

*La Velata*

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In the love shadow of nothingness, many a time but certainly for the last time, on that early morning of the vernal equinox La Velata – the anonymous donna with a mysterious smile, just referred to in a portrait – woke up and put away with her dainty hand the gently fluttering canopy, whose azure threads were already touched by the playful reflections of the sun's rays. Her eyes roved nonchalantly around the spacious bedroom filled with her treasured possessions, a room furnished wholly by her order and to her liking, which used to evoke pride and joyful expectations because she was not yet aware that there is nothing to expect and still believed in the prospective fulfillment of fullness; her glance remained fixed for a moment on a bird pecking at a bunch of grapes on the gilded wallpaper, delivered from distant Cordoba; she looked up at the grid-like riddle on the ceiling bedecked with pearl incrustations that were meant to redouble light with their joyful glitter; then for a fleeting moment she glanced unseeingly at the well-preserved amphora ornamented with arousing scenes of ancient love games, which her husband had recovered from the depths of the sea and given to her as a token of love; she actually hardly noticed it because her glance was immediately averted to her favorite ruby-spangled mandolin with which she personally accompanied the minstrel of the court in those happy days of hope when his fine rhymes used to extol the beauty of Creation as well as her own beauty; eventually her glance was attracted by the torso of a goddess hidden in her bedroom so that she could be the only one to enjoy this splendor; but her roving eyes were no less blind and vacant because all this has changed for a long time now, nothing is the same any more and nothing could make up for absence, nothing could awaken the eye, filling it with desire, since the silk pillow is steeped again with the nightly tears of the body, which, in a burning fit of obstructed energy, has ripped the thin sheet, squeezed into an ugly ball down in her feet; the eiderdown - just as wet with the same juices of obstruction - is lying crumpled between her thighs and La Velata already knows - the time of expectations is over, happiness is crushed, and only the last brushes she must lay on the canvas featuring her own image hold her back on earth, where absence has sucked in time as well as love.

*Only never is there and nothing to the bitter end.*

*And words that are spoken and images that creep all over the earth - matter has sailed away - the birds are a figment, the grapes they are pecking at are a figment, and the amphora has no bottom and is actually good for nothing, the goddess has been dead for a long time now - because there are no gods, are there- of course, the mandolin could transmit the last moan of the heart but will the heart gather enough strength to moan... the matter of life... is now hovering anchorless in the amorphous shadow of nothingness, and deprived of its bracing presence the spirit has also set sail. Matter is bound somewhere, the spirit is bound nowhere...*

La Velata rose in bed and her bare feet touched the smooth rug, brought into her room, like everything else, from a remote corner of the globe, and her face - this image so beautiful and so childishly charming, which must inevitably and fatally take shape for the sake of eternity - now writhed as if at some weird and absurd pain, and her cheeks went pale because an early sunray, slipping across the arcade of the terrace, caressed her and the tenderness of the touch awakened her senses, her mind could grasp all occurrences, but only to realize that the sunrise, which had exhilaratingly woken up the birds and the earth's fragrances, was the last one for her - determined to die as she was - because expectation is no doubt forever exhausted, conquered by the nothingness of an egregious Error, which has occurred anyway, proving to be ineffaceable, and this means time has run out, for her at any rate, because what else is time about if it is not about the mysterious expectation of a future that will be fulfilled, or rather, overfilled with the promises of years past, a meaning spilling over and flowing like a river to an obscure destination, yet blazing a path ahead, where expectation will crystallize for a moment- for all but a fleeting moment - into that plenitude of love, which is life's only counterpart, where the One and the Other will merge into an indistinguishable embrace and then time could not possibly come to an end, the moment would merge with eternity; and La Velata knows that this is what fate has decreed in an antediluvian past, engraved in the images of the stars and marked with the seal of Providence, she knows that her face should be encoded in the world's harmony and everything should have been the way it is , but it is not - it is not for her though it might be for someone else - does it matter if she has been robbed irretrievably and for good, which leaves her with the only option to plunge, with no more questions and in a resigned solitude, into Nothingness... *Why is the Error* - this came from out of her heart, but it came inarticulately and unquestioningly because all questions

are over and done with and the impossibility of fulfillment has revealed itself inexorably, after the one who is her predestined match is not available, never existing in essence, or as her faithful astrologer and alchemist, the confessor of her suffering soul, asserts - even if the Error is not absolute; even if we believe in the earthly existence of Good; even if the process leading to a discrepancy is but relatively inscribed in our destiny - even then *her* destiny will be absolutely impossible to achieve, since *the one - the predestined one*, even if he were born, his birth would be misconceived, a birth beyond the confines of mortal sight, beyond the possibility of an encounter, so he could not possibly emerge, which means he does not exist. Even when it dawned upon her, and when later she was explicitly told, despite the spiritual torment which this knowledge inflicted, part of her inner self declined to give up and the thwarted hope resolved itself into a vague attempt to at least retain the impossible, to evince its unfolding within her in a different, inconceivable manner, and she invested all her available powers in this attempt, so that when all her hopes collapse into the inane abyss of the Error, when the void of timelessness becomes conspicuously clear and the vial of poison is her last resort and refuge from the chasm of repressed desires - so that even then the trace of her anguish remains as a sign and evidence of her being here on earth - such as she is and such as she wishes she would be - despite the anonymous darkness, unaccountably wrapping her entire life. The sunray, gently caressing her skin, cannot disperse this darkness, nor can the birds, singing loud hymns to the morning of the vernal equinox, dismiss it with the jocund din of their exhilaration - the fact is that life has proved impossible with this absence, which takes shape only in the juices of unbearable obstructed energy, and La Velata, admitting this to herself, had long arrived at the only possible solution, which should be accomplished on this day of the vernal equinox; actually she had long contemplated reaching for the forbidden flasks of her faithful astrologer and alchemist, and secretly - for who would become overtly accessory to the negation of self - she would pour into her vial, designed for arousing fragrances, a tiny ounce of that liquid, only three drops of which, as he himself has told her, would put an end to suffering and transport her to eternity, since life has denied her what she has ever desired and what she was created for - the fullness of contact and amalgamation in love. She would have done that long before if she had left all questions behind and put up with the obvious, but something crucial interfered, another prophecy, closely bound up with the previous one and at first sight impossible to come

true without it, a prophecy, which despite fate and impossibility, decreed that she should be the one to accomplish or at least attempt to do so, in order to prove the injustice that she has been marked with, and to affirm - for her own sake at any rate - that the choice is hers and right is the direction, which, if it turns out impossible, then one had better vanish without leaving a trace, but in order to manifest that, she would need time to express it, which would mean leaving a trace behind.

This is why she had been living for months in the spacious chambers of the magnificent palazzo, surrounded by an olive grove and orange trees, remote from people's eyes, preoccupied with the final and fundamental act of her life, which, albeit a far cry from her once predetermined and later denied existence, still had to be performed so that at least expectation and the illusion of fulfillment were not obliterated along with her; in fact, La Velata departed from the world long before she poured the bitter liquid into the small vial, which is at long last, on the day of the vernal equinox, seen glistening on the dressing table in front of the mirror, emitting a red glow with the scent of blood, while Rome was already infested with the rumor that the duke's marvelous wife was suffering from an incurable disease and has retired to die in peace, which was actually true because incurable is the love that is not gratified, and only the tolling bells of Santa Maria de la Pace reminded her that she was in the Eternal City, where life always surged out and it was as if nothing could annihilate it.

*There is no Eternal City, nothing is eternal, except for God, but he has divided the world into two parts and eternity lies in their merging ...but I cannot and I will leave at sunset when the city is glowing red ...*

La Velata reached for the mirror cum dressing table, standing to the right of her bed, so that she could at any time inhale the redolence of myriad vials full of choice perfumes, or refresh her body with pansy-scented and musk-suffused oils, then picked out the miniature chubby vial with a golden cap and a ruby on top, filled with the blood of her eternity. She gazed at it and a prickle ran through her body, from the stomach up to the chest and the tender flesh under the chin, all the way up to the mouth, now brimming over with saliva, which she took in with a slow delightful gulp, the thrill of the anticipated flavor of death spreading down to her thighs again, similar to the tremor of love, excitingly anticipating the explosion of passion in which her body will forever dissolve, and breaking through its confines, will liberate itself from itself...

