stuttered Velázquez, who had begun to perspire as he helped himself to another glass of wine.

"I mean that our great monarch is, as befits his exalted position, both severe and magnanimous at the same time. The moral reform that the kingdom has undergone is beginning to show its effects, and therefore those who fail to keep pace with the times might find themselves, you

13 Illegible note. May say "*that is the question*". [English in the original.] (Editors' note)

14 *Aquí comienza el arcano...:* [No? There begins the mystery / unraveled here. Take your time / read with care; scan the line and find who gets it / Got it? / No.]

LA COMANDITA

see... In short, do you remember," Cárdenas said, lowering his voice and leaning close to the painter's face, "the Conde de Villamediana?"

The king bounded out of his chair, but Acedo gently pulled him back down, whispering, "Let me see what you've written."

"I... I think I begin to see," murmured the painter.

"Naturally, of course, if this mission is not to your liking, there's really no harm done. You will simply return to Seville to paint old women frying eggs, something you do quite admirably, I must say. Our conversation will never have existed. Is that clear?"



Figure V: *Old Woman Frying Eggs*, Velázquez, National Gallery, Edinburgh

LA COMANDITA

And with that, Cárdenas gave the painter leave to withdraw, granting him three days before a final audience with the king. The moment Velázquez was shown out, the monarch burst into the room thundering:

"You can thank the stars you know so much about bulls and thus have earned my excessive affection, or else, by God, I'd have your ears and tail cut off!"

"Me, Your Majesty? But what have I done?" whined Cárdenas.

"Why did you have to go and mention Tassis?" roared the king.

"To let him know that even a count may be of no account!"

"Stop it, now," said Acedo, "you never know when to leave well enough alone. And Your Majesty should calm down, too - I think our salmon has taken the bait."

"What makes you think so?"

"Look at the wine left in the jug: it's empty. He relishes the good life more than most that nourishes."¹⁵

"Which is?" asked Cardenas.

"Painting, you dunce. Art... And the king, whose mid gets fed thereby."¹⁶

15 ...more than most that nourishes: "*Le gusta más la buena vida que lo que tanto le sabe.*"

16 Bordenave mentions two *jeux de mots* (*sic*) and alludes to the two meanings of the verb *saber*: to taste or relish, and to know. This undoubtedly clarifies the king's poem, but we are not sure how. (Editors' note)

LA COMANDITA

IX

DIEGO stares off into space, aware of his nakedness and deformity.
Nothing happens.

"I'm sorry, baby," he says.

The girl begins to weep.

"What will Madame say? She'll think I can't get a rise out of a child even."

"Out of a granddad, more like it," he muses, drying her tears. "I've never had children, not that I know of. From what I've seen, they bring you happiness and pain, almost at the same time."

He gives her a kiss on the forehead and a small swat on the rump.

"I'm going to sleep now."

LA COMANDITA

X

STILL in his shirt, the dwarf practiced fencing maneuvers, watching the long shadow he cast in the blond rays of early morning light.

"I was thinking about what you said last night after Guzman left," said the king, "and I think you are right."

Diego de Acedo made a lunge at an imaginary enemy in the beautiful silk tapestry, while the king peed in a urinal.

"Until we see him in action," continued the monarch, "we had better not let anyone interrupt our 'Velázquez'. I know you don't want anyone messing with your spectrum, much less in front of others. But what I am concerned about is not letting the cat out of the bag."

"Don't let that worry you, old boy. It just can't happen," answered Diego, adding a triumphant "*Touché!*" as his foil dimpled the enemy's crotch.

"Wasn't Manuel something? I didn't know he could imitate me so well! If he can pull off an audience with Velázquez,¹⁷ I ought to have him preside over council meetings."

"And go to war, and to Isabel's boudoir, and..."

"You can't imagine what a stiff neck this pillow's given me," complained the king, climbing back in bed.

"Why don't you practice fencing? It would be good for your muscles."

The king closed his eyes. For some reason, his memory was filled again with the flames of the Inquisition, which less than a year ago had consumed two of Villamediana's servants, one of the Duque de Alba's pages, a mulatto slave boy, and the jester Mendocilla. Acedo hadn't spoken to him for a week. Torture, executions, arranged murders...

17 Apparently, after the interview with Cárdenas, Velázquez was received in a "royal audience" by another of Philip IV's jesters, where he accepted the conditions offered. (Editors' note)

LA COMANDITA

"What will people think of us?" mused the monarch out loud.

