

Elson Habib, Playing Black, Ponders the End Game

BRIAN DOYLE

His grandfather died, as he had always said he would, in the café on Via Raffia Garzia, just after his first coffee, his newspaper folded crisply into quarters and parsed so that sports preceded news and opinion, as was only right and proper, Elson, as he had said many times; you want to have your comedy and tragedy delivered as unadorned as possible, and sports, which is as liable to be corrupt as any other human pursuit, is nonetheless not generally as cynical and laden with lies and flimflammetry as the capering of politics or the devious trickery of commerce, not to mention the orotund *dichiarazione* of the ostensibly wise, which was how his grandfather talked, with amusement but penetration, smiling but sharp-eyed, amused but not foolish.

The men of the family handled the business details of the death; the women of the family handled the funeral and feast; and Elson, being the only grandchild, was sent to his grandfather's apartment to *secure the room*, as his oldest uncle said, a phrase that made Elson smile as he walked down Via Enrico Besta, for he well knew that his grandfather would have made wry remarks about this phrase, *secure*

the room from what, Elson? the ravenous wind? tardy assassins? the ravages of time? the weight of sadness? what does your uncle, my beloved second son, imagine there is to steal among my effects? The only objects of value to me there are the ones that are of no value to anyone but me, other than the chess set, which is a lovely thing and no mistake.

It was the chess set that Elson looked for first, when he stepped into his grandfather's room. Such a small room, but airy and shot with light; his grandfather had chosen it carefully, after his wife died, because it was at the top of the apartment building, with a view of the sea, but he did not have to climb the stairs, as the building was tucked into a hillside, and he could take the longer way around, which was a gentler slope, and enter his room from the back; indeed, he had finally had Elson remove the front door of his apartment altogether and replace it with a large carving of the Madonna, on the theory that a door that was never used was not really a door then, and who could object to seeing a portrait of such a fine woman, rather than a drab entryway? And the chances are excellent, Elson, that she was a wonderful chess player, given her patience and wry wit. It is said that chess was invented in India after she ascended into heaven, but who is to say? Are there any newspaper stories from the day that chess was invented? No? Well, then. So to have a portrait of a fine chess player there instead of a door makes good sense.

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