*This is not the right time yet but there is not much time left...*- and La Velata placed the vial back in front of the mirror, where the quintessence of eternity redoubled ambivalently and froze in a Here and There, tied up in the crystal reflection, but her now lucid eyes turned to the other reflection - the objective which must round off her time - for the sake of which she had been postponing for months the theft and the secret infusion of the drop of death from the alchemist's vial into the veins of her own life.

*There is my image under the veil - I am there and here at the same time, but later when I fade away, I will be only There and how will they see me, when I will be no more, and which image will they compare me with? And who, after all, are "they", if he is not here and has never been... They will be left with nothing but the dress - they will find it the way it is, lying on that chair, emptied of myself...*

La Velata rose from her bed, whose ethereal silk was suffused with obstructed desires, torn in the horror of her obsessive nightmares, and bare-footed as she was, in her white nightgown, veiling and vaulting all the shapes of her body, she headed towards the other end of the spacious bedroom, where in a small recess there was a tripod, covered with a soft drapery -

*I will now unveil myself, I will come face to face with myself, but I know that it will all come to nought again, actually could I possibly see myself given the absence of those eyes that must infinitely gaze at me and penetrate where I cannot reach...*

And she pulled off the cover, which slipped down in her feet, and the image burst upon her, emerging in the soft gleam of its own light and the two of them stood transfixed in perfect coincidence for the lack of those other eyes in which they could have been mirrored. They stayed in this position for a while, then La Velata withdrew and her vision got blurred, as if to escape from the image and step into the correspondence of the absorbing canvas...

*there is only little work left, just a few brushes and it will all be over - I can feel them so palpably - a few brushes on this elaborate and estranging dress, then a few touches on the veil, which I have raised for him only, because he is absent and there is no way he can see me and finally...then I will be facing the end...*

She took a step back, then turned to the big table, to the right of the recess, where there was a jumbled pile of brushes and jars of paints, exquisitely prepared according to most precise and most secret recipes, which she concocted under the scrutiny of her alchemist-astrologer...

*If he only had known on those evenings when he was revealing to me the secrets of life and death what this knowledge would be used for and how my veins would be saturated with the strongest poison prepared by him personally - prepared for whom? After all, it was probably designed for me as the stars tell him everything and I will so painlessly transcend...*

La Velata picked up a thin brush, gently touched its tip, where the color of her eyes should lie, then wiped her finger on the soft silk of her tunic, and with a smile on her lips, every bit as mysterious as the one impressed on the portrait, she followed the way of the brown blotch against the sparkling whiteness of the fabric -

*There is nothing I need, I will now summon the maid and she will bring over the clothes I wear when painting, then I will order her to wash this tunic up, so that she thinks I will be wearing it again on a night like this one, whilst the purpose will be different because everything here is now useless for me...*

Then she put the brush back to place, receded from herself by covering the canvas with the veil, and returned to the bed, where amongst the vials of fragrances she found a tiny golden bell, waved it back and forth and its peal unexpectedly pierced the space of the room; the yelping of a dog came from a distance, then a sonorous bark, then the door, carved with lilies and laurel branches opened and in came the maid followed by a small chubby puppy and a marvelous hound -

*How will they fare without me, will their canine souls suffer -*

The hand stretched out and caressed them, at which they wagged their tails in anticipation and stood transfixed in her feet.

"Fetch my working shift of clothes, Fornarina, and take the dress out of the clothes room."

"My lady looks like she's been grieving all night ... maybe because my lord is away ... but he'll be back in less than three days. Shall I bring in some tasty food?"

"I need nothing, Fornarina - just some milk and no one coming into my room. I'll be all right. Look, there's plenty of fruit in the room, so if I am hungry, I'll satisfy my appetite with it. Come back after sunset, I'll need you only then.

*Shall I really, for I won't know what need is like and everything will be clear but someone will have to find me, won't they, and I can already hear the shriek reverberating and rebounding from the walls, then the steps of running people*

*and voices ...voices... and I will no longer be there ...until they see someone watching them from the tripod - will it be me or him?*

"Come in without waiting for the bell because you know that I could get carried away and forget everything..."

"You also forget yourself, donna."

"Watch your words , Fornarina, go fetch the garments and the milk, then take Pix out for a walk. Look at him, he can't stop fidgeting and yelping. As for Aphrodite, let her stay, she'll be lying in my feet... So leave me alone, ... and let no one in, because time flies and there is not much left until dusk..."

La Velata sat down on the edge of her bed, staring at her beautiful maid's brisk movements - she opened an almost invisible little door built into the wall opposite the bed, and stepped into the clothes room filled with wooden stands, where dozens of brocade-fringed, gilded and gem-dashed gowns, arranged in orderly lines, stood as if on someone's hidden feet -

*they are so weighty and thick that they can actually do without me, they could stand erect on their own, so why would they need me - they could well exist empty of my body without losing their appeal, and anyone could fill them...*

she shook her head because these thoughts seemed somewhat stupid or just superfluous; at that moment the maid walked out of the clothes room with *that gown* in her hands, the favorite one, the one designed for times of ultimate bliss; the gown which fate - or God, for that matter - as if in a fit of playful mockery, turned into a cerecloth for her dreams and desires; this is the reason why La Velata does not wish to die in it, she does not wish to have it on when they lay her in the tomb, and it is only this reluctance that she has committed to a thin parchment, inscribed with most exquisite letters and hidden in a secret drawer, lest there should occur a mistake and someone else should decide for her - now she will just have to take it out before she infuses her own death into her veins, so La Velata smiled again, with the same old smile, which will be impressed on her face forever; then the maid laid the gown in the armchair, to the right of the tripod, at a distance which would in no way hamper observation, and it was as if the dress had taken a seat, independent and completely immersed in the dead life of its rumples, the glimmer of its brocade, the self-sufficiency of its puffed-up sleeves, devoid of living flesh...

*that's how they will find it, empty of my body ...thus I'll take revenge on the empty fate that made me put it on back then...*

"Fornarina, do you remember when I wore this gown for the first time, which was actually the only time..."

"I will remember if I have to, donna..."

"It was a year ago to the day, it was the vernal equinox and you can't have forgotten for on that day an artist from Urbino was supposed to visit us, he had good references from Duke Guidobaldo Montefeltro himself, ...and I was waiting for him..."

"Why should my lady remember a thing like that?"

"He was supposed to paint a portrait of me."

"But my lady did not like him, you saw his pictures and rejected his offer, saying it was not the right man. We all wondered what you meant for he was no mean painter at all and he had won the admiration of many others. Actually, the duke kept asking you to whom you had decided to entrust your consummate face?"

"But you did like him , Fornarina, and while he was here you spent a whole night in the embrace of his strong arms..."

" You make me blush, donna... Have I done anything wrong? After all, you ordered me to do so..."

"No, nothing wrong at all, Fornarina... he was not the right man, was he ..."

"But you still remember..."

"That's because I was wearing this dress and as I've told you more than once, dresses count as living creatures for me ... but I won't go into that. You can go now, just take this nightgown and give it to the laundress for the duke loves it very much and says it is as if my body emerged from the sea waves when I'm taking it off at night..."

La Velata pulled at a lace, gently tied around her ivory neck and the nightgown slipped down so that her body emerged from the folds of the delicate silk -

*I will never again see myself as naked as this, basking in the sun, and oddly enough, when something happens for the last time, as though forever...*

And she made some steps towards the open door of the porch, where the sun is playing in the folds of the curtains, gently fluttering in the breeze; she drew them slightly apart, and unabashed, for there is no one to see her, embraced herself -

*...the sun is my only mate now...*



and her body was aglow for a moment, as if sparkling with an intrinsic light replicating the sun, so Fornarina clapped her hands:

"You are so beautiful, donna..."

"Pass me my clothes, Fornarina... come on, hurry up, there might be some gardener passing by and he will be embarrassed when he sees me..." - and without turning around, she stretched back her hand until she could feel the thick cotton material, so different from the silks and satins of her own garments. She stepped out of the sun and put on the trousers, which enveloped the lower part of her body reaching down under the knees, where two delicate laces had to be fastened, so Fornarina bent over obligingly, tied them up and then fitted the fine silken socks onto her bare feet, reached for a pair of satin slippers, and La Velata raised her arms so that the maid could slip through her head a thick robe, smeared with all kinds of paints that no water could possibly take out.

*I am different now...no, it is now that I am myself and I have to be on my own...*

"You can go, Fornarina..."

