Bino,
the boy nun

Winter

A slate sky, a frozen river. I leaned from the bridge. Ice glimmered blue-white. Families slipped along hand-in-hand, lopsided children twittering like birds. For two weeks, Florentines had flocked to the banks of the Arno River, slowed and frozen. Now they played. They wore thick coats lined with ermine and squirrel pelts. But the cold wind felt strange. I imagined paper shivering, torn between reddened fingers.

Butchers laughed next to me, their teeth cutlery. At this hour of night, normally they closed up shop along the bridge and emptied buckets into black waters. Pig guts would stream into whorls of rotted wool, shorn from sheep and swept days before from the narrow streets.

A boy sitting on the ice stared up at me, his head like a pearl. Even in the cold he wore a flimsy vest, black and violet. He seemed just like a man of high society, only in miniature. Though other children played, he looked at me almost wistfully. He rubbed his nose, and then his expression seemed angry. I didn't even notice the little girl sitting beside him in a cinder-grey dress, her black hair braided into swirls. She pushed marbles on the ice, clear blue glass clacking against each other, no sound in the din of the butchers' laughter.

And then I saw them. His red hair like burning coals. A few dim stars twinkled above his head. She tumbled into him. He lifted her; airborne briefly, hands on the juts of her hip. They slipped slowly on the ice, their faces pained by concentration, laughter, and the cold. Under her gown, juniper green, her lame leg dragged. Her past revealed to me, brushing the ice. Natalia.

It looked like her, the girl from our bean-shaped hilltown in Umbria, long ago: she had a lame leg, she often dragged through the piazza; she couldn't play dice or throw squashes in the autumn, like the other children. In a grotto-grey world, the hope of seeing her again sustained me through long and lonely years; back then, I felt privileged to have a little white mouse visit me by my bed (I named him Vincenzo.) Yet here she was in faraway Florence, a woman playing or dancing, so close to me. I shivered, but not from the cold. The bodies of the butchers

warmed me. It couldn't be. I looked down to the ice and held my breath.

The butchers joked about a crazy man who slept every night near the Duomo, a small melon tucked under his shirt. He looked like a slumped flour sack, his mouth a gash. Yet he combed his silver hair hastily into pigeon toes, and donned the finest variety of vests, codpieces, and leggings. He cried all the time, Oime, Oime, I got me a baby! He begged for soldi, just a few coins so he could raise his poor bastard.

I had seen that man too, staggering down the Via Dante Alighieri to the foundling hospital, rattling a tin cup for coins while clutching his fake belly, moaning. I only felt sorry for him. But they laughed, savoring the remains of their story.

The butchers downed peach brandy in green bottles, and tossed them half-drunken from the bridge. The glass pulverized in dollops on the ice, green shards sparkling from moonlight and brandy, just like a collection of dewy cloves and leaves squeezed in a little girl's fist. I was silently thankful for this softening springtime image on the ice. That ice, its sheer whiteness, seemed to slow time, and let my mind play as if I were a child again.

I kept looking down.

On warmer nights, those bottles would have plunged beneath the glassy but flowing water, into the floating darkness of trash, clouds of wool, grey and feathery in a blood-blackness. Bottles would burble and gulp water, bobbing to the surface only briefly, slick and grimy and choked with wool. Clacking against the oars of boats, the bottles float away from Florence, snaking down the Arno to meet up with the Tiber, washing up on the sandy banks of another city in another time.

Ser Panino's studio

"Sinister handed," he said, tapping the charcoal nub poised in my left hand. "You won't draw the apple, only the withered core. It all comes out ugly in the end." I can still feel Ser Panino's words, hissed into the whorl of my ear. I feared him; I was just a little boy. But I was drawn to his painting studio, the scent of linseed oil like the rotting straw in my backyard, the light bouncing from mirrors, magnifying lenses,

and piles of colored dust.

He was the notary in Vendini, with no paper and no knowledge of the written word. So he recorded births, marriages, and deaths by painting portraits, high in a studio overlooking the uneven piazza. Actually, he only painted one baby portrait back in 1520 -- a marble white head with lips like velveteen pillows, a barely visible nose and wide blue eyes, propped on a velvet vest. The baby clutches a goldfinch with gossamer fingers. He said all babies look alike, so why paint more than one portrait? But I suspect he didn't want to paint a real baby -- mewling, grublike in stained swaddling clothes. At church, others would gather about cooing newborns, cradled in loving arms. They'd pass the babies around, lofting them into the air and kissing them on cheeks, red as robin breasts. Only Ser Panino looked on uneasily, like a man at a busy apothecary shop, selecting medicines on a shelf for an embarrassing ailment.