"What does it matter?" answered the dwarf, trying to pierce a fat fly with his foil.

"But it does, it does. Look at [Charles Stuart](#), turning up like that all of a sudden, because of our doing here."

"There's a fool for you!"

"Oh, come on..."

"And that [bastard he brought with him](#), a drunken freeloader," added the dwarf, missing the fly again.

He paused in frustration, but seeing himself looking huge on the wall, plunged again into his own shadow.

"Do you know what those twits want? [Not a wedding](#), of course?"

"I know what they are looking for," said the king, finally taking up his foil with the words, "*En guard!*"

"How old is the Prince of Wales?" asked the dwarf, thrusting with his right.

"How would I know?" parried the king.

"Judging by the size of... his... cheek..." insisted the dwarf, attacking in two, three, four steps down the length of the antechamber, "I'd say he was close to thirty. And what does he do?"

The king didn't answer. He tried his best, but the dwarf parried each of his thrusts as though he were shooing away the fly, and finished his speech by raising his left eyebrow and saying, "Whatever [his papa](#) tells him to."

The king looked out the window. The day was going to be warm, and the heat could already be felt, even there in the [Northwest Gallery](#). He hoped to be able to outwit his friend, but the dwarf

[here again there is a break in the text, which resumes]

like that bothersome fly that had woken him up this morning and was just now flitting from the [Dürer](#) to the Carracci, and then back to the [Bassano](#).

LA COMANDITA

Just as the king saw it decide to perch on Rubens's *Diana and Calixto*, the dwarf made a skillful, classical thrust, while remarking, "you, however, are just a boy." Then, having wrested away the king's foil, he added, "And yet you've already got dozens of great achievements to your name."

"Don't give me that, Diego," the king retorted in irritation, while slowly coming up to the canvas. "Those are just Guzman's numbers. All of that must be credited to my father."

"But what did your father leave you? A shameful [treaty with the Dutch](#)? An armada consisting of seven broken down old boats? The Indies lost, [Portugal discontent](#) and [Naples on the point of rebellion](#)?"

"I don't care about any of that," lied the king, trying to catch the fly with a flick of his wrist. "What I'm concerned about is how I'll go down in history. Will I be stuck with that moniker of the Young Apollo, or will they see me as a Maecenas, like the [Medici](#) and the great Popes?"

"The chronicles," said Acedo, parrying another thrust by the king, who attacked without warning, "never deal with such weighty matters. They only talk," he counterattacked, "about [Fadrique de Toledo](#), [Feria](#), [Spinola](#) and any others you might also recognize as grandes of Spain; all the rest of us get dwarfed in comparison."

With this, Acedo leaped onto a table and from there to the windowsill.

"The only thing that really matters is this: the window. Cotán saw that clearly, which is why he told you to go to hell."

"That's all?" asked the king, to shut him up.

"That and the lie. I'm in on that part too, which I accept. It's why we need our precious Don Diego."

The dwarf released the rope suspending a lamp from the ceiling and, as the king uttered an amazed, "What the...?", used its counterweight to soar high in the air. The king, taken aback, finished his question with "...devil do you mean by 'the lie'?"

"Don't turn scrupulous on me," glowered the dwarf. "To begin with, letting me paint, which is like others being allowed to build up

LA COMANDITA



Figure VI: Ceiling of the Banqueting House,

Rubens

memory..." he added, trying to smash the fly, which had settled on the ceiling.

"Get down from there!" shouted the king.

"...with temples, mausoleums, gardens and all those other public spaces."

"That's no lie," retorted the prince immediately, "it's money. James Stuart has commissioned a certain Inigo Jones to design the Banqueting House, and he is going to have the ceilings done by Rubens."

"What you ought to have done to the ones here is a good cleaning," answered the dwarf, removing a cobweb with his foil. "Raise the lamp."

The king hoisted the counterweight so the dwarf could descend like one of Fontana's angels, insisting as he did so, "Money, my friend, money. And what money have I got?"

LA COMANDITA

"You've got me there," admitted the flying angel once back on the ground.

"There's always God."

"What good is God?"

"Don't blaspheme!"

"It was just a quote, you dolt."¹⁸

"What I mean," he said, smiling maliciously as he drew near the fly, "is that God could help get me some ducats..."

"That's a different matter," admitted the dwarf.

