

# FROM THE GAME FOR REAL

BY RICHARD WEINER

TRANSLATION BENJAMIN PALOFF

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He boarded the metro at La Trinité. – It was after midnight. After midnight on an empty, ordinary night at the start of the week. In the first class car, no one but us two.

He boarded at La Trinité. I won't say that he merely reminded me of someone, because I put my finger on it faster than that. He was just as alluringly unhandsome as the Spanish dancer Vicente Escudero, which struck me immediately. Who knows; maybe it even was Vicente Escudero. – Vicente Escudero, at his ease, looks like a man betrayed, standing over the body of the woman who's betrayed him (and in whose death he's played a part) and with his gaze, which is like a lead line, measuring how deep his hatred must plunge into vengeance to be appeased. And which determines that the lead line is too short for something as deep as this.

And Vicente Escudero is, when dancing, like an assassin amused by the thought that one can do just fine without a lead line, that one can plunge headlong into a bottomless hatred, and that this bath can be refreshing, if we only plunge into it without thought of return.

He was unhandsome. Broad Spanish feet, almost fake. And maybe they were . . . Words, which he would not have uttered for anything in the world, withdrew into the steep wrinkles that fell from the downturned corners of his mouth, and which were rather like perfectly conjoined scars. Vicente Escudero knows many, many words of this kind.

I don't know what prayer is. But, having seen him, I was quick to compose one. An ardent one. I prayed that Vicente Escudero would *not* assume the empty seat opposite me. (He had twenty-five to choose from.) I prayed, knowing that he would sit exactly where I was afraid he would: opposite me. I knew this with such certainty that my plea inadvertently

became more ardent just as he was moving in the other direction, for I was praying with the certainty that I was praying in vain. And indeed, after two steps he turned around and sat down there, opposite me. Opposite me.

From his pocket he drew a program from L'Apollo and started reading it intently. He read with the unsettling interest of a spy. He paid no attention to me. He wasn't *not* paying attention in a provocative way, but with the kind of strained impassivity by which a misfortune is placed before us, a misfortune that is already at our doorstep, though not yet set in motion. I countered with an unspoken question. A question? Only from a twitch of one of those two scars, so perfectly conjoined, did I realize that I may have actually asked him something. It was a distinctly responsive twitch, if an inadvertent one. It was an answer to the question: "Are you following me?" – He replied (through that twitch of his scar-wrinkle) without looking up; he immersed himself in reading his program, maybe even more deeply than before. And suddenly there came a certainty that he would not get off at Notre-Dame-de-Lorette, that he wouldn't even be getting off at Saint-Georges.

At each stop he leaned out and read the station name, which he happened to know by heart. This he demonstrated I no longer know how. He was reading the names of the stations, but it was directed at me. After Saint-Georges is Pigalle. That's a transfer station. So how did it sound—How do you think it sounded?—that unspoken question I posed to him as I was pretending to inspect my (trembling) hands? Perhaps it sounded like: "Get off at Pigalle!" – No, not like that, it sounded like: "Aren't you getting off at Pigalle?!"

The interest with which he was reading his program from L'Apollo now attested so cynically to its own phoniness that a chill ran through me. A chill, plus the certitude that he had understood (not raising his head) what I had been silently asking him to do. And, of course, he didn't get out. – After Pigalle is Abbesses. But the question "Aren't you getting off at Abbesses?" was so pointless that it fell away automatically.

After Abbesses is Lamarck. That's my stop. It's not the last stop. Vicente Escudero could still go three more! – But shortly before we came to the station the certainty that we would both be getting off at Lamarck took on an air of necessity to his will or my own, already so self-asserting that my considerate gesture—"We'll be arriving presently, see that you don't miss it, sir" (for he was reading)—broke off of its own accord. He looked at me. With a look as though in generous confirmation that, yes, this was no fantasy: of course he'd been sent, of course he'd been handed a mission.

“And sent by whom, and a mission to do what?” I said with a benumbed smile. And he replied with a smile as well. An exceedingly solicitous smile at that.

He got up. We got out. He walked beside me. The flamboyance (but was it flamboyance?) with which he didn’t let me out of his sight from that moment on was equal to the flamboyance with which he had ignored me until then. When we stepped into the elevator (for there’s an elevator) he paid me the same polite attention I had shown him in the car, stepping aside humbly and affably so that I might be the first to enter. – The building where I live is not far from the station. He walked beside me the whole way. He looked into my eyes as though they (these eyes) had been stolen from him. He matched my step. He did so with a kind of naïve and deferential ardor.