But he insisted on attending every wedding, setting up his easel between the slippers and boots of the bride and groom, so he could see them better as they took their vows. Pretend I'm not here, he'd say to the fidgeting couple, peering at them through a magnifying loupe. Yet all those paintings still look alike. The wedded face each other in balanced profile, their shoulders rolled back: the bride unveiled in a gown of carnation pink, the groom stiffly offering a wedding chest of glittering florins. A white pony, from which the bride has just dismounted, waits by the door between them. Placed there like an ivory chess piece.

One time in studio, Ser Panino leaned into a magnifying lens, which I held above an almost finished marriage portrait.

With his thumb, pointy and wrapped in silk, he smoothed the pink ridges of a brush-stroked cheek, the face of his surrendering bride. It took me ten years to paint skin smoothly, he said, another fifteen years to paint silk, glass, lace collars, and even dew-drops.

I never mixed the colors of earth and mud onto his regimented palette of red and yellow and blue, dabbed with a little bone-white.

Ser Panino painted from plaster death masks cast by the town friar. In his portraits, the dead are better looking than they were in life. Their youthful profiles face left, into the past. He never painted scars or moles, even though the unrelenting sharpness of sun, heat, and gardening tools rendered them plentiful on the faces of turnip farmers and grape pluckers. Squash imperfection, Ser Panino said during one of his more challenging paintings, Jacopo Zucchino, the oldest man to have ever lived in Vendini. The men on the gossip benches said he was at least two hundred and fifty years old. And I admit, he looked that old when I saw him at Sunday Market; hands trembling, he kept dropping his soldi. His head was like a golden apple, withered and moldy. When Ser Panino finished Jacopo Zucchino's portrait, skin smooth as a newborn, hair black and wavy, he hung it on his studio wall and admired it for an entire evening. He seemed to forget that I was even in his studio; he even forgot to eat dinner. His art would consume him.

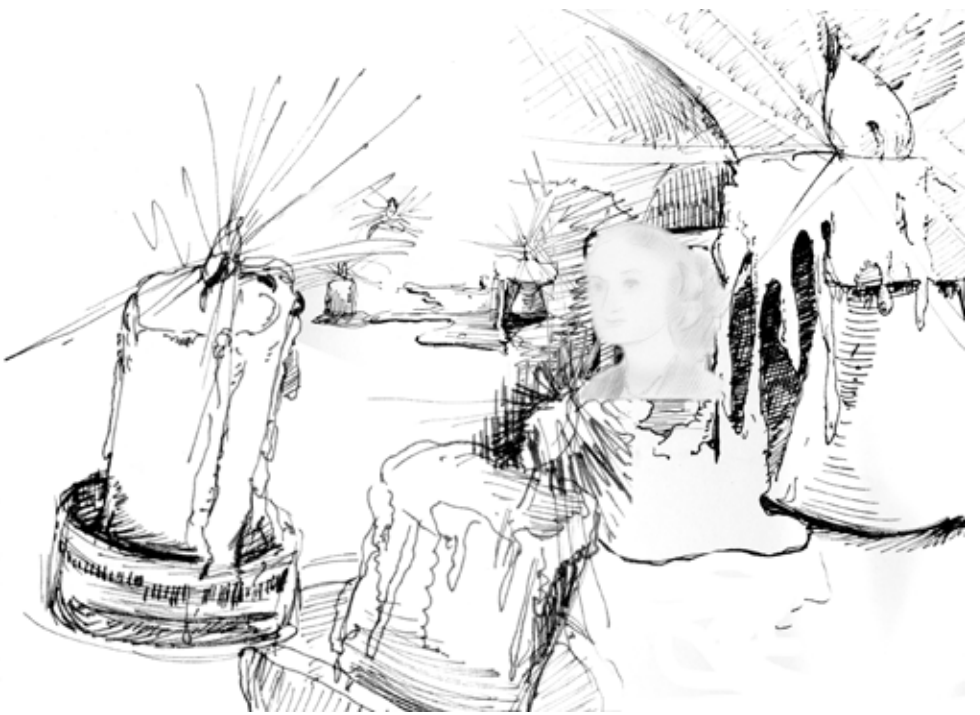
The people, in turn, would hush and huddle over his portraits, propped on a shelf at church next to incense candles and wood figurines of the saints. They saw redemption through prettifying pictures. Without saying so, Ser Panino reveled in his painterly power over love and death. He presided over his studio in an imperial uniform: a slim green vest and a collared shirt cut neatly from canvas linen. He liked to stroll to his studio window during Sunday Market, a maulstick in his hand, and watch the people bustle about in the piazza below. I'm sure he did this so people could look up at him, a silhouette holding a staff. After all, he could only see close-up. Foggy glasses hid his minute eyes.