"So we're back to where we started," added the king, grabbing a slipper. "War with England!" he yelled, smashing the fly with one deft blow.

"Didn't I teach you not to use the other hand?" managed the dwarf.

Steps were heard coming down the hall and then the door of the antechamber opened. With another swift bound, Acedo disappeared under the bed. "Come in!"

"What was all that noise?" asked the Prime Minister.

"Just a fly I was trying to spear with my sword," answered the king.

"Couldn't you have called me?"

"To kill a fly?"

The count accompanied the king into the inner chamber and explained the agenda for the day, while helping him dress. The item that roused the young man's greatest ire was the proposal to give the series of *Poesie*, which Titian had painted for his grandfather, to the Prince of Wales.

"No!" he exploded, before he could contain himself. "He's already taken the *Venus* from El Pardo and *Great Grandfather's portrait*, and just about everything else he could lay his hands on. I have had parades, processions, banquets, soirees, bull fights and spectacles organized for him, as well as a hundred whores a day at his beck and call the whole time

¹⁸ Note appears to say: "manuscript fails to clarify" (but might also read "banned in Havana"). (Editors' note)

LA COMANDITA

he's been here, meaning a hundred thousand at least. If gifts are what he needs, I have given him ostriches for heaven's sake, plus five camels and an elephant from Aranjuez. So what is he planning on doing for me - or to me, actually?"

"Your Majesty, he wishes to become your brother-in-law. You are aware, of course, of how difficult the situation is. If it were up to the House of Commons, we'd already be at war, and you know what damage they could do us at sea, raiding our dwindling revenues from the Indies."

"Oh, my aching neck," complained the king, getting back into bed again.

"You must speak to your sister and convince her that he is not the devil."

"Get her to a nunnery. Go!"

"Don't give her ideas, Sire!"

"It -was just a quote, you dolt."

"It's for the good of Spain. What are a few pictures, a few animals and a sister, compared to such an advantageous alliance?"

The king stared at the count and pointed to his urinal.

"I'd kiss it again," conceded Olivares, with a bow.¹⁹

When he stood back up, he found himself alone in the room.

¹⁹ Reads: REtold (sic) Referring, no doubt, to the chronicles and to a famous anecdote about the king and his royal urinal, passed down to [Elliott](#) via [Marañón](#). (Editors' note)

LA COMANDITA

XI

SEEING him alone in her bed, unarmed and awake, La Margaritona seems at a loss for words. She climbs in under the covers and cradles him beneath her breast, hugging him close. Moonbeams creep through the window, tracing the outline of the beautiful escritorio with its fine carving. Although he can barely see the figures, he knows them by heart: the apple of discord, the abduction of Helen, Menelaus's fury, Paris's escape. Escape. How many times has he needed to flee? And where to? And though he can't see it, he knows his Italian sword is there, on the desk, its guard engraved with that same cowardly scene, the lover fleeing, his beloved in the hands of the murderous husband. La Margaritona has fallen asleep. The voices of the night, the *ohs* and *nows* and *comes*, have subsided into lethargy, the long wait before daylight, the dull ache of tired flesh. Out the window he sees an owl sweep through the silence. Death lingers still, appearing again and again with the Infante, the Queen, Sebastián, Calabazas, Dolores. Dolores.

XII

THE king had Acedo dress in scarlet and crimson with gold trim and lace, in honor of Rubens, who knew how to make such excellent use of those colors. Without his dark everyday apparel, the dwarf was now ready to attend the audience with the Flemish master as a court jester.

"My, you look fancy," smiled the king.

"Go to hell," Acedo growled.

When they arrived at San Lorenzo,²⁰ Rubens was there waiting and promptly began a bow, a sign of obeisance which the monarch did not allow from an artist he so much admired. Out of the corner of his eye, the king saw with misgivings the flourishes which Acedo was dedicating to the painter, thus inaugurating the prerogatives of his new profession.

"I am sure you know Dieguito," said the king, "the most entertaining of all my jesters. At court they call him Pelusa, in honor of the little hair he has left."²¹

They strolled attentively through several rooms, smiling at the original frescoes in the Hall of Princely Virtue and at the ones by Urbino in the Prier's rooms, the panels by Zuccaro and Tibaldi in the basilica and the imperial staircase, stopping with deeper respect before works by Titian, El Greco, and a number of Flemish and Venetian artists, which at the time were found in the library, the writing room, the dark vestry and many other rooms.

