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Love in the Time of Cholera

Translated by Edith Grossman

PENGUIN BOOKS

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It was inevitable: the scent of bitter almonds always reminded him of the fate of unrequited love. Dr Juvenal Urbino noticed it as soon as he entered the still darkened house where he had hurried on an urgent call to attend a case that for him had lost all urgency many years before. The Antillean refugee Jeremiah de Saint-Amour, disabled war veteran, photographer of children, and his most sympathetic opponent in chess, had escaped the torments of memory with the aromatic fumes of gold cyanide.

He found the corpse covered with a blanket on the campaign cot where he had always slept, and beside it was a stool with the developing tray he had used to vaporize the poison. On the floor, tied to a leg of the cot, lay the body of a black Great Dane with a snow-white chest, and next to him were the crutches. At one window the splendor of dawn was just beginning to illuminate the stifling, crowded room that served as both bedroom and laboratory, but there was enough light for him to recognize at once the authority of death. The other windows, as well as every other chink in the room, were muffled with rags or sealed with black cardboard, which increased the oppressive heaviness. A counter was crammed with jars and bottles without labels and two crumbling pewter trays under an ordinary light bulb covered with red paper. The third tray, the one for the fixative solution, was next to the body. There were old magazines and newspapers everywhere, piles of negatives on glass plates, broken furniture,

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but everything was kept free of dust by a diligent hand. Although the air coming through the window had purified the atmosphere, there still remained for the one who could identify it the dying embers of hapless love in the bitter almonds. Dr Juvenal Urbino had often thought, with no premonitory intention, that this would not be a propitious place for dying in a state of grace. But in time he came to suppose that perhaps its disorder obeyed an obscure determination of Divine Providence.

A police inspector had come forward with a very young medical student who was completing his forensic training at the municipal dispensary, and it was they who had ventilated the room and covered the body while waiting for Dr Urbino to arrive. They greeted him with a solemnity that on this occasion had more of condolence than veneration, for no one was unaware of the degree of his friendship with Jeremiah de Saint-Amour. The eminent teacher shook hands with each of them, as he always did with every one of his pupils before beginning the daily class in general clinical medicine, and then, as if it were a flower, he grasped the hem of the blanket with the tips of his index finger and his thumb, and slowly uncovered the body with sacramental circumspection. Jeremiah de Saint-Amour was completely naked, stiff and twisted, eyes open, body blue, looking fifty years older than he had the night before. He had luminous pupils, yellowish beard and hair, and an old scar sewn with baling knots across his stomach. The use of crutches had made his torso and arms as broad as a galley slave's, but his defenseless legs looked like an orphan's. Dr Juvenal Urbino studied him for a moment, his heart aching as it rarely had in the long years of his futile struggle against death.

'Damn fool,' he said. 'The worst was over.'

He covered him again with the blanket and regained his academic dignity. His eightieth birthday had been celebrated

the year before with an official three-day jubilee, and in his thank-you speech he had once again resisted the temptation to retire. He had said: 'I'll have plenty of time to rest when I die, but this eventuality is not yet part of my plans.' Although he heard less and less with his right ear, and leaned on a silver-handled cane to conceal his faltering steps, he continued to wear a linen suit, with a gold watch chain across his vest, as smartly as he had in his younger years. His Pasteur beard, the color of mother-of-pearl, and his hair, the same color, carefully combed back and with a neat part in the middle, were faithful expressions of his character. He compensated as much as he could for an increasingly disturbing erosion of memory by scribbling hurried notes on scraps of paper that ended in confusion in each of his pockets, as did the instruments, the bottles of medicine, and all the other things jumbled together in his crowded medical bag. He was not only the city's oldest and most illustrious physician, he was also its most fastidious man. Still, his too obvious display of learning and the disingenuous manner in which he used the power of his name had won him less affection than he deserved.