On an otherwise balding head, he would try and fail to tuck a lock of rebellious white hair behind his ear. I often

imagined him just before sleep, taking off the glasses -- puckered eyelids, tangled with the soft silk of spiders. I laugh softly when I recall how much I feared him. I once thought he was the most ancient thing I had ever seen, older than the petrified mozzarella Mamma served at home on the driftwood dinnertable. Older than Jacopo Zucchino, older than the frescoes of angels at church, painted by the long ago Master of the School for Little Slaves. Older than the disheveled church stones, silver-pink, and the weedy leaning tower behind it. Ser Panino's skin looked like an intricate map of rivers, crumpled and yellowed.

Now he's just a birdlike head in profile, high above me on the studio wall. He painted his own death portrait, probably from his imagination. I had left Vendini when I was thirteen, and I was gone for thirteen years. He didn't believe I would return to his studio. No matter, he wouldn't have forgiven me for abandoning him and then painting with my left hand. He probably would have said that he preferred solitude anyway, that the left-handed would one day land in hell, wandering in endless circles amidst the shades.

And Ser Panino never could have imagined that I would rival him in loneliness. Bino, the boy nun. Suffering away incognito in a convent, so far from home, painting manuscripts and waiting for Natalia to arrive. She did, but by that time it was too late. By then, I was somewhere else, no longer the innocent boy, Binino. From Florence, I was ready to crawl home to Mamma.



True forgiveness, I hope, radiates from one place, Mamma's good grace. Can I tell her why I left Vendini, confess to her? I've been practicing this moment for years. I rode a leaden-headed mule back from Florence, with only my apprentice at my side. During the long and hot trudge, I'd gaze out at the cypresses, the silver leaves of olive trees waving on gnarled branches; hills, pale blue, like halved robin eggs. I whispered my confession: Mamma, I left you for an irreconcilable love -- the love of a girl, Natalia, and my love of art, painting.

I once thought Ser Panino would be proven wrong, even though he wouldn't ever know: I would create beauty. I would paint with my right hand, and craft a life of quiet suffering and illusion. In the convent, and later in the high society of Florence, my life was balanced and untrue; a composition of lies in servitude to beauty. My life was like a painting -- a marriage portrait, maybe.

After I had left Vendini, Ser Panino painted Natalia's wedding to Rosso, the redheaded boy. But of course, Ser Panino painted neither his red hair nor her lame leg. I can't discern Rosso and Natalia from the other portraits on the wall. Maybe it's better that way. In my grey convent cell, I once drew a portrait of my own fictive marriage to Natalia. I dipped a porcupine quill into ink, and used fine paper made from reeds and plants in the Far East. I had stolen the paper from nuns. I never knew Natalia had married; I was in fact waiting for her to arrive at the convent too, and show her the depth of my suffering on her behalf. She would begin by hugging me, my hands trembling like leaves…

The drawing needed to be beautiful, if only to satisfy my imagination. So I tried to draw with my clumsy right hand. I could peer into the paper and see the lines come to life. We face each other. She's oddly pale, her skin bluish, the color of paper, with thin black hair pulled tightly around her head, moonlike green eyes and a soft, one-stroke black eyebrow. She leans a little to the left, on a cane to support the lame leg. But she lifts her free hand to my golden ring, which slips on her crooked finger.

This was one drawing I wanted to keep. In the empty space of paper, I sensed my future. I had divided that space with lines, an image of Natalia, of hope and love.

But I would learn lines don't exist in nature. And fate

(that unseen hand) doesn't always create a beautiful and balanced composition. Fate could bring me closer to Natalia even after I had given up hope -- in Florence, at a ball for Michelangelo, his broken nose and cudgel hands still dusted with marble, and before that, on a bridge above a frozen river. But in the end, only fate could push me away from her too, a heavy hand against my back, sinister and so pale that I never even saw it in the light; our marriage, vows of love, nothing more than inky lines on paper, flecked with reeds and plants.