A woman was standing at the door to our building. She was wearing a checkered loden dress and green silk stockings. She was heavily made-up. She had even applied carmine to her nostrils, and with such senseless brazenness that it occurred to me that she might have wanted to say something particular by it, for example, that she had fallen into despair while making herself up, or that makeup is one of the guises of her desperation. She was leaning against the doorframe. He leaned against the opposite doorframe, waiting for the door to open. They did not converse, not with a look, not with a smile. But how to put this? They were from the same team. They were from some sort of team. Not only was this certain, it could not have been any other way. They were from the same team—not like spouses, not like lovers, not like friends, not like acquaintances, not like castaways on a raft, but they went with each other. – I know the building’s residents. Neither he nor she lived there. Nevertheless, they were waiting at the door, just like me. The door finally allowed us in.

I stepped aside so that she could go first. I followed her, and once inside I swung around; no, not to check whether he, too, might have been coming up behind me, but merely to be sure to shut the door behind him. And now I see I am walking along with him on one side, her on the other. I don’t know how this happened, but they’d gotten me between them. I say that they’d gotten me there, for it reeked of utter violence, without my being able to recall how they’d moved me into this position. Their walk, their gestures, their glances (which crossed like the arms of adults rock-a-bying babies) were synchronically symmetrical, as if these two were posable puppets mounted on a single shaft. But what naturalness, what ease! Could these really just be people, nothing more? I felt no fear, no alarm. Perhaps I was a bit curious, but with a curiosity that was disinterested, confident.

I called my name out in front of the porter's door, as usual. The sound of my voice was like a veil that had suddenly fallen from something. And it was only then that things took on the air of "something's not quite right." Panic weighed down so sharply and unexpectedly that my lower back completely buckled, my torso heaved. The word "help" started prying at my lips like a crowbar. Here, however, both of them gave me an admonitory wag of the finger, though they did so without withdrawing their eyes' and mouths' strict, if cheerful, watch. Needlessly: the panic had already settled down in the meantime, flat and unbleached, like a thread of jute. Yes, I strode past a panic already tamed. The admonitory fingers had done their work; now their symmetrically summoning hands expressed a mute and gracious "This way, please." I slowed a little and replied with a similar gesture. Thus, for a moment, we were playing a *très magnifique* scene of gracious and unpretentiously worldly gentlemen. We played it carefully, conscientiously, like in the theater, and it popped into my head that maybe that's what we were here for. They yielded at last to my gracious insistence: they took a small step before me, languorously hunched over, as though from embarrassment and an acquiescent desire to please. – When we'd gotten to my door, they stood again like they had at the building's entrance, one to each side of the frame. But it was no longer as it had been—out of the blue they were wearing a severe, hard look. Their mute appeal for me to open up was overbearing and threatening. I dug into my back pocket for the key, looking from one to the other. And still there was that confident curiosity within me. Their gestures, always so peculiarly simultaneous and symmetrical, became impatient and curt: now a finger pointing toward the keyhole; now a derisive and contemptuous jerk of the head; now an exaggerated collapse against the doorframe, like that of people who are waiting before a still-closed theater and affectedly pretending that they will surely never live to see the day; now tapping their feet angrily, if quietly.

A grotesque thought suddenly popped into my head. In the form of an absolute mathematical certainty, that is, that they wouldn't bear it if I, shoving the key into the lock, were to look them both in the eye, but at the same time. Sure, I knew this was absurd. Nonetheless, the comforting sense that this was somehow just possible did not abandon me. I found the key, I ram it into the lock, my gaze fixed before me, and now I'm faced with four eyes, each of them individually and all of them at the same time, as if mutually: two of them brown, two blue; one curious, one timid, and one sweet; the fourth said nothing.

The key turned.

\* \* \* \*

I came home around one in the morning, went up to my door, slid the key in. –

How's that? What about those four eyes? The man? The woman?

How impatient you are! How impatient! Just let me get the door open.

You see: I came back around one in the morning, I went up to my door, slid the key in. I unlocked the top lock, unlocked the bottom one, leaned in gently. The door didn't open. Not that it didn't give at all, but it didn't open.

*That means there must be someone pushing against it from inside.*

Which is to say, as we do when things are falling apart like this, “a thought popped into my head.”