His instructions to the inspector and the intern were precise and rapid. There was no need for an autopsy; the odor in the house was sufficient proof that the cause of death had been the cyanide vapors activated in the tray by some photographic acid, and Jeremiah de Saint-Amour knew too much about those matters for it to have been an accident. When the inspector showed some hesitation, he cut him off with the kind of remark that was typical of his manner: 'Don't forget that I am the one who signs the death certificate.' The young doctor was disappointed: he had never had the opportunity to study the effects of gold cyanide on a cadaver. Dr Juvenal Urbino had been surprised that he had not seen him at the Medical School, but he understood in an instant from the young man's easy blush and Andean accent that he was

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probably a recent arrival to the city. He said: 'There is bound to be someone driven mad by love who will give you the chance one of these days.' And only after he said it did he realize that among the countless suicides he could remember, this was the first with cyanide that had not been caused by the sufferings of love. Then something changed in the tone of his voice.

'And when you do find one, observe with care,' he said to the intern: 'they almost always have crystals in their heart.'

Then he spoke to the inspector as he would have to a subordinate. He ordered him to circumvent all the legal procedures so that the burial could take place that same afternoon and with the greatest discretion. He said: 'I will speak to the Mayor later.' He knew that Jeremiah de Saint-Amour lived in primitive austerity and that he earned much more with his art than he needed, so that in one of the drawers in the house there was bound to be more than enough money for the funeral expenses.

'But if you do not find it, it does not matter,' he said. 'I will take care of everything.'

He ordered him to tell the press that the photographer had died of natural causes, although he thought the news would in no way interest them. He said: 'If it is necessary, I will speak to the Governor.' The inspector, a serious and humble civil servant, knew that the Doctor's sense of civic duty exasperated even his closest friends, and he was surprised at the ease with which he skipped over legal formalities in order to expedite the burial. The only thing he was not willing to do was speak to the Archbishop so that Jeremiah de Saint-Amour could be buried in holy ground. The inspector, astonished at his own impertinence, attempted to make excuses for him.

'I understood this man was a saint,' he said.

'Something even rarer,' said Dr Urbino. 'An atheistic saint. But those are matters for God to decide.'

In the distance, on the other side of the colonial city, the bells of the Cathedral were ringing for High Mass. Dr Urbino put on his half-moon glasses with the gold rims and consulted the watch on its chain, slim, elegant, with the cover that opened at a touch: he was about to miss Pentecost Mass.

In the parlor was a huge camera on wheels like the ones used in public parks, and the backdrop of a marine twilight, painted with homemade paints, and the walls papered with pictures of children at memorable moments: the first Communion, the bunny costume, the happy birthday. Year after year, during contemplative pauses on afternoons of chess, Dr Urbino had seen the gradual covering over of the walls, and he had often thought with a shudder of sorrow that in the gallery of casual portraits lay the germ of the future city, governed and corrupted by those unknown children, where not even the ashes of his glory would remain.

On the desk, next to a jar that held several old sea dog's pipes, was the chessboard with an unfinished game. Despite his haste and his somber mood, Dr Urbino could not resist the temptation to study it. He knew it was the previous night's game, for Jeremiah de Saint-Amour played at dusk every day of the week with at least three different opponents, but he always finished every game and then placed the board and chessmen in their box and stored the box in a desk drawer. The Doctor knew he played with the white pieces and that this time it was evident he was going to be defeated without mercy in four moves. 'If there had been a crime, this would be a good clue,' Urbino said to himself. 'I know only one man capable of devising this masterful trap.' If his life depended on it, he had to find out later why that indomitable soldier, accustomed to fighting to the last drop of blood, had left the final battle of his life unfinished.

At six that morning, as he was making his last rounds, the night watchman had seen the note nailed to the street door:

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Come in without knocking and inform the police. A short while later the inspector arrived with the intern, and the two of them had searched the house for some evidence that might contradict the unmistakable breath of bitter almonds. But in the brief minutes the Doctor needed to study the unfinished game, the inspector discovered an envelope among the papers on the desk, addressed to Dr Juvenal Urbino and sealed with so much sealing wax that it had to be ripped to pieces to get the letter out. The Doctor opened the black curtain over the window to have more light, gave a quick glance at the eleven sheets covered on both sides by a diligent handwriting, and when he had read the first paragraph he knew that he would miss Pentecost Communion. He read with agitated breath, turning back on several pages to find the thread he had lost, and when he finished he seemed to return from very far away and very long ago. His despondency was obvious despite his effort to control it: his lips were as blue as the corpse and he could not stop the trembling of his fingers as he refolded the letter and placed it in his vest pocket. Then he remembered the inspector and the young doctor, and he smiled at them through the mists of grief.