The maid took a short bow, picked up the little puppy, which kept romping around, and walked out; the door, carved with lilies and laurel branches, closed behind her; La Velata made a few brisk steps and turned the key twice -

*this is the end, there are no more humans around, there will be no one else but myself between now and the sunset, the remains of my life, and then ...what will it be then after the end of time?*

So her time began to elapse, she headed for the tripod, where the veiled image anticipates the final touches to its eternal flesh; with an unexpectedly abrupt gesture, La Velata pulled off the shroud concealing her from strange eyes

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*I will never be hiding again, when I will be no more for good - in fact, I am as good as gone now, - then everybody will see that I am the paintress of myself, the paintress of beauty, and - why not - the World? - and the one who was supposed to paint is missing for he only is through me, he is present only within me and the veil will no longer be needed - O Lord, how liberating - they cannot fail to remark on this and so they will understand how inadvertent their fiction is...*

La Velata bent over, picked up the veil, covering her image through all these months of harrowing creation when it slowly impressed itself on the canvas; she laid the veil over the back of the armchair, which had

accommodated her gown, self-sufficiently sitting there in the calm of lifelessness, listlessly shrouding its own emptiness, ready to be observed from that particular angle, which will enable it to step with all the splendor of the satin, the brocade, the gold, and the elusive tulle into the canvas, where something real will replenish it.

*All I have to do now is watch, continuously and attentively, so that I could capture the minutest details, which he would also capture, if he existed, and then lay them down distinctly and accurately - the final touch of tenderness is so crucial and it will possibly be the one to fill this face with love...*

...so she grabbed a stool, put it in front of the canvas and sat down; her eyes roved in an invisible triangle between the image, almost finished and fixed on its mysterious smile, the gown in the armchair, lifelessly ignorant of its other life in the picture, and her self - the self that she could not discern in its coincidence with her own body, and yet the self which she yearned to bring out and extricate from her identity, thus being able to discern in that image on the canvas, which should be emitting its own inimitable light... -

*it would be much easier if I could use a mirror, I would see an exact replica of myself, produced by the immediacy of reflection, and nothing else would be needed, I should just use the tip of my brush and take the face over to the other side, but this is forbidden, or downright impossible because I would then find myself in front of a mirror again... and what will I see? Will I see myself? No - I will see him - the missing one because whenever I look at myself in the mirror I know I am not looking with my own eyes and I recall so vividly the day when I put on the dead dress and realized...*

...It was a prophecy. Unequivocal, accurate and irrefutable, as manifest as the manifestation of fateful events, which no accident could possibly prevent - those inevitable events sealed upon the stars, for Another Self, Immortal and Immutable, has posited them into things. She had long known it all, when she was still a young girl, before she had put on the ring of a duchess, she even hesitated back then, fearing that she might in some way hinder a future occurrence, but the astrologer-stargazer, her childhood mentor, had no doubts and said - do not worry, my fair donna, this is no obstacle at all, on the contrary, this is exactly the course blazed in the stars. And then she waited - amidst the glorious glamour of her life there was only one luminous light, whose source lay

in the obsessively anticipated coming of love, when he, the man from the prophecy, was to appear and portray her - the eternal woman, the one she does not know herself, the one nobody has ever known, because it is but the miracle of love that unveils... Even his name was disclosed on a moonlit night, when in the alchemist laboratory, linked to La Velata's chambers by a secret corridor, she sat with the stargazer, thrilled beyond measure, chanting the astrological prayer, until at some point they could see how on a thin parchment, the mysterious and fateful signs, without the assistance of their own hands, came into being - unfortunately, rather too blurred and hardly legible, but still they both simultaneously uttered the same name - Rophaela - which threw them into confusion, because they thought it was not quite correct, they had never heard of such a name so they spent quite a few hours conjecturing before they arrived at a feasible conclusion - and it was, of course, the astrologer-stargazer who came up with the idea, and O God!, how ambiguous truth had been when he exclaimed - Raphael, it must be Raphael, donna! - for that is the name of the archangel of Spring and Beauty, hence that must be an apposite name for anyone who is to portray her, meeting her in love, forever...

And she waited for him. Not only did she wait, she kept her eyes open for that stroke of fate, because she had to recognize it, a firm believer in the inevitability of events as she was, and at night, when the duke held her in his embrace, because it was to him that she belonged in the span of her simulated life, she gave him the shell of her body, and with her eyes closed, turned to the core of that self, which no one but him could ever awaken, so having no articulate language in which to repent, she begged for forgiveness - she begged Him, the One, - and then she turned her ears to the depths of her womb, which left her firmly convinced that she was unshakably and forever faithful to him. So time kept swelling, laden with obstructed desires and fervent hopes - until one day, so unexpectedly, despite her knowledge of predestination, his name emerged, somehow suspended in the air as a word, a sign taking shape before her eyes, and the world was drawn into a violent whirlpool, which would not stop; La Velata was on the verge of unconsciousness, she propped her head on her graceful hand, bejeweled with rings, and a servant came over to the table, where she was having dinner with the duke, ready to seize her in case she fell to the ground. A moment of turmoil ensued, her husband jumped from his seat and approached her - what's the matter, my dear, is it that the eels are too fat or the artichokes are not fresh enough... - then she recovered her senses, took a gulp

of thick Cypriot wine, and how red, as red as blood, was the liquid, sparkling with the light of dozens of candles, sending a warning that the end is imminent, and she failed to understand... Then the whirlpool came to a halt and La Velata even smiled for she had to find out immediately if the bliss had finally and irreversibly descended upon her, so she innocently asked - my dear husband, tell me everything about him, who is he and what has he painted - and learned that the Duke of Urbino, Guidobaldo Montefeltro and his honorable wife Elizabeth Gonzac, had addressed a letter to him, which was also meant for her, because they wanted her to know that a young artist, whose patrons they were, for they believed him to be remarkably gifted, was coming to Rome and they kindly ask that La Velata's family should take him under their wing, because they predict that he will have a bright future, and if they wished, Raphael - that was exactly the name her husband had uttered a minute before, in the interval between two bites, letting her know that a young artist with a good reference from Duke Guidobaldo Montefeltro would visit them, and the world had turned topsy-turvy - could also portray La Velata's inimitable face.

When? When is he coming? -

was all La Velata could ask, though she felt like asking something else, because there was only one fact she needed so that she could feel secure in the knowledge that all her dreams were fulfilled, but how could her husband possibly know when this young, in his own words, painter was born, and that would have been the most telltale sign in that the old astrologer had already determined the year, the day, and the hour when his star had risen on the horizon along with his first baby cry, and o miracle, that happened to be her star, they had simultaneously come into this world, which was the best guarantee and proof of the ultimate coalescence, coming their way from eternity... Of course, she will have to wait and ask him herself, when, having weathered the storm of utmost excitement, she will be standing face to face with him...

When is he coming?

A month from now, donna - replied her husband, unaware of the upsurge of emotion in her throbbing heart - a month from now and he will bring along some of his best paintings so that we could see for ourselves how exceptional his divine talent is, and buy one for our chambers; and should you wish, in case you approve of his talent, I will give him loads of gold to paint a portrait of Rome's most beautiful woman...

...What a delusion! Perfectly conceived, unfathomable, meticulously worked out down to the tiniest detail, -

*but who conceived it? And why? Who is it that wants to see me unhappy, exposed to ridicule, well, I can't put up with that, I can't forgive so I will impress myself onto the canvas as an indelible reproach, so that someone could someday find out how that minion of fortune was conceived and how he soared to heights that fate had not decreed, for the only reason that others besides myself knew that he was to be born, but emptiness is so much of a burden...*

La Velata rose from the stool and entered the triangle formed by the image, the gown and the place from which her eyes were to probe into the inscrutable, then she approached the table cluttered with all kinds of jars, and picked a palette that featured the same tones as the canvas, merging into hardly discernible tints - from pallid silver to glittering gold - gentle and subtle combinations which captivated her eyes before she had even reached for the brush, and then the glimmering colors on the palette penetrated through her pupils, until they were all aglow with a light that was to burst out onto the canvas, born out of her own image, the one she sees with her inner eye, not the one which is reflected in the cold surface of those mirror-like eyes, watching her closely wherever she turns...