"This is quite a jumble," noted the king. "Don't you think so, Rubens?"

"Indeed I do, Your Majesty," agreed the painter.

20 The Monastery of San Lorenzo, El Escorial.

21 *Pelusa*: Borde's private homage to Maradona? More likely a *jeu de mots* aimed over Rubens' head at Acedo: *pelusa* means "fuzz", but is also a nickname for jealous children.

LA COMANDITA

"One of these days I shall have Velázquez put these things into proper order."

"Then we could have the maestro hung here," offered Acedo.

"It would be an honor to be put down in history that way," responded Rubens, twirling his gorgeous mustache, his pale eyes on the hand of Adam, in the [painting after Titian](#) he had done in El Escorial.

"Wasn't it quite daring to try and outdo the master of masters?" asked the king in admiration.

"It wasn't an attempt to outdo him, Your Majesty. The idea was merely to produce a work that would coincide with Titian's."

Perplexed, the king fell silent, while Rubens stole a look at Acedo.

"Over half a century ago," the maestro continued, "the subject of the apple was an academic admonition against sin. In contemporary hands, however, the proposition is fantastic, and decidedly sarcastic. Titian's Adam, a contemporary of [Luther](#) but not at all cowed by him, sees the apple and reaches for his wife's breast. My Adam is the same, but is terrified at Eve, who smiles without shame or glory worth mentioning."

"What about the parrot?" asked the king.

"It's there," volunteered Acedo, "because, in the end, he has missed his mark and the work is repetition."

This brought a smile from the discerning maestro, and they walked on to the dining hall, where the king had had [Montiño](#) organize a private banquet to astound Rubens. On the walls were all the works done by Velázquez since his arrival.

"I want your most sincere opinion," said the king, partaking of a sparkling wine with his distinguished visitor.

"And you shall have it, Your Majesty," replied the painter, "as far as my limitations allow."

"You are modest, Rubens," said the king.

"He's a diplomat," interjected Acedo. "That's why he's come to see us."

LA COMANDITA

"To avoid constraints," continued the king, "we shall be quite alone."

"With the jester?" noted Rubens. "Isn't he a friend of Velázquez's?"

"His discretion is as great as his ignorance, especially in matters of art."

They stopped in front of a number of portraits of the king, one on horseback, and Rubens began to stroke his beard.

"I imagine," said the king, "that you've already seen them, but I preferred to have the paintings grouped so that you could view them as a whole and, if possible, see their evolution."

"Marvelous, this wine. From the Penedes, no doubt," observed Rubens. "Yes, indeed- these works. I've seen them already, even discussed some of them with your Velázquez. He's quite reserved, though, and in fact seems uncomfortable even discussing his own work. Gives an impression of total detachment from his painting. Astonishing."

"He must be overwhelmed by your presence."

"Perhaps, but if Your Majesty could only see how loquacious my friend Van Dyck can be. There's a man who loves to talk about all his own works... and even about those that are not."

"Perhaps it's a matter of personality."

Acedo, pausing in front of a canvas and totally alert to all of Rubens's reactions, could contain himself no longer.

"Enough nattering. How about getting to the point before all these victuals go to waste? For example, what does your Excellency think of this first portrait?"

"Ah yes, an early work indeed," replied Rubens. "Full of beginner's mistakes. The truth is, subject, pose, treatment, drawing - *en fin*, everything about it is outmoded. A bit awkward in fact."

"Awkward, is it?" gaped Acedo, going more scarlet than his doublet.

"Yes, of course, awkward," approved the king. "The man had just arrived from Seville, barely out of his shell; served his apprenticeship with Pacheco... it all adds up."

LA COMANDITA

"It was most understanding of Your Majesty, though," added Rubens, "to pose for such an antiquated scene. Take that falcon, for instance. It's just not done these days."

"He looked so eager, you know," replied the king, giving Acedo a look "I couldn't bear to contradict him, at least on that first encounter."

Hands on hips and ruffled as the falcon, Acedo challenged: "What about the little matter of re-spon-si-bil-i-ty?"

"I haven't forgotten it," responded Rubens, taking another sip of wine. "It plays a role, no doubt about it. But your modern, up-to-date artist, one who's talented and sure of himself - one like that would never be affected to such a degree. Here, the sheer old-fashionedness of the thing seems the chief influence, the treatment's so harsh, so dry, so..."

