

Her Name was Julia

I was to meet Nico, a friend of Philippe's and the most esteemed photographer in Leuven, a half hour ago. I'd finished a three-hour training ride through some spectacular countryside, then stopped at Het Moorinneken in the Grote Markt for a couple quick beers. I would have stayed for a third but Emma, my Portuguese friend and waitress there, urged me along.

"Philippe sets up a meeting with Nico and you're late?" She shook her head, looking down at me as I finished my second Witkap, my preferred beer in this beer-crazy country. "How could you?"

"I'm not going to be late, Emma," I said.

"Don't you know who he is?"

"Yes," I said as if answering a nagging mother, "I know who he is." I stood up, wobbling, and reached for my helmet.

"You're drunk!"

"I'm not drunk. Two beers," I said, holding up two fingers.

"Yes, in less than ten minutes." She handed me my water bottle and shoved me playfully. "Get going now before Nico thinks you're a fool. Don't forget your camera!" She lifted it from the table—an old Hasselblad medium-format model—and I slung it over my shoulder. I straddled my bike, clipped in my left foot, and gazed up at the Town Hall's rococo exterior, the sun just dipping behind its spiky towers.

“You know, in all the times I’ve sat here, I’ve never once taken a picture of it,” I said. “What does that say about me?”

“It says you’re going to be late—now get going. Go!”

I pushed off and wound my way through the Markt, then turned onto the Bondgenotenlaan heading east, and before long I was on the edge of town. The road opened into spotty farms and villas, and I was able to make good time going close to twenty-five miles an hour. I dropped my head and shifted up a gear and I smiled to myself at my new-found freedom. I don’t mean merely the freedom of the open road, but the freedom I’d given myself, the release from the cycle of pain I’d known since the day I was born. Even now I felt the uncomfortable ache in my chest that came with exertion. I lifted my hand and ran a finger vertically on my jersey, absently, habitually, along the scar beneath. I say *scar* as if singular. I’ve had exactly seven heart surgeries in my life, each new scar layered over the previous, hiding all but the most recent foray into my chest—the last one being two years ago.

I took comfort tracing the tip of my finger along the scar, knowing no scalpel would ever slice me open again. I’d come to Belgium to live out my final days, to enjoy them as I never had before, unencumbered by grief, in morbid anticipation of the unknown.

The house was a low, pale building with a long, slanted roof. Stout bushes ran along the perimeter, their tapered branches reaching pleadingly for sunlight. A warped fence encompassed the yard on three sides, all but the one facing the road. The most distinctive feature of the property, which was large, was the canopy of massive trees whose branches spread horizontally like roots in the sky. The trees let only speckled puzzle pieces of light through to shine on the dirt-and-grass ground. Two dogs stood back along the fence tied with rope to a tree. There was only dirt and no grass where they trod incessantly in an arc of hunger and hope.

Philippe was around back sitting at a picnic table watching Nico, who sat with splayed legs on a stool before an easel, painting. In front of Nico were three young women. They all had dark hair falling to their backs, and each wore a white formal blouse and a blue skirt, like something you’d wear at church. They sat in a slight curve facing Nico.

I was a bit confused. Nico was supposed to be a photographer. I was meeting him so he could teach me a few things and I could improve my own technique. I sat down beside Philippe, who moved his cane to make room for me, and whispered in his ear to which he replied, "Don't make a ruckus, but you certainly don't have to whisper."

"Yes, don't whisper," said Nico, "it makes me nervous. I would rather you just talked like a normal person."

"Sorry I'm late," I said to Philippe. "Traffic, you know."

"Ah," Philippe waved it off. "If that is your biggest crime, you are doing well."

Nico, who was shirtless, wore khaki pants and sandals. Modest layers of fat lay one atop the other over his belt like slim, stacked sandbags. His skin was dark, and though he was balding with greasy white hair slicked back on his bean-shaped head, the tan gave him a healthful appearance.

"Why is he painting?" I whispered.

"Again with the whispering!" said Nico. The girls, each of them, gave me a stern, frightened look.

"He has exceptionally good hearing, James," said Philippe. I fell silent, my eyebrows raised as I looked around guiltily. "He wants to know why you're painting," Philippe said to Nico.

"Why am I painting?"

"Yes, that's what he asked."

"Why doesn't he ask me?"

"I don't know." Then, to me, "Why don't you ask him?"

"I didn't want to bother you," I said to Nico.

"I already told you, your talking doesn't bother me. Are you the sort who needs to be told more than once to believe things?" Nico for the first time, brush aloft, turned to look at me. He seemed to be waiting, almost challenging me to say something. I felt like a fool sitting there with his dark eyes and that big sweaty stomach snickering at me.