*O Lord, I am so lucky to be able to do this...otherwise I would have been dead by now -*

...the brush touched the corner of the slightly open bodice, and the gown in the armchair shuddered with a mysterious life of its own because La Velata's eyes awakened it in the portrait... -

*that's the only way to bring it back to life, through the touch of my brush, but then he used to watch it as if it were a gorgeous thing rather than part of me and my life - all alone and desperately dead, devoid of essence, just the way she is now sitting in the armchair, a meaningless shell of nothingness, unless I choose to fill it with flesh here on the canvas ...it was actually designed exclusively for him...*

What a turmoil it was in her soul when it came to counting the days, or rather the hours and even the minutes before his arrival, what a bliss of thrilling sensations, which made her thoughts fall apart, and still myriad little revelations occurred behind her otherwise unruffled forehead - she felt her

body taking shape every waking moment, drawing upon some inner life of its own, which she had never suspected; she felt her blood traveling in her veins, which throbbed in harmony with something she could not name, inevitably lingering around her; she felt her womb, hiding in its depths an obstructed desire, unlock with the readiness of an animal and suck her in - the world changed and her life was no longer possible in this climax of expectation, which now had a clear-cut limit and a definite purpose; in order to fill with something the dragging-out prolongation of the period in which she had to bear for the last time the burden of solitude and failed fulfillment, as well as to prepare like a scapegoat for the moment of her eternity, La Velata called her dress maker and ordered him at a very short notice to sew *the one and only*, the gorgeous gown, incomparable to any other, which should absorb her burning flesh and merge with it so as to cover it completely, revealing it down to the root of its unattainable essence, and a veil, which should lay her face bare for the most seeing eyes... She took part in the designing and had a stake in every detail, she informed every fold with the sensation of her own body, a sensation which came upon her in those days of unaccountable inspiration, and then in her anxiety to keep her secret all to herself, that cryptic smile emerged from within onto her lips, the smile that only *he - the One* - could see into, laying it down forever on the canvas with the insight of an unprecedented revelation, so that she, La Velata, could grasp the mystery of her own life...

*O Lord, what a failure, what a burning and glaring Error, not just Here and Now, not just for me, or it only seems that way, because this hardly perceptible lock of hair is like a living thing, rippling down to the ear and whispering something unintelligible, beyond any Error, but in spite of incomprehensibility it has taken shape and the veil has been raised, albeit not by his long-expected hands ... and this feels so nice, just like the sweetest revenge...*

And La Velata retreated again to that spot by the stool, at the very tip of the invisible triangle, from which, she now knows for certain, he would have been watching her, constructing the invisible geometry of an inordinately sophisticated space, only that he is not the one who watches now, she has taken over, so she spent some time gazing either at her face or the gown, in order to see herself in an exterior likeness rather than in the image, but mainly in order to confirm her belief in the deadening power of this earnest regard, which rather than thinking about her, conceives the geometry of her soul according to the laws of perspective.

*No, that is impossible, but how terrible it was when I found out...-*

And then she reentered the triangle, thus reaching the focal point from which she could, without the help of the mirror's eyes, observe her own self; she touched the palette with her brush and in a moment a hardly perceptible golden thread flashed on the canvas, in one of the folds of the sleeve, swelling in a life of its own...

*No, this is not just his life, it is my life after all, it was for him that I had this gown made and he, as soon as he caught a glimpse of me, ripped me to shreds and then pieced me together into his own world where I do not belong... O Lord, what a failure, but I can't bear it that way and it didn't take me long to realize...I realized he was not the right man and this fact is so simple to display...*

...because no matter how slowly these days, hours, even minutes dragged on, absorbed by the present mill of the great Expectation, no matter how unbearable the nights might seem, those nights when the moon comes to a halt up in the sky, as if crowning the top of a cypress tree, and never moves, so that time should no longer elapse and that particular night should never come to an end, forever the same in the vicious circle of its return, when the flesh is burning in the embrace of that prospective Meeting, anticipated and experienced more than once - like a yearning for the rejuvenating dew that will come down from the sky, like a golden rain in which the sun will fervently erupt in an orgy of unexpected oblivion, like a promiscuous and prolonged dance in a swan's embrace, or like an impending hurricane, irreversibly wresting you from the entrenchment in the bodily longings, recurrent like the resurrection of the earth and ultimately subsiding, permeated by the eternity of the moment...

...because no matter how slowly the world turns in the human mind, its progress is inevitable as time accumulates and the gown is now ready, standing there in anticipation of the moment when the flesh, for which it has been designed, will breathe life into it, the veil is also fluttering with the feeling of its material's softness, and la Velata has already seen the sunrise on that day when he is supposed to arrive, - her alchemist-astrologer has worked it all out with utmost precision, giving her every assurance that there could be no mistake - such coincidences are out of the question and what she has expected is now about to come true; he was the only one who could partly, given his knowledge, share and sympathize with her emotion, which he seemed to be experiencing and understanding through her...-

I understand you, donna, for the miracle of love is a true salvation...-

that's what he used to say to her ... but actually there is no salvation.

*There is only never and nothing without end.*

When her maid brought in the gown, his arrival was only an hour away, and it all works out beautifully when it is so decreed, for the duke was detained by some business away from Rome and she was to receive the guest on her own - after all, a painter and a portrait do not count for much when compared to the ponderous problems that a man has on his mind - so La Velata committed herself to Fornarina's cares; the maid fussed around her, removing the creases and fiddling with the folds, the ribbons and the laces, failing to understand why her mistress is so pale, why she is not happy at the sight of this exquisite miracle of a gown, created by her best dress-maker to be a worthy frame of her own unparalleled beauty; any other woman would have been more than elated about having such a splendid garment - so what is it that eats her, is it that she expected a dress of a different cast, a dress unseen and unheard of - of course, madam could not be nervous about meeting an artist, who was there to follow her orders, nor could she be anxious about the quality of her future portrait, for which this gown was expressly made, because in case she didn't like it, any artist, any distinguished artist, would produce another picture...could anyone afford to turn down her offer, or the duke's offer for that matter?

"Look at yourself in the mirror, donna, look at yourself and you'll come to worship yourself..."

That's what a frenzied Fornarina kept repeating, pushing her mistress towards the wall, covered with mirrors - the same mirrors that La Velata ordered out of her room when she sat for the first time in front of the canvas to paint herself, but the way the mirrors' eyes saw her - look at yourself - the maid entreated her, but she would not and so she looked away from the wall; why on earth would she want to worship herself if he was already around, so she turned her back on the surface where she could have seen her consummate face, she wouldn't even cast a glance at the gown to find out how it looked when observed from without, because she knew from within that it looked gorgeous from without, but those other eyes were already waiting for her, the eyes that were to see her in a light that neither the mirrors nor her own eyes could cognize...

... The chiming of a bell filled the air... the valet opened the door, and following his orders, announced that the guest had been ushered into the big



hall, overflowing with pictures, statues, and almost suffocating under the burden of its opulence...-

*I will be hard put to avoid the mirrors there -*

was the very last thought that lingered in La Velata's mind, but she could already feel the dizziness coming upon her, the firm ground under her feet receded and she knew she had to meet this formidable challenge, so she bowed her head and let Fornarina attach the veil to the dark ripples of her unruly hair, and she merged with its softness forever...