"Do spare us more thunder, grand 'n potent Excellency," interrupted Acedo. "As no one's born a wonder in technical competency."

"You must forgive my jester," intervened the king. "He's enormously fond of the painter, and criticism - even the most sensible and wise - goes straight to his heart."

"It honors you, Dieguito," answered Rubens, giving him a look of appreciation. "You defend Velázquez much better than he does himself."

Pastries and an assortment of cold meats were served, along with a chilled vinho verde so exquisite as to render all else irrelevant. Acedo grabbed a hock and went up to a portrait of Olivares, complete with key and spurs.

"What about this one? Isn't it imposing and lordly?"

"Somewhat out of proportion, don't you think? The head a bit small for such an impressive body? The count's a huge man, but this is excessive, as though he'd been drawn from below, as if..."

Rubens stopped suddenly and looked down at the dwarf.

"Do go on, Rubens, let us hear more," encouraged the king, full of visible glee.

"Extraordinary thrust," the prudent painter said, raising his goblet. "Is it from the Miño?"

LA COMANDITA

"But the painting, Rubens, tell me about the painting," insisted the king.

"Ah yes, well, it's just a small matter after all. Must be a way of emphasizing the subject. The truth is, though, that this same effect appears again in quite surprising places. Even Your Majesty's portraits are somewhat... er... out of proportion."

"Couldn't it just be that the canons have had to be altered to suit such a long-legged fellow?"

"You must be joking!" retorted Rubens, scandalized. "His Majesty is a fine-looking man, as anyone can see in the portrait I did of him recently."

"Pray don't hold it against him," chuckled the king, "it's just the nonsense of a jester, the prattle of a poor, embittered dwarf ... who's going bald."

"Yes, well, in any case, the worst one is that equestrian portrait there. The horse is off balance, the pose ungainly, the background unimpressive. There's no character to it. These works have got to impress, move the viewer to admiration, instill respect. They have to be infused with a special atmosphere - glory - as Your Majesty understands."

"Most certainly. This painting is devoid of charm. Just what Barberini and dal Pozzo said of the portrait Velázquez did of his Eminence: no spirit in it."

"Enough said," intervened Acedo. "Mr. Rubens is not interested in the idle gossip of this household, much less in what two fussy Romans might have thought."

"*Au contraire, Dieguillo, au contraire,*" replied Rubens, "I've been a lover of gossip since childhood. Made me doubt for years which art to go into, painting or politics."

"And which did your Excellency finally choose?" asked Acedo, dryly.

"Well," suggested the king, "looks like it's time to eat. Shall we be seated?"



Figure VII: *Philip IV*, Velázquez, El Prado



Figure VIII: *Philip IV*, Rubens, Hermitage

LA COMANDITA

The table was spread with roast rashers and sweetmeats of lamb with stuffed endives, and crusted veal sweetbreads in crawler sauce, to be relished with a monumental red likely to inspire a portrait of its own.

"So is there nothing here that pleases you?" inquired Acedo, expectantly.

"The bouquet of this Cariñena," responded Rubens. "And, of course... a few signs of improvement. That young man, now, with the unfinished left hand, or the portrait of the Infante... The figure still wants better composition, of course."

"I always told him that perhaps a piece of furniture, a curtain, or something like that might help," suggested the king.

"Exactly. Take my full-length portrait of Your Majesty, done after the one over there, where Your Majesty's holding a letter. I added a bit of background scenery, you see, to create a sense of atmosphere.

Then there's some curtain drapery to give the scene movement and tension. Truth be told, though, real dynamism comes from how one treats the canvas. In my case, light colors go on thick and opaque, covering the layer of oil and any chalk showing through. But the dark colors, now - they're left light and translucent, just the opposite of what we see here. The optical effect is obvious: my lights are warm as doves; shadows cold as pearls. Modulation? Question of thickness. The secret's in the layers."

The king listened deep in thought, Acedo with one eyebrow raised. The first courses were removed and replaced with artichokes and ham hocks, game birds in cold aspic with poached eggs, and a change of wine, this time a truly admirable one with such voluptuous body that their spirits were aroused almost instantaneously. Finally, the dwarf announced:

"What I like best about that painting is the absence of everything - that and the glove. That's where the dignity comes from, without props of any kind. Just the floor and the wall, an imperceptible line separating the two. And about the way the canvas is treated - a brown background is enough for me, well spread with a spatula. The pigments, tempered with

LA COMANDITA

linseed oil, go on almost by themselves, reserving thickness for touches of light. Then, just the softest of brushes and there you are."