'Nothing in particular,' he said. 'His final instructions.'

It was a half-truth, but they thought it complete because he ordered them to lift a loose tile from the floor, where they found a worn account book that contained the combination to the strongbox. There was not as much money as they expected, but it was more than enough for the funeral expenses and to meet other minor obligations. Then Dr Urbino realized that he could not get to the Cathedral before the Gospel reading.

'It's the third time I've missed Sunday Mass since I've had the use of my reason,' he said. 'But God understands.'

So he chose to spend a few minutes more and attend to all the details, although he could hardly bear his intense

longing to share the secrets of the letter with his wife. He promised to notify the numerous Caribbean refugees who lived in the city in case they wanted to pay their last respects to the man who had conducted himself as if he were the most respectable of them all, the most active and the most radical, even after it had become all too clear that he had been overwhelmed by the burden of disillusion. He would also inform his chess partners, who ranged from distinguished professional men to nameless laborers, as well as other, less intimate acquaintances who might perhaps wish to attend the funeral. Before he read the posthumous letter he had resolved to be first among them, but afterward he was not certain of anything. In any case, he was going to send a wreath of gardenias in the event that Jeremiah de Saint-Amour had repented at the last moment. The burial would be at five, which was the most suitable hour during the hottest months. If they needed him, from noon on he would be at the country house of Dr Lácides Olivella, his beloved disciple, who was celebrating his silver anniversary in the profession with a formal luncheon that day.

Once the stormy years of his early struggles were over, Dr Juvenal Urbino had followed a set routine and achieved a respectability and prestige that had no equal in the province. He arose at the crack of dawn, when he began to take his secret medicines: potassium bromide to raise his spirits, salicylates for the ache in his bones when it rained, ergosterol drops for vertigo, belladonna for sound sleep. He took something every hour, always in secret, because in his long life as a doctor and teacher he had always opposed prescribing palliatives for old age: it was easier for him to bear other people's pains than his own. In his pocket he always carried a little pad of camphor that he inhaled deeply when no one was watching to calm his fear of so many medicines mixed together.

He would spend an hour in his study preparing for the class

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in general clinical medicine that he taught at the Medical School every morning, Monday through Saturday, at eight o'clock, until the day before his death. He was also an avid reader of the latest books that his bookseller in Paris mailed to him, or the ones from Barcelona that his local bookseller ordered for him, although he did not follow Spanish literature as closely as French. In any case, he never read them in the morning, but only for an hour after his siesta and at night before he went to sleep. When he was finished in the study he did fifteen minutes of respiratory exercises in front of the open window in the bathroom, always breathing toward the side where the roosters were crowing, which was where the air was new. Then he bathed, arranged his beard and waxed his mustache in an atmosphere saturated with genuine cologne from Farina Gegenüber, and dressed in white linen, with a vest and a soft hat and cordovan boots. At eighty-one years of age he preserved the same easygoing manner and festive spirit that he had on his return from Paris soon after the great cholera epidemic, and except for the metallic color, his carefully combed hair with the center part was the same as it had been in his youth. He breakfasted *en famille* but followed his own personal regimen of an infusion of wormwood blossoms for his stomach and a head of garlic that he peeled and ate a clove at a time, chewing each one carefully with bread, to prevent heart failure. After class it was rare for him not to have an appointment related to his civic initiatives, or his Catholic service, or his artistic and social innovations.