*...the veil which took me so long to paint because if He proved unable to unveil me, or just wouldn't do that because he knew he couldn't do it, preoccupied as he was with his own persona - how could I do a thing like that? Still, I've done a good job so far and now I just have to draw that boundary where the unfolded edge comes out to the foreground of the canvas, next I'll lay two darker brushes in that cave between the veil and the neck, which marks the end of the necklace's visibility...O Lord, it will then be over and done with, but will someone ever understand what has really happened?*

La Velata placed the brush on the table beside the tripod, then put down the palette and felt incapacitated by fear because the hour of the end is actually nigh, many hours have flowed into the memory and the sun has moved away, reversing its course

*And there is nothing I could change now, that's the way I'm going to be - laid forever on this canvas, anonymous, for do I have the right to inscribe my own name, actually does anyone know their name - I will be anonymous, because I am the One...*

then she took another step back, withdrawing to that place from which she could see herself as an insubstantial likeness, as a treasured possession in somebody else's inscrutable world, so that she could look at herself with those eyes -

*then I should feel for the last time that wave of nausea coming upon me and remember for the last time that moment of despondency...*

No, that's impossible - she is stripped of her memory and there seems to be no such moment, her mind refuses to accept the immateriality of the event and everything is resolved into the chaos of imperceptible sensations, swarming

into her mind, and for some reason invariably taking on the mantle of doubt throughout the two days he spent in her house, until they finally materialized in that cry of despair whose only witness was the man who had predicted it all; still, that was no moment of insight, but rather an utterance of the unuttered, pent-up for ages...-

That's not the right man!...What should I do? -

she was even powerless to cry on her astrologer's shoulder, and he kept begging for forgiveness, promising to check it all over again, for why bother about him not being the Right Man, if that were true, then the Right Man was Another Man, and nothing could stop them from tracking him down, but this time there was no doubt the astrologer was incompetent, all his reckoning was wrong, because she already knew better, she was the one endowed with knowledge and she could no longer harbor any delusions, although she was unable to explain how she had come to this simple and incontrovertible piece of knowledge - that he is absolutely absent, he is a figment, he has never been and will never be available; the Error of Origin is fatal and is manifest in her fate of all others. How could she explain, how could she describe - wretched as she was - to all those who in an attempt to fill the gap had created the Big Fiction, and without ever asking her, without any concern for her soul had decided to commit her - inarticulate as she was; - and yet as soon as the valet opened the glittering gilded door and she stepped into the hall where she stood face to face with him , she was overcome with that preposterous suspicion, vague and subconscious at first, that someone wanted - why would they? - to deceive her by luring her into the trap of a monstrous Lie, and then she yielded for a moment to her overwhelming desire that it should be Him, looked around the room and saw him - that artist, the minion of fortune who did not realize how insignificant the existence, afforded to him, was... No, he became fully aware of it only later, when her Body articulated it, and then again when she saw his pictures; at that first moment, however, all she saw was his face - that comely, childishly happy face that had no idea of the mute fury of feelings that had taken possession of her; nor did his face show any understanding of the need for the expression of her emotions in some unknown but inevitably available focal point, lying beyond the geometry of visible space and beyond the perspective of deceptive deflections...

He kissed her hand. Then he took a low bow and she could see how he was sizing her up - her outfit, her dazzling beauty, her eyes, her haircut,

painstakingly shaped by her best coiffeur, - he was dumbfounded and if she had borrowed Fornarina's eyes for a moment, she would have seen he was ready to worship her, but she thought of this as the mirror into which she would not look, listlessly evading it, because in those eyes destined for her she expected to see something different - the indescribable to which she submitted at night, immersed in the longings of her inaccessible flesh - and what she saw was but the portrait that he was already painting in his mind, and she shuddered because it was not Her. Then she recovered her senses and got a grip on the storm raging in her soul, it even crossed her mind that she might be wrong, for inordinate expectations give rise to frustrations in the real world, which invariably conceals the essence, and this overwhelming doubt, which paralyzed her, might not be based on a grain of truth; so she decided to wait and see; undaunted, she was going to resort to all means to find out for certain because hope should not fade too soon, leaving you with only one possible solution. She even asked him when he was born and was even thrilled when she established the coincidence, but for some reason she thought it might be just a coincidence, she felt a cold wave coming her way in spite of his warm eyes, which looked at her and painted her somewhere in the distance of his own life, and tranquillity settled so suddenly in her soul that La Velata impassively and confidently invited him to stay for dinner, and then, after the torpor of the thick wine, she suggested that he should stay overnight, so that they could discuss the financial details concerning the portrait, as well as the hour when a special carriage sent by her would bring over the pictures, which she would like to see, and even buy, before she could make a decision about her order. She did feel that flicker somewhere in the depths of her eyes, which inevitably came up when she stood before a man's eyes, overtly reflecting her, and she did not hide it, on the contrary, she let it burn up, for the man before her was handsome and she was bound to touch his body in order to confirm or dispel the doubts which lay heavy in the back of her soul, stiff under the stranger's scrutiny,

*and I was so frightened that I couldn't even realize how and why it all came upon me, I couldn't even feel unhappy at that moment, on the verge of decision, on the verge of understanding - who could explain it to me if I knew my feelings were petrified...*

The storm struck again later, when the maid took him to the one of the spare bedrooms and she remained all alone among the numerous mirrors and the reflected light of dozens of candles, it struck in the form of a deluge of

reproachful words that she addressed to herself, because all her longings were back and her body went wild as soon as he walked out of the dining-room -

*what is it that makes me think so, as if a black demon has come to take him away from me, is it really so simple to make sure it's not him, why should it be his fault - after all, his eyes were filled with warmth and they might well be seeking their last resort in me - why did I accuse him... -*

still, this was not a matter of accusation, everything was caught in the commotion of sensations, which rushed into her mind in an increasingly chaotic succession, and La Velata could not bear this unless she sought the ultimate, the one and only confirmation...

Is this not the moment of never and nothing without end?

Then all alone, a candle in hand, like a criminal, she groped her way through the silent corridors to that wing of the enormous palazzo, lying right across from her chambers, where visitors were accommodated, and in one of them he had gone to sleep or was still burning with desire for her body? The long corridors of the rambling building kept winding before her eyes until she opened slightly a door, but the room was empty and the shadows were surreptitiously silent, then she went for another door, and yet another... and she saw him - his clothes were thrown on the chair beside the bed and he was lying casually there, fast asleep behind the folds of the canopy, somewhat drawn apart, he was lying there, never expecting and never expected, even on this night of the full Moon, calling for love...

*but why should I think so -*

and La Velata approached him with the candle in her hand, illuminated his face and took a close look at him - was this the way she had imagined the predestined lover, but how could she possibly imagine him, if the answer does not lie within visibility, and now the Body will immediately give her a hint...She blew out the candle and in the light of the Moon laid her hand on his forehead, touching it gently, in the hope that it might awaken with the tenderness of intangible yearnings she knew were hidden somewhere in his soul, then he shifted slightly, feeling the touch, and although she did not see his face, she knew that his eyes opened and looked at her in the dark; maybe this is the moment when all doubts are resolved, because he raised his hands, touched her gown and then realized it was part of her flesh - so his hands dug into the satin, the laces, the delicate tulle near the breasts, they scoured the whole body until she helped him by letting the gorgeous covering of the corporeal core fall to the

ground, the veil followed suit and then she thought for a moment that it was all about to come true...

No, nothing comes true, because there is only never and nothing without end.

The man toppled her onto the bed just like the duke, who was the sole proprietor of her consummate flesh, and luxuriated in *his* sensations aroused by her body, he slipped deep into the gap, incandescent with expectation, and ripped it with the impetus of *his* desire, but he put it together again for he needed it united in the cast of her flesh, then he struck out in a direction of his own, probably heading for the rapid pulse of the heart beating in his veins, and she was left alone, more and more parching, terrified and stiff in his hands, which kept jerking her back and forth in the rhythm of *his* exhilaration, while she was locked in the cavity, covered all over, crushed within the confines that he would not break, fossilized into a shell, superfluous and unattached to her own soul - why -

*why is it not available, the Body that would be mine, why doesn't He give it to me, why is the error...*

but there was no thought at that moment, just sickening sensations and a desire to slip away from the increasing rapacity of the strange body, which reached the climax of utmost strain and poured *its* juices into a womb that it never came to know... - you are so beautiful, donna, and I am so happy that you have vouchsafed to afford me this pleasure - she heard a distant voice, absolutely sincere for she had really vouchsafed...

*was this all there was to it, was it to be just like an all too familiar role, learnt by rote? -*

so La Velata descended from the bed, stepped onto the gown, lying on the rug, and felt with her bare foot the gold woven into the satin; he did not object to her unexpected withdrawal, he would obediently accept any decision she could make, and she felt quite vividly, with her senses accustomed to detecting male desire, that he still wanted her, his flesh being ablaze again...

*the poor wretch, he is at the other end of the world...and I, why shouldn't I be good?...-*

and with a frightening smile on her lips, which no one could see in the moonlit darkness, she promised that the following night, he was to stay on,

wasn't he, after she sees his paintings, she will visit him again in the dark hour of secret desires, but now she must hasten lest anyone of the servants should find out about this reckless deviation from her wifely duty to the duke, who worships her...

"I'll be waiting for you, donna", she heard him say in a subdued and weirdly pleading voice.

The gown had already covered her body, protecting it like a snake with the cold matter of desires, transformed into satin, silk and brocade, the veil fell over her face, so that she could be anonymously unrecognizable for strange eyes, and La Velata merged into the dark, slipped through the door and only then did she light the candle from the torch in the corridor that was kept burning to help rambling strangers find their way...