M-a-M-a

In Ser Panino's studio, I've set up a bed for Mamma. Tonight she lays beneath her yellow blanket, head and neck like a gourd, silver hair tied back thinly, balding from the spot where her head touches the pillow. She stares out the window, the weedy piazza sullen with the hues of night. Binino, she says, as if she has swallowed pebbles. Her breath whistles, sheets over her breast rise and fall, rise and fall. I draw closer, her coldness blanketed by the coal brazier lit by her bedside. For me as much as her. She aged so much in the years I was gone. Had I hastened this moment?

I'm glad my young apprentice is here, clacking a spoonful of pigment in a jar of amber-colored linseed oil. His presence reminds me that I had done some good -- it hadn't all turned out so ugly. And the sound distracts me from Mamma. I sit by my easel and my blank oak board, the white priming glaring at me. Her eyes dart under her lids, her hand wormy with empurpled veins. Her fingers knead rosebuds.

Mamma. I remember when I was twelve, the year before I left her. She was young, with thin black hair scumbled by the heat; it fell wavering from her kerchief, down her long neck and shoulders. Her eyes, lichen green, seemed to shift in the sunlight beneath the shade of thick black brows. Her skin seemed soft. On her face and arms, fuzzy black hairs seemed to glow improbably in the sunlight like caterpillar down. But her hands and knees told me another story. Her knuckles were scabbed from scrubbing with soapy water, her fingers rough like bread crust. Beetle-black bruises and scabs crawled over her knees. I shuddered a little when she sat down on the well's ledge and they appeared bare from her grey gown. Between matins and vespers,

she cooked and cleaned, humming to herself songs from her childhood, looking up to watch the occasional soap bubble lit by the sun. I was her only company. Papa was often in the backyard sty or at the piazza, selling his pigs.

We sat by the water well drawing on my erasable board. Water in the eye of the well blinked black and white. The center of the world, I thought. I had just become Ser Panino's apprentice, a baby step in my strange journey away from her. But she didn't realize that; she was only focused on the present. Though I didn't know how to read back then, I had nearly formed her name a dozen times on the board's white surface. With the red-orange rust of an iron nail, I scratched a flock of birds around hills, their wings the stems of M's, the a's the hills. M-a-M-a. But Mamma had learned to read when she was in a convent as a little girl. Those first few drawings pleased her the most. She praised each one. Such a sweet nature, bambino mio. She liked to place each drawing on her windowsill overnight. She'd pinch my ample cheeks and kiss me with chapped lips on the forehead.

At first the praise meant so much to me. She was not only Mamma, she was an artist in my eyes. Mamma told me how in the convent she had painted manuscripts: breviaries, pocket calendars, prayer books. But the men on the gossip benches said she had been kicked out for her insolence. Maybe she couldn't help herself -- confined by men, hidden from the world -- but freed in the flat space of paper. She had embellished the designs with enigmatic imagery: birds flying on top of space reserved for text, mystical cats, animate pear trees with arms and legs, skies feverish with stars, and obsessive drawings of the Virgin Mary.

On the erasable drawing board, the fleeting images were like living creatures beneath our hands. I'd draw on the white surface made of sheep-bone paste, and she'd dip a whetted brush of hog's hair in a tin cup and brush over it, tilting the board so the image rained down in silty drops. She scrubbed the board clean with a cloth. Back then I only dimly understood why she insisted on erasing my drawings. She could feel peaceful in loss. Her parents had died. The baby had died. Almost all at once. Often, I could hear her scrubbing the floor harshly, asking angry questions. She didn't want to be a saint, so why was she being tested? And so what if she wasn't a nun, was Saint Clarissa

mean-spirited?

There was no answer, not even by the end of the day. Papa slept beside her bed on a stool. His back ached and he couldn't lay down, he said. He seemed bothered by her vocal escapes into thoughtfulness. In the early morning, I would glimpse him through the eye-blink of the bedroom door, a bowl of half-downed wine on the floor by the black boots unlaced on his feet. Not even Taddeo the cat could wake him, lapping the wine from the bowl.