A thought popped! And as yet it's no more than that huge juniper seed when the forward march of the litany of holy logic, recited on a rosary flicking whistlingly along, comes to a screeching halt. As it must: – The door gives, but it doesn't open. It's always doing that in spring and summer. The apartment is humid; the door swells and catches on the upper left corner. In summer, yes. But today? What day is it? It's the fifteenth of November. *That means* they've been running the furnace for fourteen days already. *That means* the door has already dried out. *That means* it opens easily. Yesterday it opened easily. Why is it catching today? Because something is blocking it. What's blocking it? Let's see. We're on the ground floor. The porter opens the pneumatic lock with the push of a button. A tenant enters, shuts the door, and, passing the porter's lodging, he calls out his name. He has to call out his name. And if he doesn't? Or if he calls out a fake name? The porter knows the voices and names of the tenants. If he has the slightest suspicion, he comes out to check. But the porter is married. Furthermore, his wife is plump. The children are already grown. And yet there are still some wild nights over at the porter's. The whole building knows this, and we know thanks to the porter, who brags about it. My door is not opening. *That means* the porter and his wife had a wild night. An hour earlier, two hours earlier, they'd heard the bell. Open up, by all means. But worry oneself over who called out and how they did it? Would you? Love really is the road to perdition. *My door isn't opening.* Despite the fact that the furnace has been going for fourteen days already, that the door's already dried out, that it opened just yesterday. That means . . . –

Here's the huge juniper seed felt along the forward march of the litany of holy logic:  
*"That means someone is leaning against it from inside."*

You have come to this point exhausted, terrorized, no longer remembering, incapable of stopping. A thought? Hardly! It's the outermost guardrail of composure, of sangfroid. Will that guardrail hold up against our blow? Or will we topple over it? Or will it break? Will it give? It won't give? A door that doesn't open? *That means someone is leaning against it from inside.* I know this beyond sure; I know this spectacularly. My litany of holy logic has prayed me into the certainty that "this makes sense." This makes so much sense that there's no miracle to chasten its arrogance. Hasn't everything conspired to confirm that the door isn't opening because someone is leaning against it from inside? So where's the miracle? That he's cornered? Helpless? So if I unjam it, what then? Me? I'll unjam it, believing. Believing that, despite everyone and everything, the door is resisting me not because someone is leaning against it from inside, but . . . O terrified courage, come to me! Eyes, squint! O shoulder, my ram, come, have at the door . . . It's opened! —————

*And now look at the guy who's doing it!* — Who? The guy who was just leaning against the door from inside, of course. Let's take a look at him. Do you see him? He looks so on and so forth, right? But that's the point. The point is, namely, yes: Does he look the way we'd expected (for, *after all*, we had been expecting him)? We'll say it right off the bat: no idea. And let's tell ourselves presently just what it was we'd expected. Let's settle into our sangfroid, our composure, and behold: I come home late at night. I unlock the door. The door gives a little, but it doesn't open. I force it with my shoulder. I'm face-to-face with a stranger—let's say, for the time being, an intruder. I should be frightened; I should at least be astonished, and so what if I've foreseen this, for I did foresee this, after all. But everyone knows what it means to "foresee spooky things": on one side of the scale, there's the premonition; on the other, the hope that the premonition is false. The side with the hope is *always heavier*. By which I mean that premonition is never armor against dread. We always drive like a runaway train into what we dread—through the barrier of premonition. Foresee it or don't—what you dread, you will dread forevermore. But nay: I wasn't feeling dread because I encountered a stranger behind my door; I wasn't even astonished. I merely became conscious of the fact that I *should* have been astonished. But somehow the astonishment didn't feel like it. If you look into the mirror, and in the mirror—nothing; if you put a record on the phonograph, and there's no sound. It's the same way here: I know that I *should* be

astonished, but astonishment refuses.