*That was the end, after that I fell asleep and I was dead to the world, otherwise I should have died there and then, so I was free from my thoughts until the next morning when my astrologer, the accomplice and witness of my unrequited love, came up before my eyes and it was then that I cried out -*

*It's not the right man, what should I do?*

*and realized that the end had come and my only option was procrastination as a form of transition from Here to There...*

Next there was nothing. In his alchemist laboratory, preoccupied with the maps of the starry heavens, the astrologer speculated on the Error, in which he at least had come to believe, while La Velata received once again the impostor bearing the name Raphael - but why should he be an impostor if he suspected nothing at all; he was just singled out by those who were unable to see into absence, those who could not feel the abyss that the world had collapsed into, those who filled the gap with illusions about some geometrically rational space where the soul irreversibly dies.

On the next day the carriage with the paintings arrived, and he, somewhat embarrassed after the fabulous night that he hadn't expected, stood before them and before her - the coldly impassive and now unapproachable beauty - and began to explain the exciting query he had put to the world in his paintings, but his attempts to explain were of little avail as she had spent years preparing for this moment, studying all the novel ideas of her time - the philosophical speculations about the Spirit and the Universe, about the spherical essence of God, about the laws of perspective that always hold true in nature, so she fixed her understanding eye on the pictures where the world extended in a scheme.

So there was nothing surprising about his explanations and what occupied her mind was quite different, a quest he didn't have the slightest idea of, so La Velata, while listening attentively to the words that were meant to expound the divinely exact laws to which the forms on the canvas were subject, was actually gazing intently at some dimension beyond the visibility of the splendid images, she didn't take long to discern what she already knew should lie out there, and she even asked him to keep quiet because she would like to contemplate on her own. It was then that her suspicion was confirmed, taking the shape of a thought, which since the day before, when she met him, had been lingering in her mind - the thought that he could never paint her face despite the perfect visibility that his hands were capable of, because he invariably paints nothing else but himself - she saw him in all the images in which she immersed her eyes, but this was especially true of the female ones - always the same covering of an essence alien to the artist, an essence materialized only in the beauty of the corporeal shell that was accessible to him - the same shell that her husband possessed, the same shell that he himself had come to know on the night when the fulfillment of her destiny was tested. ...Madonna after Madonna, all of them similar in their affectionate anxiety over their children, women mourning the death of Jesus, frozen in a moment of grief that was not theirs, forever the same grief, symmetrically spilling over into space, projected onto a destiny that was not theirs...

"I'll buy this one", La Velata said at once and looked at him with a smile, copying the delicate smiles of the Madonnas, which he was positively fond of, for she had to tickle his vanity at all costs if she wanted to acquire the picture...

"But why have you chosen this one of all others, donna? It's not for sale," protested the minion of fortune, surprised at her choice, for the dainty white hand, bedecked with rings, had pointed at his own portrait, which he always carried along to show it as a perfect accomplishment in this genre...

"Don't you really understand why I want to have it?," La Velata asked shrewdly, confident in the charm that no earthly creature could resist, for his thoughts are so predictable while hers are so indescribably veiled - how could he have any idea why she should want to have this particular portrait...So he surrendered, and with a generous smile proudly offered his humble image, if she so strongly wishes to possess it, as a present for the most beautiful woman he has ever set eyes on.

That's how she obtained his portrait, single-handedly painted by him, but she didn't show it to anyone; instead, she hid it in her studio, allocated to her by the duke, who had decided to indulge her whim to spend hours on end in a diversion he failed to understand, painting pictures that she wanted no one to see, for how could she dare exhibit them to all those renowned painters who visited her house after having acquired a perfect command of their art...

"This is the portrait I want," she said and the sweetest revenge popped up in her mind, the sweetest revenge she could take on her incompatible destiny, the most genuine deliverance from the captivity of her vitiated body, ethereally haunting the self-same gown, which choice of clothes he interpreted, she was certain, as a sign of one more night spent in possession of her body.

"This is the portrait I want," and she ordered it out of the room and into her studio, where no later than the following morning, when he would have left her home forever, she was to begin her postponed life, in which the visions of solitude will spill over into the hues of an anonymous, ineffable inspiration until the moment of death, when, revenged in the knowledge of her own identity, she was to stand next to him - the one she wants him to be and the one he would be if he existed in actuality, without the preposterous presence of the Error. She had nothing more to lose,

*but o Lord, what have I gained standing in front of this portrait that he himself has painted -*

so at first she was really keen to obliterate it completely, wipe it off the face of the earth so that she could no longer see the warm eyes, imagining that they were looking at her while they were leaving nothing else but their own mark on the world. She checked this impulse because his annihilation was no objective for her; after all, He didn't exist anyway and her ascent away from the demeaning regard of those mirror-like eyes, which had robbed her of her destiny, the eyes which even on the day of their farewell meeting were still filled with lust for her body, frantically demanding that she believe the man who had adopted the most beautiful name, the man who was commonly held to stand for the archangel of Spring and Beauty, was the one destined to paint a portrait of La Velata, thus committing her to eternity -

*however, which La Velata? - the one everybody wants to see so that they can gratify their own desires in my soul, devoid of essence...*

When he asked her about *her* portrait and hopefully begged her to start their sittings on the following day, or even on that very day, for her image was



so firmly settled in his heart, she once again responded with a smile, and with the right conferred on her by her position of power, retorted:

"One year from now to the day, maestro, come then and it will be possible..." - and by way of compensation she bought one more picture, which he didn't rate as one of his best, for it had been painted a long time ago, when his soul was still overcome by doubts, the road ahead was unclear and his youthful mind was ridden with some vague longings - but she chose that one, "The Knight's Dream", where two women, one of whom represents Passion, while the other epitomizes immaculate virtue, are tempting the knight, who is lying on his shield under a laurel tree, still wondering deep in the recesses of his mind which way to take...

*Neither way for he doesn't understand what they are saying to him...-*

La Velata thought, fascinated by the naiveté of the picture and wishing to make up for his disappointment after her refusal to sit for the portrait, which he failed to account for.

That put an end to the whole affair, there was just an ambiguous smile before she retreated to her chambers, a smile that had certainly made him shudder as it was accompanied by her final words and the rustling sound of her gown, slipping out of the door...

"Farewell, maestro, I've been delighted and I hope you'll stay for another night before you depart, for I know how arduous a task you have been assigned by His Holiness, who is anxious to erect the most stately cathedral dedicated to Saint Peter...

So La Velata walked out of the hall and before the door closed behind her she just cast a furtive glance in the direction of that space which was now vacant...

The grief was inevitable and the sun lost its brilliance, her eyes refused to look to the world, where the future was missing, devoid of meaning, but the evening set in regardless, for time knows no end and imperturbably goes round the harrowing circle that drags along people's woes - then the sunlight smoldered out and the sky and the earth were trapped in the shadow of darkness, the night came and the stars lit up the dome of the world, so that the stargazer, still brooding on his miscalculation, could raise his eyes and inscribe the preposterous error not in the scheme but in the natural constitution of divine light...

Then La Velata proceeded with the final action - the ultimate proof of her unerring intuition - so she called Fornarina, her maid and companion throughout the span of expectation; Fornarina was unlikely to suspect anything since more than once she'd had to smooth out the pillows, wet with the juices of obstructed energy, as well as the creases of the sheets, in which the contortions of the body inevitably sought refuge -

La Velata ordered her to take the favorite gown out of the clothes room, the gown which was conceived by the unveiled faith in the one and only possible life, then veiled again after the collapse into the Error, transformed into a dead shell of her forever discarded essence, a gorgeous mask of failed fulfillment, in whose labyrinth any casual observer would be ensnared and lost;

she picked it up from her hands and told her to undress, then gave her a shift of her finest underwear, redolent of musk; next she applied the vial's little tube to the maid's hair and sprayed on it some drops of her perfume, smoothed out the creases and the folds, fastened the ribbons and the laces, put on the veil, and saw herself in the uncanny light of the candles - all covered in satin, giving out golden flashes, her breasts fluttering enchantingly under the tulle - just the way everybody sees her, just the way everybody wants her and who could question her predestination posited in the very nature of this self-gratifying beauty. She embraced the maid since now she was her nearest and dearest sister, and whispered lustful words in her ear, deceptive and challenging words, pleas and conspiratorial exhortations, but it didn't take long to persuade her, Fornarina bowed her head, and a blush must have come up on her cheeks in the dark, so La Velata seized her by the hand and dragged her along the dark corridors lit by an occasional torch, leading her to that room which was still haunted by the pallid shadow of shattered hopes, and she opened the door for her, after taking away the flickering light of the candle, and then lingered on the outside, engrossed in the moans culminating in a frantic inspiration, aroused by herself... She stayed on, listening to the passion of the bodies entwined behind the door, and she didn't move until the first roosters heralded the break of dawn, unveiling the secrets of the womb-like night; then La Velata gave a sign, she scratched on the door and in a little while Fornarina emerged, shrouded in her mystery - absolutely Other but also the Same - a woman wrapped in the opulence of the familiar gown, wearing a perfume exuding the fragrance of a woman, reduced to the flesh that he needs.