He almost always ate lunch at home and had a ten-minute siesta on the terrace in the patio, hearing in his sleep the songs of the servant girls under the leaves of the mango trees, the cries of vendors on the street, the uproar of oil and motors from the bay whose exhaust fumes fluttered through the house on hot afternoons like an angel condemned to putrefaction. Then he read his new books for an hour, above all

novels and works of history, and gave lessons in French and singing to the tame parrot who had been a local attraction for years. At four o'clock, after drinking a large glass of lemonade with ice, he left to call on his patients. In spite of his age he would not see patients in his office and continued to care for them in their homes as he always had, since the city was so domesticated that one could go anywhere in safety.

After he returned from Europe the first time, he used the family landau drawn by two golden chestnuts, but when this was no longer practical he changed it for a Victoria and a single horse, and he continued to use it, with a certain disdain for fashion, when carriages had already begun to disappear from the world and the only ones left in the city were for giving rides to tourists and carrying wreaths at funerals. Although he refused to retire, he was aware that he was called in only for hopeless cases, but he considered this a form of specialization too. He could tell what was wrong with a patient just by looking at him, he grew more and more distrustful of patent medicines, and he viewed with alarm the vulgarization of surgery. He would say: 'The scalpel is the greatest proof of the failure of medicine.' He thought that, in a strict sense, all medication was poison and that seventy percent of common foods hastened death. 'In any case,' he would say in class, 'the little medicine we know is known only by a few doctors.' From youthful enthusiasm he had moved to a position that he himself defined as fatalistic humanism: 'Each man is master of his own death, and all that we can do when the time comes is to help him die without fear of pain.' But despite these extreme ideas, which were already part of local medical folklore, his former pupils continued to consult him even after they were established in the profession, for they recognized in him what was called in those days a clinical eye. In any event, he was always an expensive and exclusive doctor, and his patients were concentrated in the ancestral homes in the District of the Viceroys.

His daily schedule was so methodical that his wife knew where to send him a message if an emergency arose in the course of the afternoon. When he was a young man he would stop in the Parish Café before coming home, and this was where he perfected his chess game with his father-in-law's cronies and some Caribbean refugees. But he had not returned to the Parish Café since the dawn of the new century, and he had attempted to organize national tournaments under the sponsorship of the Social Club. It was at this time that Jeremiah de Saint-Amour arrived, his knees already dead, not yet a photographer of children, yet in less than three months everyone who knew how to move a bishop across a chessboard knew who he was, because no one had been able to defeat him in a game. For Dr Juvenal Urbino it was a miraculous meeting, at the very moment when chess had become an unconquerable passion for him and he no longer had many opponents who could satisfy it.

Thanks to him, Jeremiah de Saint-Amour could become what he was among us. Dr Urbino made himself his unconditional protector, his guarantor in everything, without even taking the trouble to learn who he was or what he did or what inglorious wars he had come from in his crippled, broken state. He eventually lent him the money to set up his photography studio, and from the time he took his first picture of a child startled by the magnesium flash, Jeremiah de Saint-Amour paid back every last penny with religious regularity.

It was all for chess. At first they played after supper at seven o'clock, with a reasonable handicap for Jeremiah de Saint-Amour because of his notable superiority, but the handicap was reduced until at last they played as equals. Later, when Don Galileo Daconte opened the first outdoor cinema, Jeremiah de Saint-Amour was one of his most dependable customers, and the games of chess were limited to the nights when a new film was not being shown. By then he and the

Doctor had become such good friends that they would go to see the films together, but never with the Doctor's wife, in part because she did not have the patience to follow the complicated plot lines, and in part because it always seemed to her, through sheer intuition, that Jeremiah de Saint-Amour was not a good companion for anyone.

His Sundays were different. He would attend High Mass at the Cathedral and then return home to rest and read on the terrace in the patio. He seldom visited a patient on a holy day of obligation unless it was of extreme urgency, and for many years he had not accepted a social engagement that was not obligatory. On this Pentecost, in a rare coincidence, two extraordinary events had occurred: the death of a friend and the silver anniversary of an eminent pupil. Yet instead of going straight home as he had intended after certifying the death of Jeremiah de Saint-Amour, he allowed himself to be carried along by curiosity.