And so now we move on to this other person! Now that the miracle has worn off, let's stop calling him an intruder. The miracle has worn off; therefore, we are justified in calling him not an intruder, but rather a thief. Fine. What can a thief expect in someone else's apartment but to be caught? And so how does a thief, now caught, *normally* look? Every which way: he makes a run for it; perplexity, as they say, ensues; he braces himself to resist; he attacks. And yet who among you has ever seen a thief who, having been caught, starts bawling, and that's all? For this guy was bawling, and that's all. And so you're astonished that my astonishment and my shock remained out back. Isn't that rather like, instead of themselves, they'd only sent some duly authorized replacement, i.e., a dumbstruck question, from whose secret memory drawer an associative recollection leaped from this teary-eyed thief to the domestic fantasy of a boy whom his mother has caught with his finger in the jam jar? Do you know those tears of the jam-thief? They're not tears from any fear of punishment. They're tears set up long in advance: this boy—my intruder, my thief—was quaking to the core; he was quaking long before there was any reason to. This smartass, this tough guy was a quaking daredevil. How do we square this? Yes, that's the question: how do we square it?

So take a look at what he's doing! Look at the fists shoved into the clenched teeth, from where he'd love to cry out, but he's afraid. And those eyes, which moan for you right now, right now, to tolerate his tears; otherwise, they'll well up on their own, they can't hold back any longer—oh, this weepy thief, whose left hand is reflexively bidding us: "Come closer, don't be afraid. But don't beat me, alright?" his boyish anxiety adds, howling. "Don't beat me!"

What would you say to that?

I said simply, if just a little peevishly:

"What is it you want here? And why are you bawling? It's ridiculous!" – And I shut the door behind me.

And I go about my business. You know, like he isn't there. That guy right there! I know very well that he's behind me. That he's skulking like an obedient dog. You'd almost say: like a cunning bitch. – Please, just imagine it: a surprised thief, or something of that sort, and instead of the least bark, he's skulking behind me like a pinscher I've whistled for, and which has rushed in, wagging its tail as a sign it knows it's going to get a beating. And which

doesn't have any idea that I only whistled out of terrible fear, that I was staking everything, everything on that whistling. A dog, shall we say, with fists to its maw, and with terror-stricken, teary eyes, and with that left hand comically bidding me not to be afraid of coming home, like I have nothing to fear. Home! Just imagine: a thief who bids me not to be afraid of coming home! And then, sure enough, something popped into my head. To wit: this guy is unspeakably *unthreatening*.

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Like anybody, I too have a silly weakness for wanting to wedge myself into a spot where someone else is not. It was by chance that this occurred to me right after I'd made that move—I say by chance, for there was no reason why it should have occurred to me after that move in particular—when I had turned around, crowding him. Let's understand each other: "to crowd" suggests the notion of assault. Just this once, however, it merely indicates that I turned to face him, nothing more. I don't go after him; I don't preach; I don't reprimand. With the possible exception of reiterating with my eyes what my *mouth* had uttered a moment before, as in: "What is it you want here?" (Sounding neither threatening, nor overly curious!)

*But look at him!* Just take a look at him! For on my soul, this spectacle was worth it: the elegant pantomime of some deep, some unfathomable loss! The right hand at last pulled away from chattering teeth! The twisted right hand, away from which the cramp is slowly and incessantly drifting, and which is again mindful, which is again cautiously connected, which, under his coaxing eyes' crazed surveillance, is dragging itself forward, approaching, astir; whereas the left, heretofore so beseechingly outstretched, has suddenly gone slack, so helpless, as if felled. But that right hand *on the march* and its rebellious fist opening slowly, slowly, grudgingly, out of the superiority of some insidious enmity: you could call it a bud, but one that would admit under pressure that it is no bud at all, but a hard knot of little snakes wrapped in rose petals. – It opens so grudgingly, so shyly. But why? Why? If it doesn't even hold anything so foul?

O thief, my thief, what will you give me, then, for the key?

He is so afraid of me. Don't be afraid! But he's so afraid of me! Why are you afraid of me? You have the key—who gave it to you? You have the key. Thieves pick the lock to

get in. This is a key. The real thing. Thieves don't have a key. They can't have a key. You have one; perhaps you're worse than a thief? – Show me. Glory be, the notched key. The lackey's key. Kept with the porter. It's no fake. It's the real thing. From where? How did you get it, whoever you are? Did you pinch it off someone you'd killed? Did you just steal it? Hmm? Nothing to say, whoever you are?

Then, for the first time, something flashed in his eyes, something other than astonishment, other than fright, other than pleading, other than lamentation. But perhaps it was an order above all orders, one regarding not people so much as things. A directive as follows: *for it not to matter that I get hold of the key*. And I obeyed. I loyally obeyed that it *not matter*. After protracted confusions, the first certainty. Oh, hardly a comforting certainty, hardly a negotiable certainty. But rather a suspiciously unfair certainty, you might say, kind of like some- one sweetly talking you down while readying the straitjacket. It was a tricky, treacherous certainty, *but a certainty nonetheless*.