"I didn't know you were a painter, too," I finally said, trying to be affable. The girl in the middle laughed into her hand.

"A painter, *too*?" said Nico, who was back at his canvas. He winced as if pained.

“I told him you were a photographer,” said Philippe.

“Why would you tell him a thing like that?”

“In all fairness, the last time I saw you, you *were* a photographer.”

“That was months ago,” said Nico.

“Yes,” said Philippe, “I should not have assumed so much.”

“You don’t do photography anymore?” I asked.

“Not if I can help it,” said Nico.

“You don’t enjoy it?”

“Detest it. Abhor it.”

“Really, now,” said Philippe, who seemed amused. The girl on the right, who was more slender and angular than the other two, kept looking at me with narrowed eyes and her chin slightly turned, as if I were being examined.

“I don’t know what I was thinking. I wasted ten years peering through a square hole. Girls, your chins are dropping. As beautiful as you are, if you drop your chins you’ll look suspicious instead of innocent. Do you understand?” Nico approached them and placed his fat, black-nailed thumb under their chins and brought them up.

“Are any of your pieces for sale?” Philippe asked.

“Which images would those be?”

“The photographs.”

“I think they’ve all been sold or thrown out,” said Nico.

“You must be kidding,” said Philippe, his mouth open.

“I’m sure there are some somewhere. I don’t know. I suppose some weren’t all that bad.”

Philippe turned his head away and shook it with real regret. “Nico. . .” he said. “You were the talk of the underground.”

“I still am, so I hear,” he winked.

“Yes, you are. You always have been. How many artists can move effortlessly from painting, to photography, and then back to painting again?”

“That’s pretty God damn funny, Philippe, you thinking that I was still taking photographs. That was two lifetimes ago.”

“Two?”

“Two, maybe three. You’re not still living the life you did six months ago, are you?” He asked this with mild concern.

“I’m no artist like you, Nico,” Philippe said.

“What the hell does that matter?” He had his brush in his teeth and sat admiring the three young women. They all had wide faces, high cheekbones, and dimpled chins. Their hair was terrifyingly dark, nearly black, and their lips were wide to complement their faces.

“He came to see your photographs,” sighed Philippe, “and now there’s nothing for him to see.”

“Have a drink,” Nico said to me. “Inside. In the kitchen.”

I figured, why not? The meeting was pretty much a bust, though it was enjoyable enough listening to Philippe and Nico talk, and the three models weren’t torture to look at. I went in and found beer in the refrigerator. I checked drawers until I found an opener, and then opened two bottles and came back out. One of the cats followed me, meowing, thinking I’d opened a can of cat food.

“Here,” I said, and offered a beer to Philippe. I knew he was drinking wine and he’d decline it, and then I’d have two beers instead of one.

“Nico?” I said, raising a bottle his way.

“It’s all yours, kid,” he said. “Drink, and watch me paint, and admire these beautiful creatures.”

Nico decided to have one model, the one on the left, turn away so that her face was in profile. The other two remained looking at him. I stood up and walked behind him to see the women from his perspective, and to see what the painting looked like. The composition was from the waist up. The trunks of the trees behind the three ascended behind them like pythons; this was not something Nico necessarily intended, but was a thought I had. Nico was painting over the third girl’s face, the one in profile, replacing her features with clouds and a blue sky. The contrast of her realistic form and profile of clouds stunned me. I watched as Nico filled in the creases of the clouds and made them pop out of the canvas. Whether painting the clouds was something premeditated or an idea just occurring to him as he had her turn her face, it was clear he had caught an idea and knew there was importance in it. I waved at Philippe to take a

look.

“Oh, that’s marvelous,” said Philippe.

“You think so?” Nico asked sincerely.

“I do.”

“How about you?”

“He means you.” Philippe gave me a nudge.

“I’m no expert on—”

“You’ve got two eyes, don’t you? A brain?”

My eyebrows lifted with embarrassment. “Uh, yeah,” I said. The girl on the right flashed her eyes at me, giving me a quick nod.

“There. You’re qualified to have an opinion.”

I moved my eyes from the painting, to the models, then down to the painting again. “It’s good,” I said. “It’s really good. It makes my eyes want to move around.”

“Best compliment you could hope for,” said Philippe. “Anybody who says *good* isn’t a bull shitter. A bull shitter would have used more syllables.”

Nico laughed, then rubbed the now smooth protuberance of his arched stomach. “Girls,” he said. “Come take a look.”