*Well, I was the one inside the room, the maid, shrouded in my gown - what else did I ever want?*

When the night was on the ebb, they returned to La Velata's bedroom and she asked her maid:

"Was he pleased, Fornarina? Did he enjoy your silent flesh, which, by his own admission, he craved to possess as soon as he saw you at the door... - and the maid dropped to the ground in La Velata's feet, and even kissed them, profoundly grateful to her mistress for the fabulous night she had endowed her with.

"He told me he worshipped me, donna, and he said he would paint the most exquisite portrait of me...

Without a wink of sleep, La Velata met the break of dawn, after she had dismissed the maid, letting her take a rest after the turbulent night when she had unwittingly given away *her* caresses; no sooner had the sun risen than La Velata saw him get onto the gilded carriage that was to take him away for good, back into his own life, where she did not belong. Only then did she walk across the secret corridor which connected her chambers with the astrologer's laboratory, for he must have already learnt the truth and as soon as she caught sight of him among his alembics and alchemist apparatuses which were designed to unravel the mystery of life's origin, she knew that the sentence would be pronounced, and dressed in words, it would establish some order in the tumult of voices raised by her inexpressible feelings...

The alchemist's eyes were sad, the eyes of a man accustomed to uncovering secrets that could take your breath away; he invited her to sit on a stool near the furnace while he stood staring at a seething liquid smelling of blood, then he grasped her hands so that he could less painfully infuse his words, pretty much like a lethal poison, right into the veins of her tormented flesh:

"You are right, most beautiful donna. It is a disgrace that I, the master of mysteries, have failed to understand, misinterpreting the riddles of the stars, so I really needed your hint which opened my eyes, and not in the scheme of the starry sky did I discover the impossible and ambiguous Error, but rather while gazing at the natural lights of the night, I was granted a message from above so that I could convey it to you and put an end to your pains by helping you resign yourself to inevitability... I has occurred but I don't know why and maybe the roots lie deeper than we can imagine, they might go back to the original error

which makes the mind boggle and lose its acumen - maybe that's the reason why you were the first to understand, my trustworthy donna, for penetration is of no avail in this matter, it takes diffusion and insufflation into the secret, where words are reduced to silence, and I actually have very little to tell you, not much more than what you have learnt yourself, but the Error is a fact anyway - he wasn't born at all, a fatal confusion, beyond the grasp of the human mind, has brought this about, all expectations have been fake, and not only ours, for there are quite a few others waiting for him, but empty space is intolerable, downright impossible in Nature, so it has to be filled - the prophecy must come true, the paintings must be created, and a church is to be built as well - and who could assert that they are not the true ones? Only love cannot be experienced unless it is true and that's the reason why you, the elected one, could not deceive yourself, but in fact the responsibility rests with me for I suggested to you, way back in your adolescence, the idea of this expectation... What a fool I was, for now I realize what a monstrous lie I have told, albeit not deliberate, in fact how could I know if there are so many astrologers and all of them have been duped, they have all filled the absence of the fulfillment that I had promised to you, with arid perfection, which is widely revered among them, their conception is based on a convenient scheme, which can be unraveled, and I was actually doing the same thing when I kept looking into the maps of the sky in an attempt to elicit the truth until you indicated to me the most genuine sign, your mouth spoke in the unerring language of eternal desire, kindled in man's heart by God, and then I looked at the real stars and I saw...You are right, donna - but whom will you reproach? Whom will you take revenge on? You'd better resign yourself to the overwhelming knowledge that he cannot paint a portrait of you for how could he possibly love you the way you want him to, how could he see into your essence if he himself is a fiction and Another Man, and that's where the ambiguity lies, for who could tell, once the Error has fatally occurred, the truth from the fiction, conceived to fill the gaping gap in this infelicitous detail of Creation, where everything has been jumbled, and how do we know that Truth isn't two-faced while it is given to us to see only one of its Faces... Actually, how could the two faces merge into one - well, this is a sacrament which is the exclusive province of God - resign yourself, my fairest victim of female clairvoyance - your faithful old astrologer, the master of approachable secrets begs you to accept the facts because unapproachable secrets must never be approached, and small wonder that the Duke of Urbino, the great

Montefeltro and his excellent wife Elizabeth Gonzac, even your husband himself conceive a fiction and then believe in it, actually now I know that even His Holiness... - you certainly don't think he would not be terrified by the gap and is it not his duty to fill it? Yes, everything must be accepted the way it is for there is no other option and there is no other residue but an injustice - why did it fall to your lot to be so cruelly deceived? And how was this vicious circle of fate formed?

His words dissolved in the flames of the fire and La Velata was no longer listening to him; instead, she was staring at the elemental drama of the seething red liquid smelling of blood, and she knew what was being prepared, the tincture of death designed for her, because the astrologer could never be duped. There was one thing, however, that the old sage didn't know - she won't accept the facts, she will put off the moment of death and revenge is now sweetly seething in her bosom, circulating along with the blood in her veins - not in the form of death but as a postponed life rubbing shoulders with death, a life that no one will be aware of because how could it be articulated?

La Velata rose amidst the burning discourse and gave a silent sign that she knew what he meant, she was leaving and all questions are over, there is nothing left but silence and that absolute solitude, devoid of expectations, like a veil with no one to be raised for...

That's how this postponed life of hers took off, like a loose end - somewhere beyond the course of her life, on the very borderline which cannot be crossed, but from which the Error could be seen on the horizon of failed fulfillment, and if not rectified, for it is not given to us to do so, it could at least be displayed, as a clear image, as a sign of missed worlds, an appeal for help and a dissent, which could hardly soothe the soul, but thus it will be secretly revealed if it frames this obscure language in which it could be articulated...

First she applied herself to the portrait of the man who had unwittingly inflicted the mortal wound, she spent days and weeks on end gazing at him in quest of the egregious Error, the gap which must inevitably be sealed onto his face, the nothingness that had overwhelmed the world in which she was dismissed, until at some point when sight turns into insight, she came to think that she saw, understood, and could put things right, at least on this canvas; then she would pick up the brush, blend the colors on the palette and begin to displace the creation, modifying the features so slightly that the casual observer wouldn't notice, incorporating her own image - in the luscious lips, the little

curves of the eyelids, the gentle serenity of the eyes, even in the bow that she added to the hat... No, she didn't want to efface him, he had to be there, in full view of the public, for no one was supposed to find out how she had furtively and secretly sneaked onto the surface of the canvas, inscribing her face way into the pupils, as an illusion of some unfathomable depth beyond the perspective of space, beyond the geometry of visibility, in order to fill the gap and hush the shrill voice of nothingness in which her image dies away... A warm affection rose in her heart as the two of them penetrated each other and coalesced forever in the hues, the lines, the curves, like an unexpected trace left on his image by the delicate tip of the brush, and the whole of his face, more and more infused with the coveted love, became blurred, two-faced, ideally self-sufficient, and she watched him with her dreaming soul, uttering - now, there He is - her vision alternated between him and herself and she was brimming over with happiness for she knew her eyes could not lie - the feeling was great, much better than before, when there was only one trace, and she knew that once she is no more, everyone will be looking at *him* without suspecting that she is also there...