To Mamma's haunting questions, I remained silent. I had no answers, my childhood memory a barely opened cabinet of curiosity: a smell of honeysuckle, the bolted door, the screaming, and the silence. Papa's voice louder than usual. The cornhusk bedding beside mine, how tiny even in a five year-old's eyes. And how I laid awake that November night in the blue light, my parents upset in the main room, with little Taddeo hunched on the windowsill, moon-haloed and staring at me with luminous green eyes, fur puffed and tail on end.

By the water well, she began to guide my shaky hand across the board. A butterfly flitted and landed on my shoulder, and she laughed. Look at the owl eyes on its wings. And I turned my head to it, my nose so close I was tickled by the softness of its wing. Don't move, she said. She held my left hand warmly in hers, the drawing nail paused on the board. Wings flapped slowly, so the eyes painted on the veined filament seemed to blink, yellow and blue, yellow and blue. She brushed the ragged edge of her fingernail against a wing, soft grey, the painted blue pupil. It was the most intimate image I had ever seen, blurry in its closeness. Softly the wing beat, a pulse like a tiny heart. I felt it even after the butterfly pirouetted away.

Mamma found erasure soothing. She saw hope in each new drawing. But I was more intent on capturing something unmoving, unchanged by time. Ser Panino wouldn't let me paint unless he saw a drawing he liked on my erasable board, and that never happened. He gave me charcoal vines, which turned to stubs and a thousand and two imprints on the board, each one erased: Vendini's night sky, a spangle of water-drop stars; fleeting Rosso, a black smear and a shock of rusty dust from

my iron drawing nail. Drawings of Mamma, over and over, my fingertips sweeping the charcoal dust until the black crescents on the board shadowed the real blue under her eyes. From still puddles in the backyard, I drew myself two hundred times. My round face slimming, my curled hair shrinking to my scalp, the corners of my mouth finally rising over teeth. Yet I felt time only through the fatigue in my hand.

Back then I thought I alone could find beauty, hidden and overlooked. On my white drawing board, I traced a lentil -- a miraculous perfect circle -- dropped from a sack in the piazza; I traced the pressed silver of olive tree leaves, blown and scattered along the hillside. They looked like the eyes of a cat. But other drawings still seem unsettled in my memory -- olive trees and their gnarled branches, the secret flight of birds in the swirls of an oak-paneled floor.

I longed to make one drawing so good that Ser Panino would let me paint. I composed those only at night in the blue light of my bedroom, sleepily looking up to the water stains blooming on the stucco ceiling. If only I could make a drawing so natural and beautiful, as if no hand even touched it. Imagine what would happen then. I could take over the studio. Ser Panino would hunch over beside me, grinding pigments as I worked on the easel. In my paintings, I would compose portraits out of food from the market stand. If Ser Panino could make flesh timeless, then why couldn't I do so with the flesh of fruit and vegetables? Imagine it -- cauliflower hair, olive eyes, zucchini nose, ears of sliced tomatoes. The whole studio filled with rotting pears, glistening rinds, all sequined with horseflies. Ser Panino mops up the juices with the cuffs of his linen shirt. He looks up to me, his glasses fogged even more than they usually are by sweat. Bino Secco, you rough rind!

I say nothing, but watch him the whole time, sitting in my chair with the maulstick across my lap, peeling the stony skin of a pear with my left hand, its flesh sweet and buttery in my mouth. I make little smacking noises as I eat. And when I need to sketch out my ideas, I do so on paper -- even if my hands are sticky with pear juice. There would always be more paper. Ser Panino would walk on foot, all across Umbria to find paper in a faraway convent or monastery. He'd strap the folios in a box to his back and carry the paper back to Vendini.

But that's where my fantasy ended. There was no paper in Vendini. One cold autumn night when I was eight, the town friar had thrown all the books into a fire, roaring in the main piazza. He cried that he had sinned in the past, his desire sparked by words on a page. Burned paper lilted in the starry night sky like moths. Forever after that night, I associated autumn with the scent of burning books.

I kept a leaf of paper, its edges jagged and black, underneath my pillow. Paper became more precious to me than gold or seashells. So light and thin, so unlike my Papa's coarse hands, the driftwood dinnertable, the bristly pigs in the backyard. Paper. I would lift the small swatch of paper, charred on its edges, from my pillow and to the sky in my open window, and gaze at the stars all around it. Stars -- circling, blinking white points, each point with faint, leafy streaks of white. I imagined that all the stars in the night sky were fruit strung up on the branches of some invisible heaven-tree. I could pluck them one-by-one, and bring them down to fix them to burnt paper with rabbit-skin glue. They would remain there forever, pressed against my chest.