“Are we up to something here?” I asked. “Then let's be up to something, right? A drama, is that what we're going to have here?”

His eyes got ready to answer, but they changed their mind; suddenly, as though he had replaced them, they were again just the eyes of a frightened and pleading thief. I say: a thief—but who is this stranger behind my door exactly, of whom I should have been terrified but was not terrified, who assumed my terror *within himself*, and around whose corporeal being—for he is corporeal—I step with such stubborn indifference, as if around my own shadow? Who is this unexpected intruder into my bachelor life's daily rhythm who, all things considered, does nothing to spoil it? Under whose gaze, watchful yet remote, am I pretending to be disinterestedly inspecting my ground-floor apartment, my abode, where it's so easy for a stranger to intrude, no different today than any other (when I am invariably alone)? For God's sake, who is he, paradoxically present, a man so *rare* that it's almost like he's not here, and under whose haunting, haunted supervision I perform an array of passes suited to an inspector, after which I lie down *fully aware* that I could sleep peacefully, that I am alone, that I am still alone despite the fact that he's here with me? I'm not bothered, not at all bothered by this someone, whom I see and do not regard.

I throw myself into my rounds, beginning with the dining room. Pedantic, manic passes through the cupboards, the drapes. On my heels, he whom I take for no one. He's a shadow, more shifting aside than moving—a shadow, a nothing that delights in nothingness;

a shadow, an amplified, unfathomed nothing. Can you heed the presence of someone incarnated only as if in confirmation that he's not there *for real?*

The hand outstretched with the turning key, the imploring eyes, beseeching me to take it, this, my key, all of it has the accent of an essence so paradoxical that it bothers me . . . What is meant by this ataraxia of the nerves, this eerie breakdown of all experience?

“Don't be afraid. Surely you see I'm not scared, and that I won't do anything to you.”

He went over to the corner, put his hands behind his back— a petal flutters down, circles in darkness; a memory—rather like the way day laborers used to wait at Klein's, in the cobbler's shop, until work came for them. You could see into the workshop through the glass doors from the office, where Mr. Štajer, the *Vorarbeiter*, would measure us with a brown paper ribbon, which he used to tickle our feet.

The memory circled around, drained of color. It landed softly and, once landed, sobered up, and in so doing unwittingly betrayed where it was supposed to have been going: to the realization that I'd already spent quite some time, as they say, in an impossible situation. Yes, *because something really isn't right here*. The passive resistance of dumbness isn't okay; the boyish fright and impetuous distress of this certain someone are not okay. Everything is like it's inside-out, and that's not okay. If it was okay, this thief (or whatever he is) would behave differently. But this disconsolate, this shrinking, this unnaturally withering thief: none of this is okay. And how could it be okay that I can't manage, I can't even manage to be struck properly dumb by things I know should strike me dumb, in a position that so urgently demands my dumbness? Which I refuse. No: what refuses is something within me. How dumb- founding it is that I'm not struck dumb. It's dumbfounding! And behold: *dumbfounding*, the word, is like nightshade, like a blossom of nightshade, with which something that was sup- posed to be has also come into bloom; and barely has this flower opened before it flips over, like images painted across vertical blinds that, with a flick of a spring, are hastily and chaotically snuffed out, slat by slat, until, with the turning of the last of them, a new image appears, the image on the reverse. And this image means: fear. Nothing anywhere, and suddenly there's fear.

And yet again, it's already like he's going to snuff it out. Who? With what? From where? Or perhaps it's just the brightness from the crack under the door to the next room? Someone in there has turned on a light. Who? Why? – He knows for sure, for sure he

knows, and I turn around quizzically. Meanwhile, how close my confidence has become with this person so reminiscent of “the fellow from Klein’s.” He’s not the kind who begs the question; he’s someone whom it’s impossible not to ask. So I say, “I would bet . . . ,” stifling an explosive rage, but placated by the awareness of his having ferreted out my testament, “. . . that you’ve gotten yourself into a mess.” For he nods like a boy who’s been caught and reprimanded, but who has already ascertained that the incubation period for his lashing has already lapsed. – He nods, with gratitude for such magnanimity, and in agreement that he would come to earn it. – Good, good! If that’s the way it has to be, let’s also have a look at the bright crack under the door.