

The Portrait



I.

THE MAN WHO LOVED
OBJECTS

It sits at the bottom of a field: a windowless shed of corrugated iron a hundred metres square, with lights that stopped working some time ago. Each summer the metal walls heat up in the sun, making the temperature inside almost unbearable.

I could have hooked a lamp up to the electricity but I prefer candles. One by one I light twenty of them, which are arranged at random. Then I smoke a cigarette and pour myself a glass of whisky. It's a ritual. Behind an industrial-sized petrol can I keep an excellent Bowmore, still young. Like all great whiskies, its flavour has overtones of leather and peat, and its colour is light like chicken broth, not the amber of revolting bourbons. I drink it from a silver Louis XV mug that sits waiting for me on an old wooden workbench each time I visit. The metal walls have never been painted, but they have gradually rusted to that hue artists call burnt sienna. A brown so vibrant it is almost red.

I come here once or twice a month and spend a good two hours contemplating my collections, as I used to do

in my study. I have many snuffboxes, some gold, some tortoiseshell, and wrought-iron keys decorated with dolphins or mythical beasts, glass paperweights with multicoloured patterns locked inside them, smelling-salts bottles made of the yellow fluorescent glass known as uranium glass, Dieppe carved-ivory virgins, *haute époque* ruby goblets and so many other objects. They are displayed on an old workshop table where I also have a cabinet with many compartments. I have stored various things in each of the twenty-four pigeonholes. It's a bit like those advent calendars I used to open as a child. There was a door for each day, and behind every door a little compartment containing a plastic toy. I went from day to day and from surprise to surprise right up to Christmas Eve when the real presents arrived.

All the presents I have given myself throughout my life as a collector are gathered here. It is my cabinet of curiosities, hidden from the prying eyes of others like secret rooms filled with fabulous objects should be, jealously guarded for their one true master. My cabinet of curiosities, tucked away as it is at the bottom of a farmer's field in the heart of Burgundy where there is no mobile phone signal, is particularly curious.

The summer heat is suffocating and the bales of hay that have been piled up to the roof of the shed for years and years are so dry that they could spontaneously combust at any moment. At the back, on the right, resting on bags of out-of-date fertiliser, is my portrait with its coat of arms.

Today I think I understand what really happened with that picture.

Now I sit down on the little rattan chair and, taking the first mouthful of whisky, ask the usual question, out loud. It makes me smile every time: 'Pierre-François Chaumont, are you there? Knock once for yes, twice for no.'

Then as I put my silver mug smartly down on the workbench, the ring of metal on wood produces the answer.

It all began a little more than a year ago. Far from Burgundy, in Paris.

It was late spring, and for several weeks I had been trying to make modest inroads into the living room. Bit by bit, over several years, my wife had succeeded in exiling my fabulous collections to one room of our apartment and now the ‘study’ was where all my treasures were stored. But I had recently broken through enemy lines in order to return a few Saint-Louis paperweights to the coffee table. Not long before, a terrible accident had seen a Baccarat crystal piece fall against the side of a bronze mortar and break clean in half. Two thousand euros up in smoke. The financial damage persuaded Charlotte to grant the remaining paperweights a safe haven. We agreed on the coffee table.

The following day, I fetched my matching burgundy Gallé vases with a moth motif and placed them either side of the fireplace, as my wife looked on disapprovingly.

‘Break these and that’ll be a hundred grand gone,’ I told her, anticipating any snide remarks, and quoting the value in francs to ensure the already-inflated price tag had maximum effect.

The money argument clinched it, and I wondered what else I could claim was priceless and thereby bring back to the living room.

I had not bid for anything at Drouot Auction House for some time. Auctions are more intoxicating than any drink and, in contrast to a casino, even when you lose you still somehow feel like a winner: the money you had set aside for the lot you've missed out on is magically returned to your bank account; in your mind you had already spent it, so when you leave the auction house you feel richer than when you walked in. It sometimes seemed to me that I might do well to get myself barred from Drouot, the way some gamblers have themselves banned from casinos. I pictured a big, burly bouncer, dressed like the doorman of a luxury hotel, letting everyone past until he caught sight of me.

'Maître Chaumont,' he would say politely but firmly.

'Sorry, I think there's some mistake. My name is Smith, Mister Smith . . .' I would reply in my best English, hiding behind dark glasses and a scarf.

'Game's up, Maître Chaumont. We know who you are. Off you go.'

A few hours later I'd be back with my hair dyed blond. No sooner would I approach the door than the bouncer would shake his head, closing his eyes. Never again would I step inside the auction house.

For several weeks, I had spent every waking hour on Durit BN-657. A key component in the development

of Formula 1 engines, this one small part would – so its inventor said – be the making of future Schumachers, Häkkinens and Alonsos. Two teams were disputing ownership of Durit, each claiming it had come out of its own research lab, and once again Chaumont–Chevrier legal partners had been drafted in to help. Since there was a fair bit of money at stake, Chevrier had shelved a more run-of-the-mill logo infringement case to provide back-up on Durit.

One lunchtime as he was getting his head around the case, I took a break to do what I liked best: taking a stroll around the exhibition halls at Drouot. Our office was fifty metres from the auction house – a deciding factor in the choice of premises. After wolfing down a sandwich and a bottle of lemonade, I headed inside. I glanced around a sale of Asian art. The sole lot consisted of a single erotic print showing a woman on very intimate terms with a giant octopus. Not being much of a one for bestiality or cephalopods, I moved swiftly on.

The first floor was overflowing with porcelain and rosewood chests of drawers. A weaponry sale was also taking place, drawing interest both from curious laymen and specialists in gunpowder and flintlocks. I headed to the basement. The sales down there were never hyped up in the way those held on the first floor were, and I had heard of people who bought exclusively from those auctions, reselling their purchases upstairs a few months later and living off the profits.