

The Continuity of Parks

by Julio Cortázar

HE HAD BEGUN TO READ THE NOVEL a few days before. He had put it aside because of some urgent business, opened it again on his way back to the estate by train; he allowed himself a slowly growing interest in the plot, in the drawing of characters. That afternoon, after writing a letter to his agent and discussing with the manager of his estate a matter of joint ownership, he returned to the book in the tranquility of his study which looked out upon the park with its oaks. Sprawled in his favorite armchair, with his back to the door, which would otherwise have bothered him as an irritating possibility for intrusions, he let his left hand caress once and again the green velvet upholstery and set to reading the final chapters. Without effort his memory retained the names and images of the protagonists; the illusion took hold of him almost at once. He tasted the almost perverse pleasure of disengaging himself line by line from all that surrounded him, and feeling at the same time that his head was relaxing comfortably against the green velvet of the armchair with its high back, that the cigarettes were still within reach of his hand, that beyond the great windows the afternoon air danced under the oak trees in the park. Word by word, immersed in the sordid dilemma of the hero and heroine, letting himself go toward where the images came together and took on color and movement, he was witness to the final encounter in the mountain cabin. The woman arrived first, apprehensive; now the lover came in, his face cut by the backlash of a branch. Admirably she stanching the blood with her kisses, but he rebuffed her caresses, he had not come to repeat the ceremonies of a secret passion, protected by a world of dry leaves and furtive paths through the forest. The dagger warmed itself against his chest, and underneath pounded liberty, ready to spring. A lustful, yearning dialogue raced down the pages like a rivulet of snakes, and one felt it had all been decided from eternity. Even those caresses which writhed about the lover's body, as though wishing to keep him there, to dissuade him from it, sketched abominably the figure of that other body it was necessary to destroy. Nothing had been forgotten: alibis, unforeseen hazards, possible mistakes. From this hour on, each instant had its use minutely assigned. The cold-blooded, double re-examination of the details was barely interrupted for a hand to caress a cheek. It was beginning to get dark.

Without looking at each other now, rigidly fixed upon the task which awaited them, they separated at the cabin door. She was to follow the trail that led north. On the path leading in the opposite direction, he turned for a moment to watch her running with her hair let loose. He ran in turn, crouching among the trees and hedges until he could distinguish in the yellowish fog of dusk the avenue of trees leading up to the house. The dogs were not supposed to bark, and they did not bark. The estate manager would not be there at this hour, and he was not. He went up the three porch steps and entered. Through the blood galloping in his ears came the woman's words: first a blue parlor, then a gallery, then a carpeted stairway. At the top, two doors. No one in the first bedroom, no one in the second. The door of the salon, and then the knife in his hand, the light from the great windows, the high back of an armchair covered in green velvet, the head of the man in the chair reading a novel.