"Been paying close attention to the maestro, haven't we?" acknowledged Rubens.

"Nonsense, he's drunk. So is there hope, do you think?" inquired the king.

"For Velázquez? No doubt about it," responded the maestro. "Still young, isn't he?"

"Well, let's see. How old are you, Rubens?"

"Fifty-one, Your Majesty."

"That means that when you first visited Spain, you were only how old? Twenty something?"

"Twenty-six. Ravishing Rioja... from Elciego, perhaps?"

"No. At the age of twenty-six and with numerous occupations, you painted, while here, portraits of Lerma, *Heraclitus and Democritus*. And what is more, shortly afterwards, when you were just over thirty, you painted the *Adoration of the Magi*, for the *City of Antwerp*."²²

"By the way, in case Your Majesty hasn't heard, I've just enlarged that old work of my youth. Added a strip to the top and another to one side."

"Yes, I've seen it. And you've also done a self-portrait; but, if you don't mind my saying so, that work of your youth was a magnificent thing, colossal and perfectly balanced, and the desire to improve it has proved detrimental."

Fresh baked sea bream was served, along with wood pigeons in black sauce, roast veal udders and roast piglet.

22 Note clearly reads: "Purchased at Rodrigo Calderón auction"; the rest unintelligible. Perhaps something to the effect that, with the auction of Charles I and works of Rubens himself, half a Prado was filled. (Editors' note)

LA COMANDITA

"But what I was driving at," continued the king - "what was I driving at, anyway?"

"The age of the artist."

"Exactly. Our Velázquez is twenty-nine years old and here we have the work he has done as a court painter. At the age of twenty-nine, Raphael had already astounded the world, not to mention Michelangelo, Paolo, Cellini or Botticelli. As his Eminence Cardinal Berberana was telling me..."

"Barberini," offered Rubens, who was used to drinking.

"Exactly," ratified the king. "Do you know the Cardinal?"

"Haven't had the pleasure."

"They say that Gian Lorenzo Bermi... Bormi... Bemimini..."

"Bernini, Your Majesty."

"Exactly. He must be the same age as Velázquez, and he's already surpassed everything imaginable in sculpture. And as for your friend Van Dyck, that con... pardon me... fident soul, he has certainly demonstrated his ability to dream through his work."

"Very great painter indeed, Van Dyck"

"The question now, between the two of us, is... - more wine?"

"Yes, excellent, marvelous for the digestion."

"The question is, shall we give it some more time...or is it time to despair?"

The king glanced at Acedo and saw that, with the same appetite but at half the size, the dwarf had been unable to keep up with the other two and had dropped off to sleep in his enormous chair.

"There's one who's lost to the world," continued the king, smiling at Rubens. "Better this way. What I mean is, have we got good wood... or should we find another tree?"

"He needs his confidence built up a bit, Your Majesty. Let him develop his talent freely. It's a good thing, you know, that he can't hear us; might have given him a twinge."

LA COMANDITA

When Acedo awoke from his stupor, he found himself alone with all his paintings, in the huge dining hall. He picked up a knife and strode over to the first one he had painted, the one with the ineffable falcon. With great deliberation, he stabbed a corner of the canvas and began methodically to carve it up: first one slash, then another, and another. In a moment he had created a small heap of strips within the frame. A page entered and stopped in amazement.

"Needed touching up a bit," explained the painter.

LA COMANDITA

XIII

FIRST glimmerings of morning. Tired of lying awake, he gets up quietly, dresses and goes out. From the doorway, only a small boy can be seen. He takes a long pee, yawns and stretches, then adjusts his sword. The boy comes over to stare. He is dirty, curious and has questions to ask. What is his name, how old is he, why is he so short. The dwarf answers patiently.

"Do your dick if you gimme a coin?" the urchin finally offers.

Acedo is startled.

"How old are you?" he asks.

"Five," lies the child, holding up the fingers of one hand.

"Go roll a hoop," grumbles the dwarf.

"Come on, gimme sumphin'," insists the boy. "Just a coin - my Pa showed me how."

Acedo begins to scold, just as someone comes out.

"Hey you bugger, whatcha doing to the kid?"

"The kid needs some manners," snaps Acedo.