They came around to look at the painting. The two with their faces still intact seemed pleased; the other one had some concerns.

“You painted clouds on my face,” she said in broken English. “You have not yet finished mine, yes?”

Nico, sheepishly, raised his palms in surrender. “Well. . .” he said.

“But I have a real face—like them—look at it. Why did you paint clouds over my face and not theirs?”

I felt breathing on the back of my neck. The angular girl had moved behind me, her chin nearly on my shoulder. “Hands, eh?” she whispered.

“Because,” said Nico, “the painting looks better that way.”

This didn’t go over well with the girl.

“But you did not paint over their faces? You hid only mine. Are you tired of my face, is that it?”

“Look,” Nico tried explaining. “If I’d have painted your face just like theirs, you would be satisfied, right?”

She nodded, still with eyes glaring.

“Since I only painted *yours* with clouds, you noticed it right off. You ask me, *Nico*, *why do you only paint my lovely face with those puffy white clouds?*”

“I did not say that,” she said with restrained bitterness.

“Instead of making you pleased, *merely* pleased, it made you think. A question popped into that pretty little head of yours—a question for which I have no answer.”

“But no one has a face like that,” said the girl, pointing viciously. “How can you have clouds where your eyes and nose are supposed to be? You make me look like a fool.”

“On the contrary,” said Nico. “I’ve turned you into a riddle.”

“But I don’t want to be a riddle. I want to be beautiful like my sisters. They look beautiful and I—I look foolish!”

She fled into the house. Nico sighed big, ruffled his wispy greasy hair, and shrugged.

“Am I that much of a pig,” he muttered.

“She’s always been sensitive,” the youngest sister said. “Even as a girl.”

The other one, who was now moving away from my shoulder, said, “It looks beautiful. Like all your paintings, it’s beautiful.” She kissed Nico on his dark cheek.

He had no choice but to go inside.

The other two stood for a moment, then hurried in as well. They returned with four bottles of beer and a bottle of wine and sat down with Philippe and me. When they were sitting for Nico, silent and still, they’d been like statues that you could appreciate, but not interact with. Now their shyness was gone, and soon the four of us were drinking quite fast and enjoying ourselves.

“He pays us very well,” said the younger one, whose name was Gia. “More than we could make serving drinks to drunks.” She burst out in laughter after the comment.

“And he *is* a great artist,” added Julia, the eldest of the three, who was more thoughtful and spoke nearly perfect English. “I’d pose for Nico

even if he didn't pay us," she said. She leaned forward looking directly into my eyes. "So, you photograph hands."

"Who told you that?"

"Nico," she said, then lay her own hand for a moment on mine. It was small and warm. "Don't worry—I think they're simply divine."

"You've seen them?"

"You don't think Nico would waste his time on some talentless hack, do you?"

"You don't look like a photographer," said Gia, teasing a fingernail between her teeth, her chin propped up on her palm.

"No?" I said still looking at Julia, but then turned my head. "What do I look like to you?"

"I'm not sure." She reached across the table to move my face left and right. "I think you look like a goat."

"*Gia*," scolded Julia. I laughed and so did Philippe.

"Well, he does. Did I say goats were ugly? It's obvious he doesn't look like a photographer. He looks like a goat. I like goats." She shoved her head forward for emphasis.

"Nico likes your work," said Julia. "He says you've got what it takes."

"He's a wonderful photographer," said Philippe.

"So, you're the one?" I said to him.

"As Julia said, Nico doesn't see just anyone. I had to show him a few samples of your work before he'd agree to meet with you. I hope you don't mind."

"I don't see what the big deal is," said Gia. "You like hands, so what? I like eyelashes, but you don't see me taking pictures of hundreds of eyelashes, do you?"

Julia took a swipe at her across the table. "You don't know which end of the camera is up," she said, narrowing her eyes derisively. "And if you did, you probably would take pictures of eyelashes since you spend all day in front of a mirror anyway."

"Well, at least I didn't spend all my time growing up in front of a TV like *you*," shot back Gia.

I flashed Philippe a grin, which Julia noticed. She gave me a swift shove. "I saw that."

Nico and the third sister, Valentina, returned.

"Valentina," called Gia, "don't you think this young man looks like a goat? He says he's a photographer, but I think he looks exactly like a goat—a young, handsome goat."

Valentina didn't seem to understand.

"That's enough," said Julia.

"But he *does*. He looks just like a goat."

"*Enough*." Julia raised her curled fist. "Beat it."

Gia stormed off in a huff.

"I'm glad to see you two smiling," said Philippe, meaning Nico and Valentina.