Even though I had no choice but to work on an erasable board, at least my home proved ideal for delineating the visual world. Nothing seemed to move. We had no whirring clocks, only one by the inept town clockmaker, Giuseppe Caldarone. It didn't work. The meat grinder churned on occasion, but always slowly. The tree outside was cinder, struck by lightening before I was born. We had a smattering of tall grass around the house, but mostly mud. An ill-humored pig had bitten Taddeo the cat in the backyard, so Taddeo could only hobble. He spent his days in lethargy and sunbeams, white face half-masked in brown, sleeping on his back, belly pink and soft and floppy, distended like an udder. The bearded pigs outside lazed in slop and didn't waddle past the stony wall, even though there were many gaps. No little children ran around the house; only me, and I hated running.

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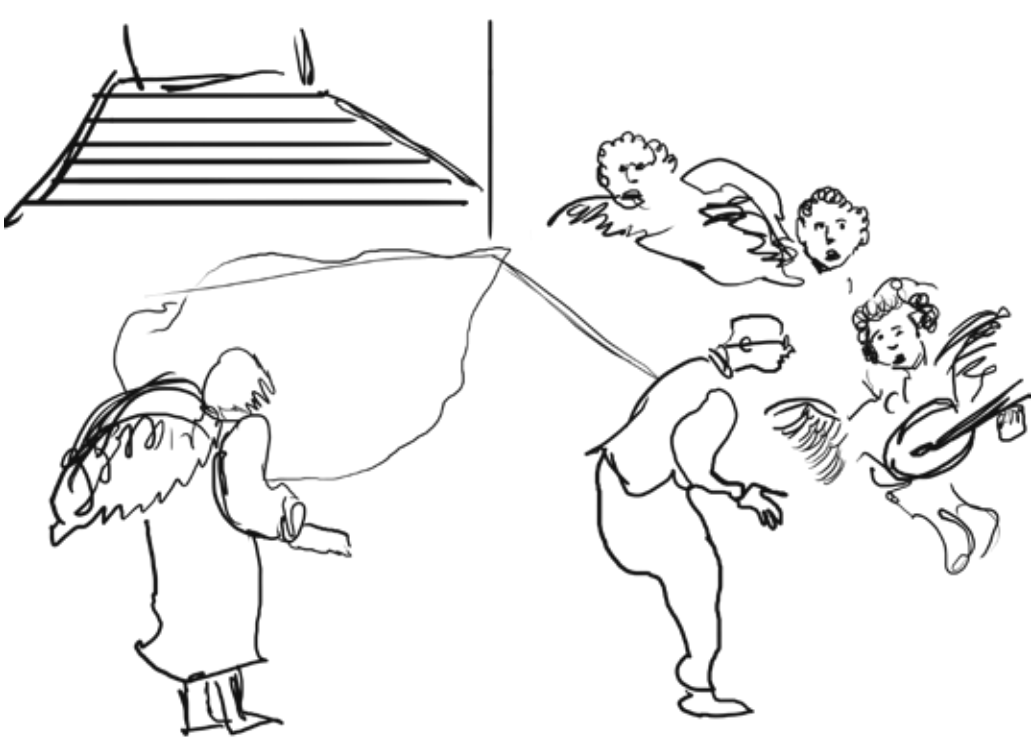
Mamma tells us a story, what happened to her last night. She saw an angel. Neither a man nor a woman, just a being. Tell me, Mamma. The angel had yellow coils of hair, a blue tunic,



red wings, and held a lute; its mouth would open, but it didn't speak. A fuzzy light beamed from angelic eyes. She trembled beneath the light, her eyes peeking from the blanket so only her hair was exposed. She couldn't hear the angel's thoughts over its thumping wings. Was it coming to claim her? Still the being seemed loving. She tried to place a halo over its head. She closed her eyes fully. She heard again a sound from childhood.

What sound?

Grape vines rustle in the breeze, strung unseen on the high wall below her window. The leaves and the night smell stale and cold. But inside she smells lye and burnt candles, and sees the familiar white wall with the square window. A small statue of the Virgin bows on the windowsill, white but veiled in blue. Painted porcelain. The Virgin smiles; her day-blue eyes twinkle. But above the Virgin looms a moon, yellow behind bare branches. Circles of yellow light trace the tree branches of her memory, a sleepless convent.