*The poor man, he never got a clue, but this is still his portrait, and what about us - could it be that we shall die on the same day if we were born together... Thus he won't disclaim authorship of this portrait if he happens to see it... But the picture is much better now, why should he do that, if everyone will be speaking about him and he will be the only one seen...*

That's how she got halfway into that year, granted to her at the moment her death was postponed, and no one had the slightest idea what was going on behind the locked doors of the studio; only the duke occasionally gave a smile of suspicion, when he felt like visiting the woman he unconditionally possessed; she took her time before opening the door, and then showed him apologetically a rather sophisticated picture she was supposedly working on, whose subject distressed her, because on the canvas Paris attempts to elope with Helen and actually does so, but it's not quite clear whether she wants it or not, so the expression of her face is simply impossible to paint... Only the old astrologer, the great alchemist, was likely to suspect something for he kept concocting forever new dyes, and she knew by the tints of the colors that these were no common dyes, at least not for her, so when she watched him dissolve the powders and blend into them egg whites and the milky juice of fig branches, that mysterious smile emerged on her lips, a weird mixture of solitude and

victory, which he could never fully interpret, but which made him suspect some sweet, ambivalent revenge and love beyond the confines of conceivable feelings. The alchemist-astrologer did not ask, for it was not quite clear if what he speculated on was good and if it was part of nature's unrevealed yet perfect laws, or if it was so designed by God, who, for some reason, had committed this insignificant but fatal Error, which had reversed the course of her destiny, but this time he would rather not intervene, it all occurred in an inaccessible space, and he was aware of the most important fact - it all boils down to procrastination, a postponed and ephemeral life between Here and There, a breath of air in a tormented soul, and who could deprive her of this breath?

Meanwhile time kept ticking away, and half of it was eaten when La Velata finally made up her mind and prepared the last canvas, designed for her own face. She didn't even allow the boy, who sometimes helped her out with the physical work requiring a more-than-female strength, to touch it; she primed it herself and when she stood in front of it, dressed in the gown of failed desire, unveiled before her own eyes, she felt her body shudder at once; it was caught in some new, unfamiliar turbulence, and she had the feeling she saw through the nothingness of the white canvas; then horror came upon her and a stupid question lingered in her mind, sapping her strength-

*how shall I reach for myself? He can but can I?*

Eyes were looking at her from all directions and the invisible glances reached their crossing point somewhere within her, they split her to pieces, which then came back together, forming a unity more alien to her, devoid of essence, imprinted on the outmost borders of the Self-Same incomprehensible flesh, endowed with a cryptic beauty eliciting burdensome yearnings... The brush, ready for the first touch, was shaking in her hand, hardly visible against the background of the draperies, the laces and the gold, bearing down on her, and it seemed impossible to lay down the first hue that would posit her existence in the form her desire urged to bring into life for everything will smolder out and go to pieces once her hand reaches for the canvas, once something lucid, colorful, indescribably substantial cuts through the white surface of nothingness, like the focal point of the Universe, from which all the lines and colors will spurt out -

*from and for me, from my eyes to the world, and then back into myself...*

and yet her own body feels more and more clammy and alien, reflected in the mirrors, which were arranged in a special way, throwing back her image from all angles, so that she could watch herself while copying her face onto the canvas, but the first touch was even further removed from her, all those eyes that enveloped her made her hand stiff, and she could find no other perspective but the one through them, through the mirrors in which she saw her reflection, dressed in the gorgeous gown, wearing the veil that only He could possibly raise...

*but he is missing, now I am on my own...*

Then her hand reached for the bell, and its toll sounded like a call for help, so the maid stormed into the studio and La Velata issued her command - let some men come over here now, let all the men come in and take these mirrors away, because the world does not look genuine in the cold illusory surface and all these planes, bearing down on her from all directions, overwhelm her, they press against her and push her out, letting her circle in a vague orbit beyond her own center, which makes the first touch impossible... Later, when she was left alone in the bare room, without second thoughts, following some irresistible instinct, she took off the gown, specially made so that *she* could be painted by *him*, and then saw the dress stand on its own, in need of no other support than the air that filled it from within, so she laid it down on a chair, in a place that would enable her to behold the ever-mingling dyes of the folds, the brocade, half-dissolved in light, the curving rigidity of the draperies -

*It will be easier to paint it this way - it will stand right there, I'll place the canvas here, and I'll stay with myself. I'll put a stool right in the place where he would have been sitting and that will be the outmost point, from which my eyes will be covering the whole space, and thus I will be taking different positions so that other eyes could not place me where I wouldn't like to be, or see a twisted image of me. There are no more mirrors now and it would be best if I didn't see myself ...why do I need that if feel it all from within whereas in the mirror it is as if He were looking, but He is missing. He doesn't exist and that's good...That's what good is about...*

Her hand rose and a drop fell onto the white canvas and made its way back and forth, up and down, filling the empty space in a rhythm blissfully spilling out of her own body, unchecked by the visible geometry of the outer eye and throbbing in the core of that self which her life refused to unveil, because



she got trapped in a stupid Error, where he - the missing one - took away her will to survive.

*At least this short span of my life will be mine, and then I'll leave it confidently and unwaveringly for even if I accomplish what I thought he was the only one to do, even then I will be superfluous to myself since he is missing. Only the other one, the counterfeit copy, can believe that he is self-sufficient.*

Thus she began to fill with her image the time of suspended expectation, thinking of it as the remains of her unfulfilled days, until that morning of the vernal equinox when a year had passed to the day and La Velata - the anonymous donna with a mysterious smile - many a time but certainly for the last time stood in front of the portrait to put the last touch on herself, the point where her existence would merge and then vanish into the veiled myth about her own destiny, which owing to some obscure Error did not belong to her. Hours upon hours went by like lightning, stirring up memories, which were no longer charged with anxiety, brought only peace and patient submission to That Hand which had impressed her own failed fulfillment upon the stars and had robbed her of all her predicted expectations, transforming them into a single sign, which she - the anonymous donna - was to leave on the canvas. The red liquid smelling of blood, prepared by the astrologer as the only way to expiate his guilt, was waiting for her on the dressing table near the spacious bed, where under the fluttering canopy she had spent so many nights staring into the dark, and in her fits of obstructed energy had shredded the delicate sheets, as if shredding her own life, so that she could take a look inside, under the husk, and see time and again the abyss of absence and privation which was ready to swallow her like a gaping womb...

*The red liquid smelling of blood is waiting, the sun is now setting down and before long the horizon will turn blazing red...All I have to do is leave the last sign, the one that will replace my name for am I entitled to a name?*

So La Velata applied her finest brush to the canvas and painted a little ribbon, a bow on the left shoulder, which was the only missing detail on the gown, and then inscribed on the two hanging laces, in a secret alphabet, familiar only to her and her astrologer, and positively lost after their death, the obscure name, which a long time ago, in the hours of faith and expectation, had inscribed itself on the thin parchment and which - was it not her genuine Name?

Rophaela...

And then once again:

Rophaela...

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When the sun left its last bloody trail behind and the horizon turned blazing red, a carriage stopped in front of the palazzo wrapped in a silence exuding the fragrance of oranges and figs, and in a moment he descended from it - the minion of fortune - summoned back by the memory of the two nights that felt more like a dream, and by a promise, which - will it be fulfilled? The valet bowed and asked him who he was looking for, while Fornarina caught sight of him from her window and her heart missed a beat-

*I have to notify my mistress, I must announce his visit, and he...is he coming for me? -*

So she rushed to La Velata's chambers, where the dying sun had already penetrated, mingled with the smell of blood...

...and the scream split the silence, rebounded from the walls, went out through the door and, reflected in the myriad mirrors, dispersed in all the rooms, halls, chambers, met halfway by steps running without any particular destination...Now there was no one she could inform about the clear facts in the chaos of signs, which bore down on her from all directions, attracted by the awe-inspiring Body, devoid of meaning, and it was then that Raphael, also dragged into the sweeping turmoil caused by the surprising and sudden eruption of grief, stopped before the proud flesh of his secret love - a shell dressed in the Same gown, silently staring into nothingness - or not exactly into nothingness, for he was the only one to follow the direction of the dead eyes, turned to themselves, and mesmerized, he approached the portrait, where she - very much alive - was looking at him...

...O Lord who has painted her, she promised...

...well, it's not bad, it's quite good...

... but there is something obscure, vague and miscalculated in the depth of the eyes...

... there is something missing, actually nobody is watching right now, so I could take it...

...and put it right...

...her beauty deserves it and unless someone happens to look for it, she will stay with me forever...

...my secret love...

**Translation from the Bulgarian by Ljubomir Terziev**