"So who's gonna give 'im some? You? Fresh from the whorehouse?"

The dwarf turns to leave. Others come outside to see what the noise is about.

"Get a load of his excellency here. Giving free lessons to the poor."

"Looks so big and strong, gonna give us a lickin' for sure."

"Let's see what he's got on 'im."

Surrounded, Acedo unsheathes his sword. He manages to keep two at bay, but another comes up on his left and drives his dagger home. Just a street kid, more or less the same size as his victim. They hear the watchmen coming and run away.

The dagger has reached right into his soul, but Diego lies to the women: some papers lying next to his heart have saved him. It's nothing, he insists, just a close call with his underworld.

XIV

IT seems to take forever to get to the Alcazar. He avoids Alcalá, takes Gracia instead. The city...

[Another nearly illegible paragraph. To get to the castle, the dwarf appears to cut through the market, and from there climbs the hill to the Torre Dorada. The text continues:

...He takes a shortcut through the Hall of Mirrors and... rests a moment against a marble table... a smear of blood there too, though none shows on his dark clothes.]

Don Francisco de Rojas sees him.

"What are you doing here?"

"I've got an audience with the King," he manages to say.

Don Francisco seems surprised and checks with Don Gaspar de Fuensalida.

"With His Majesty?" questions the Greffier. "So early? I'll have to see about this, most certainly."

He does so with Don José de Salinas.

"Impossible," says the latter, and leaves to consult with still others.

Opinions are raised, one after the other, on up to Medina de las Torres and even as high as Haro, who is just on the point of refusing audience, when finally the king appears.

"Diego!" he exclaims, catching sight of the dwarf. "Come in, come in to my office."

Somewhat bowed by the years, the king still shuffles along twice as fast as the other.

[Here again some text is lost, with descriptions of the royal room:
...embroidered in gold and coral beads...

LA COMANDITA

With details:

...light, from the river, the garden, the square...

...the tapestry of the seven planets, the miniature of [Piazza Navona](#)...
the clocks; the works by [Guicciardini](#)... [El Quijote](#), [La Celestina](#), the classics,
the obscure and the prohibited.]

"[Galileo](#)?" he wonders out loud, seeing a new acquisition.

"[The dialogues](#)."

"You dare to take on that bull?"

"The only mistake he made was to believe in mathematics. In that he was exactly wrong."

"For you, of course, to be the center of the universe has always been a good deal."

"What's that?"

"Whatever it takes to screw Barberini..."

"Come again? I can hardly hear you; try and speak up, man."

"I can't, I'm down here."

"I don't know what you are saying. I am concerned that we haven't given the world geniuses like Galileo. A while ago a note was sent to that idiot [della Faille](#) to request patronage, and he could think of nothing better to say than - makes me furious even to repeat it - that we are so involved in war that we have no time, interest or money to waste on matters and tastes in cosmography and mathematics. Miserable sod!"

"There's always a winner, in everything," murmurs Acedo, his whole spirit bent on keeping himself upright.

But even as he tries, he loses his balance and is on the point of falling against the bookcase, when the king reaches down to grab him and props him up against an oak chair.

"Diego! What's the matter, what's wrong?" cries the monarch.

"Nothing," responds the dwarf. "Just weakness."

LA COMANDITA

"But you're bleeding!" exclaims the king, kneeling for a closer look after seeing the blood on his hand. "I'm going to summon the physicians."

"No, please, wait. I have to give you something."

[At this important moment, the text again becomes irreparably illegible. From here to the end, only a few fragments:

"...Did you talk to him?..."

"...The journey did him in..."

"...What will become of you?..."

"...Don't you see I died yesterday?..."

"...Tomorrow I shall appoint you Painter..."

"...don't feel like it... not even finishing the Infanta..."

"...Wouldn't you like a glass of water?"

"Yes, thanks, I'll get it."

"Don't move."

...He limps over to the desk, pouring a glass from his own pitcher...

...bringing it back in his left hand...

...He sits down on the floor next to him...

...a parcel of papers, the wrapping smeared with blood...

"...letters over the years, the diaries..."

Scene impossible to reconstruct from so few details. Apparently: dwarf hands over rest of manuscript to the king (to keep it from falling into indiscreet hands?). Scene left unresolved; only these words:

"The naked truth," conceded Diego, "is only..."]

LA COMANDITA



Figure IX: La Puerta de La Villa, Habsburg Madrid