We're cloistered around her bed, sitting on our knees. Laszlo, my young apprentice, lays back onto the oak floor. He's a Hebrew from Hungary. He tells me how he came from a place of wheat fields and lime-washed homes, of snow limning thatched roofs, of goulash and brittle bread, unleavened, a place real to him only in memory, and that memory seems so distant it may as well belong to someone else. He believes in magic men. His old village had one, the regos. Sometimes the regos rolls his eyes to the back of his head, and travels to the past to confer with distant relatives and fabled beings; other times, in a trance the peasants called dead-alive, he shuttles to the future and returns with a vision of forthcoming events. Ayve, Laszlo says, it was pure abrakadbra.

But once he told me he didn't believe in Catholic miracles and Italian angels. I look at him now, how hushed he seems. All the features of his face, long and narrow like a root vegetable, seem to soften. His eyes are wide and black and curious. He rubs his small mouth and thin black mustache, glimpses silvery light bouncing off a mirror, and looks about the room as if a bird were careening inside. By moving from her imagination to memory, Mamma seems to have made the angel real for him. He asks if he can keep vigil with me tonight.

I can't tell them that the angel really came from the frescoes at church by the choir. Mouths open and songless, fingers motionless and poised on lute strings, the frescoed angels have yellow coils of hair, blue tunics, and red wings. Their eyes are catlike, too big for their heads. People say the Master of the School for Little Slaves painted them two hundred years ago. Yes, I'm right to say nothing, why not let Mamma and Laszlo believe in an angel, something that doesn't exist? Loss defined their lives. Laszlo had lost his family, even his home in the cool, rustling wheat fields by the Carpathian Mountains; Mamma had lost me, her Binino, the cherubic little boy who liked to hold her hand and sing vespers with her before bedtime. Although I'm concealing the truth from Mamma yet again, are all lies so bad that the liar winds up in hell, legs wiggling like minnows from the mouth of a three-headed demon?

When I returned to Vendini after thirteen years, Mamma told me how she imagined my fates: I had wandered down into

the valley and into the hands of dagger-wielding bandits; I had gone to the forests and been eaten by a truffle-sniffing boar, or maybe even a black bear. She said that I couldn't have left because I didn't love her, which was true, though I sensed doubt in her voice. Of course I love you, Mamma. Yet because of me, for years her imagination rendered pain, not beauty, and now she dwindles in bed. Let her imagination render beautiful images, as if we were sitting on the water well again.

Mamma and I used to lean in closely after prayers to see the frescoed angels, the crowd still shuffling from the pearwood pews. Up close their faint pink skin looked like cracked eggshells, and their legs dissolved into the plaster priming, mottled and greenish brown, stained with candle smoke. Tiny dots outlined the angels.

Those dots used to mystify me. But after I left Vendini, I would learn how to paint frescoes. On tanned sheepskin, the long ago master had drawn lines to create angels. He stippled the lines with a needle; there in church, he stretched the animal skin over the primed wall. Through a straw, one of the little slaves blew charcoal dust along the lines. They would soon unveil the angels to the pews of polished pearwood, the vaulted ceiling painted blue with yellow stars, the dusty greenish light hanging lazily from the windows. The master and the little slaves had one day to fill in the lines. If they didn't, they would have to mix new paint. It would dry fast on their brushes.

Altarpiece

When I was twenty-five, I was allowed to join the Florentine painter's guild due to an unhappy relationship to a famous painter, but I'll tell that story later; it shames me so much. Those were the unhappy years in Florence after the convent.

My final commission was an altarpiece for a Dominican monastery. They wanted me to paint a landscape of Jerusalem in an old style, with papery gold leaf and unmixed colors: red, yellow, and blue. That style reminded me of Ser Panino and his precious paintings -- except he never painted distant landscapes. He refused to paint the sickly cypress trees flaming down the hillside, and the olive trees in the valley. I think nature's intricate detail made him jealous, and the branches of olives trees were

too gnarled for his mind to comprehend. His fogged glasses seemed fitting.