"Nothing that a good cry and a glass of milk won't cure," said Nico. "She's a bright girl. High-strung, but then all young intellectuals who are also beautiful are high-strung." He shrugged. "Take the good with the bad."

The sun shifted and the puzzle piece dabs of light moved from the ground to the wooden fence. Nico and Valentina were back at the painting. She took her seat on the stool, dropping her chin again until Nico reminded her and she raised it. Philippe got up and meandered around looking at the yard. You could hear his cane breaking small twigs as he went.

"You're a photographer, eh?"

"I try to be."

"And you came all the way out here because you thought Nico was a photographer."

"Sure," I said. "Philippe's been talking about him for months. I'd heard about his infrared photographs. I was hoping to see some."

Julia poured herself more wine and leaned forward and her eyes roamed over my face. It felt as if I were being sized up and judged. I grinned wide and took another drink. I'd given up women long ago. Well, long in a young man's life, anyway. I couldn't remember the last time I was with someone. Certainly, before I came to Belgium this last

time. I wasn't impotent. But I didn't see any point in pursuing sex, let alone a relationship, when there wasn't any possibility of a future. I suppose others would do just the opposite and try to grab as much as they could while they had time. I just didn't see the point. So as Julia stared into my eyes appraising me, I merely waited with the patience of indifference.

"And you like old things," she suddenly said. "Tell me about it, Eddy Merckx man. I want to know how it's done. How does a budding young Bresson like you capture the hands of time?"

I told her about my ride yesterday.

"I went out about twenty miles from Leuven," I said. "I can't remember the name of the town. Sometimes I ride until I get lost and then find my way back by way of the sun. It's a challenge, I suppose. Anyway, I stopped at this village and sat under some trees, and then along came this guy and his small dog, which seemed to be leading him. He must have lived through the war. I didn't know if he was old enough to have fought in it, or if he was a boy then, but he lived through it one way or another. He saw friends and relatives die. He wept as the Nazis moved in, then cheered when they were forced out. Yet, here he was, alone, walking his dog, invisible to everyone who passed by. I'd asked him to stop, which he was glad to do. I took pictures, not just of his hands, but of him and his little dog standing there."

She took another sip of wine, then lifted her chin to examine my face more closely.

"What's the obsession with old age, Eddy?" she said. "Somebody like you. Seems kind of weird. It doesn't add up."

Her staring had made me want to laugh but now, looking back into her eyes, I felt the quick rush of expectancy.

"I understand old men," I told her. "It might be hard for you to understand that, but I just do. I feel comforted when I'm around them."

"Old men?"

I nodded.

"Most guys I know use the ol' SLR as chick bait."

I laughed. "Maybe I would if I were on the prowl," I said.

“Yeah, sure, maybe you would. I mean, why not? But then a guy like you—I doubt if he’d have to resort to such obvious carrots to snare the rabbit.” She took a sip of her wine, sticking out her pinkie, never losing contact with my eyes. “What brings you to Belgium?”

I looked down to my cycling jersey and flashed my eyes to my helmet on the table.

“Only the cycling? Come on, there must be something besides the obvious.” She leaned in, her knees pressing me. “Is it a girl? Is it, Eddy? Did you fly all the way over here for the romance and intrigue?”

“No,” I said, “no girl. Should there be?”

“Should there be?” She leaned back in surprise, then came forward again. “Why, of course. Why do you think I’m here?”

“For a girl?”

She shoved me on the arm. “For the *romance*,” she said. “To immerse myself in the cauldron, so to speak. To swim in the soup—drink it up and swallow it down and see how it feels in my stomach. What else is being young all about?”

“That’s one way of looking at it.”

“There’s another way?” She looked at me, tilting her head.

“I’m not really worried about that,” I said.

“Too busy with the hands?”

“Seems so.” I took a drink from my beer.

She continued staring at me. Her eyes, except when she itched her upper thigh beneath her skirt suddenly, never left my face. I felt my cheeks burning from the alcohol and the heat and her scrutiny.

She suddenly stood, her legs like slender flying buttresses on either side of the bench. “Come on,” she said and held out her hand.

She took me to the far side of the house where there was a covered porch. She made sure the door was closed and brought a finger to her lips, indicating that I should make no noise. Poised on her toes, though there seemed no reason for it, she pulled away a tarp to reveal stacks of boxes. In the boxes were photographs. Some were matted, but most weren’t.

They were neatly piled with large books in between the layers to keep them flat. I began looking through them, astonished as much with the care she had given them as with the prints themselves.

“Nico would kill me if he knew,” she said.

“He doesn’t know these are here?”

