

One more? she said.

Yes mam.

She used an opening he'd not seen before. In the end he lost his queen and conceded. She smiled and looked up at him. Carlos had entered with a tea tray and he set it on the table and she pushed aside the board and pulled the tray forward and set out the cups and saucers. There were slices of cake on a plate and a plate of crackers and several kinds of cheese and a small bowl of brown sauce with a silver spoon in it.

Do you take cream? she said.

No mam.

She nodded. She poured the tea.

I could not use that opening again with such effect, she said. I'd never seen it before.

Yes. It was invented by the Irish champion Pollock. He called it the King's Own opening. I was afraid you might know it. I'd like to see it again some time.

Yes. Of course.

She pushed the tray forward between them. Please, she said. Help yourself.

I better not. I'll have crazy dreams eatin this late.

She smiled. She unfolded a small linen napkin from off the tray.

I've always had strange dreams. But I'm afraid they are quite independent of my dining habits.

Yes mam.

They have a long life, dreams. I have dreams now which I had as a young girl. They have an odd durability for something not quite real.

Do you think they mean anything?

She looked surprised. Oh yes, she said. Dont you?

Well. I dont know. They're in your head.

She smiled again. I suppose I dont consider that to be the condemnation you do. Where did you learn to play chess?

My father taught me.

He must be a very good player.

He was about the best I ever saw.

Could you not win against him?

Sometimes. He was in the war and after he come back I got to where I could beat him but I dont think his heart was in it. He dont play at all now.

That's a pity.

Yes mam. It is.

She poured their cups again.

I lost my fingers in a shooting accident, she said. Shooting live pigeons. The right barrel burst. I was seventeen. Alejandra's age. There is nothing to be embarrassed about. People are curious. It's only natural. I'm going to guess that the scar on your cheek was put there by a horse.

Yes mam. It was my own fault.

She watched him, not unkindly. She smiled. Scars have the strange power to remind us that our past is real. The events that cause them can never be forgotten, can they?

No mam.

Alejandra will be in Mexico with her mother for two weeks. Then she will be here for the summer.

He swallowed.

Whatever my appearance may suggest, I am not a particularly old-fashioned woman. Here we live in a small world. A close world. Alejandra and I disagree strongly. Quite strongly in fact. She is much like me at that age and I seem at times to be struggling with my own past self. I was unhappy as a child for reasons that are no longer important. But the thing in which we are united, my niece and I . . .

She broke off. She set the cup and saucer to one side. The polished wood of the table held a round shape of breath where they'd stood that diminished from the edges in and vanished. She looked up.

I had no one to advise me, you see. Perhaps I would not have listened anyway. I grew up in a world of men. I thought this