As soon as he was in his carriage, he again consulted the posthumous letter and told the coachman to take him to an obscure location in the old slave quarter. That decision was so foreign to his usual habits that the coachman wanted to make certain there was no mistake. No, no mistake: the address was clear and the man who had written it had more than enough reason to know it very well. Then Dr Urbino returned to the first page of the letter and plunged once again into the flood of unsavory revelations that might have changed his life, even at his age, if he could have convinced himself that they were not the ravings of a dying man.

The sky had begun to threaten very early in the day and the weather was cloudy and cool, but there was no chance of rain before noon. In his effort to find a shorter route, the coachman braved the rough cobblestones of the colonial city and had to stop often to keep the horse from being frightened by the rowdiness of the religious societies and fraternities

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coming back from the Pentecost liturgy. The streets were full of paper garlands, music, flowers, and girls with colored parasols and muslin ruffles who watched the celebration from their balconies. In the Plaza of the Cathedral, where the statue of The Liberator was almost hidden among the African palm trees and the globes of the new streetlights, traffic was congested because Mass had ended, and not a seat was empty in the venerable and noisy Parish Café. Dr Urbino's was the only horse-drawn carriage; it was distinguishable from the handful left in the city because the patent-leather roof was always kept polished, and it had fittings of bronze that would not be corroded by salt, and wheels and poles painted red with gilt trimming like gala nights at the Vienna Opera. Furthermore, while the most demanding families were satisfied if their drivers had a clean shirt, he still required his coachman to wear livery of faded velvet and a top hat like a circus ringmaster's, which, more than an anachronism, was thought to show a lack of compassion in the dog days of the Caribbean summer.

Despite his almost maniacal love for the city and a knowledge of it superior to anyone's, Dr Juvenal Urbino had not often had reason as he did that Sunday to venture boldly into the tumult of the old slave quarter. The coachman had to make many turns and stop to ask directions several times in order to find the house. As they passed by the marshes, Dr Urbino recognized their oppressive weight, their ominous silence, their suffocating gases, which on so many insomniac dawns had risen to his bedroom, blending with the fragrance of jasmine from the patio, and which he felt pass by him like a wind out of yesterday that had nothing to do with his life. But that pestilence so frequently idealized by nostalgia became an unbearable reality when the carriage began to lurch through the quagmire of the streets where buzzards fought over the slaughterhouse offal as it was swept along by the receding tide. Unlike the city of the Viceroys where the houses

were made of masonry, here they were built of weathered boards and zinc roofs, and most of them rested on pilings to protect them from the flooding of the open sewers that had been inherited from the Spaniards. Everything looked wretched and desolate, but out of the sordid taverns came the thunder of riotous music, the godless drunken celebration of Pentecost by the poor. By the time they found the house, gangs of ragged children were chasing the carriage and ridiculing the theatrical finery of the coachman, who had to drive them away with his whip. Dr Urbino, prepared for a confidential visit, realized too late that there was no innocence more dangerous than the innocence of age.

The exterior of the unnumbered house was in no way distinguishable from its less fortunate neighbors, except for the window with lace curtains and an imposing front door taken from some old church. The coachman pounded the door knocker, and only when he had made certain that it was the right house did he help the Doctor out of the carriage. The door opened without a sound, and in the shadowy interior stood a mature woman dressed in black, with a red rose behind her ear. Despite her age, which was no less than forty, she was still a haughty mulatta with cruel golden eyes and hair tight to her skull like a helmet of steel wool. Dr Urbino did not recognize her, although he had seen her several times in the gloom of the chess games in the photographer's studio, and he had once written her a prescription for tertian fever. He held out his hand and she took it between hers, less in greeting than to help him into the house. The parlor had the climate and invisible murmur of a forest glade and was crammed with furniture and exquisite objects, each in its natural place. Dr Urbino recalled without bitterness an antiquarian's shop, No. 26 rue Montmartre in Paris, on an autumn Monday in the last century. The woman sat down across from him and spoke in accented Spanish.