“Every time he dumped them into the trash, I pulled them out. He burned an awful lot, and that couldn’t be helped. But he never comes back here. He thinks there’s nothing but old tires and junk, and before I started hiding his photographs that *was* all that was back here. He’s only been in this room once that I remember, and that was because he was drunk and he was looking for the toilet.”

The photographs were all in black and white—I knew Nico never worked in color. I found some infrared and these I examined more closely. The infrared were mostly landscapes where the white foliage contrasted with the darkness of everything else. There were many nudes, mostly of the three sisters. I found one of Julia sitting on a fence, clothed, with cows and the setting sun behind her. I don’t know why, but I looked at this one longer than the others until I was aware of her gazing over my shoulder. She perched her chin there, breathing into my neck.

“I was scared to death,” she said. “That’s a bull, not a cow. Nico wanted me to get in with him. I told him he was nuts.”

I set the picture down and continued on, casually, but kept the corner tip exposed as I lay others over it in the vague hope of finding it later. “Are you going to keep them?”

She moved to my side and shook her head almost fearfully. “These are Nico’s, not mine. Heck, what would I do with them?”

“They’re probably worth a lot of money,” I said. I said it to see how she’d respond.

“Aw, I wouldn’t sell them,” she said. “I just can’t see these things going to the dumpster, is all. Today he says he’s a painter, and tomorrow he might pick up his camera again—who knows? But when the day comes and he changes his mind, I’m going to pull back this tarp and give him the biggest surprise of his life. Can you imagine? I mean, can you *imagine?*”

I nodded, but I was only half listening. I came across another picture of her sitting in a wicker chair holding a cat. Sunlight washed the right side of her face casting the other side in deep shadow. Her eyes appeared heavy, as if caught at the beginning of a blink or, perhaps, because she was fatigued. Her chin was thrust upward, further turning her eyes into slices of mystery. She had the quality of seeming sad and happy at the same time.

I liked this one better than the one with the bull. “Can I take this?”

She seemed surprised. “You want that one? There are loads more better than that one.”

“But I like this one,” I said, smiling.

She snatched the photograph from my hand and looked it over. “I remember the day he took it. I was hungry—famished—but there wasn’t a thing to eat in the house and so I rode into town right after and had the biggest bowl of rice you ever saw.” She rubbed her finger over the print as if trying to wipe away a smudge. She passed it back. “Take it, Eddy, but don’t let Nico see you with it. Not unless you want to see him blow his top.”

The photograph wasn’t matted, so I rolled it neatly and slipped it in the back pouch of my riding jersey. We left the house and returned to the others. The sun was falling. Nico had started a fire and I could have stayed—Philippe could have put my bike in his trunk and given me a ride—but I wanted to get home before dark.

“I’m heading out to the botanical gardens tomorrow,” I said. “You should come along.” We were sitting together on the bench of the picnic table, legs extended, watching the fire.

“What for? I mean, do you like flowers?”

“Sure, you do.” She smiled, suddenly and comically, as if I were taking her picture. “All right—that sounds rather whimsically unusual—but I can’t in the morning. Classes. How about the afternoon?”

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll come over and we can ride there together. Do you have a bike?”

“Nothing like yours, but I have a bike.”

“You don’t need a bike like mine,” I said. “It’s going to be a joy

ride.”

“Is that a promise or a hope, Eddy?”

I grinned. “Oh, let’s just wait and see.”

I stood up and gathered my helmet from the table.

“You don’t have to leave just yet, do you?” She touched me on the arm.

“I’m afraid so.”

“But why? We’ve only just started the fire. Nico hasn’t done his impressions yet. You just *have* to see him do his impressions.”

“I’d like to,” I said, “but I’m beat. I rode fifty miles before coming out. You wouldn’t want me falling asleep at the wheel, would you?”

“Heck no.” Her hand hadn’t left my arm. She squeezed it. “Be very, very careful,” she said.

I put on my helmet and glasses and straddled my bike, then clipped in my left foot. “I’ll see you tomorrow, then.”

“Yeah, sure. See you tomorrow. It’s going to be epic.”

I coasted over to Nico and Philippe and thanked them. Nico told me to come again any time I wanted and he’d tell me everything he could remember about his former life when he was a photographer. I pushed off and passed beneath the big dark trees, then turned onto the road. My legs felt heavy now. I was dizzy from all the alcohol and from talking to Julia. It was a good kind of dizziness and I wanted it to linger. I felt the rolled-up photograph on my back, and I thought about her all the way home. I rode steadily, not fast, so I could remember all the things we said to each other.