On three wood panels, I depicted scenes from the life of Gésu: shooing moneylenders from the temple, washing disciples' feet, falling from the cross. The friars from the monastery scurry about the scene. Some peel onions, others tie a mule to a post or pluck lutes. Behind these scenes, I painted a single landscape of flame-like, barren cliffs rising to a gold-leaf sky. Dainty trees speckled the cliffs amidst miniature buildings painted in eggshell pale colors. The city was supposed to be Jerusalem. But I lifted each building -- even the fantastic Hebrew temples -- from my childhood home, Vendini. Those little buildings were collected in my memory like robin eggs, fallen from an unseen nest and picked up in a paint stained palm.

Even in Florence, I remained enfolded in Vendini, that haunted bean-shaped space -- the echo of footsteps; clothes strung on high wires between narrow alleyways, flapping in the black breeze; indigo pigeons burbling in the night-dimmed piazza; the green glare of cat eyes from swinging baskets in alleyways; moths flitting about Mamma's bedroom; my Papa's rotting teeth, a dark grotto.

I don't notice such mystery anymore. Twenty-five years have passed. New portraits line the walls, faces of family and the people I once knew. Yet Vendini has never changed. Only I have. Adulthood has stamped out the wonderful strangeness, leaving only the ache in my hands and back. The regret. Monotony. Most of the townspeople spend their days shuffling from bench to bench, where they sit and swap superstitions, their faces withering under the sun like fruit on the vine. Even young people rarely leave Vendini. Most will die from giving birth or from a toothache, or from the strain of pulling turnips in sheepskin breeches. No matter, their fate is one: a portrait painted by me, propped for a couple of days on a wood shelf in the church, flanked by fragrant candles and wood figurines of the saints.

Papa's shadow

I place my portrait of Papa by Mamma's bed on the wax-gobbed table. I do so while she's sleeping. I drape rosaries over Papa -- the blunt jaw doused with salt-and-pepper hairs; the high chiseled cheekbones, burnt sienna in color, deep lines

streaming downward as if through eroded cliffs. His jaw seems misaligned, as if his tooth still aches. Though he was often in bad spirits, especially around me, he was not so bad to Mamma. His love for Mamma was like a garden of golden beets, an unseen tracery of roots growing deep into time. Pulled into the present by simple, sometimes grudging acts of devotion -- tending to the pigs, rubbing her feet, scraping out half-moons of dirt from her toenails, rolling into bed on occasional nights to comfort her. The bed matting would crackle, unused to his weight.

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Papa took me to Ser Panino's studio the first time. I was twelve years old. He was trading pig bladders from our farm for some soldi. Ser Panino used these bladders for his paint. He mixed his pigments with oil, and spooned them into the bladders. Once tied up, he could pinprick them and squeeze paint onto his palette.

Bearded pigs turned into links on our plate every Sunday, red and leathery. I had to chew the meat even though I could hear the piglets squealing in the oaty and moaty backyard. The stench of the slaughtered pig bladders, veined and splayed across the kitchen floor, and then doused in vinegar, often made me sick. But now I knew the poor pigs would find redemption through art. I considered the little pyramids of blue and yellow and red dust, arranged on tables around the studio. Pretty colors would soon fill their insides: azurite blue, saffron yellow, carmine red. I imagined the bladders tied to the bare branches of pollard trees, a sun rising, the bladders blooming in impossible stained glass colors.

Ser Panino spoke to Papa but continued to work. On a table by the easel, he dropped satiny red-orange flowers from a glass jar and plucked their yellow stamens. From vinegar-stained leaves of copper on the windowsill, he scraped grey-green tarnish. But I made a commotion over the paintings. "Ser Panino! Ser Panino!" I cried joyfully. The colors seemed stolen from the piazza, its rose hues and hewn stones. In the piazza, I had once even touched my nose to my toes and looked up to the sky, pulsing blue. Ser Panino's blues seemed brighter. "How did you steal all the colors and bring them here?"

Papa apologized and tried to restrain me. He touched me on the shoulders, gently like he always did. As if he were

testing my softness. As if I were an egg that could break from too much stress. Ser Panino was pleased, but his thin-lipped smile compelled me to hide a little behind Papa's legs.

"Blue-green comes from copper tarnished on the sill," Ser Panino said, "I paint skies with it. Saffron yellow comes from the flowers by the outer wall." I tried to say something, but Ser Panino simply raised his voice over me, not out of enthusiasm, but out of irritation. "Red comes from crushed insects brought back by explorers searching for the fountain of youth. I get my purest blues, ultramarine, from Badakshan, so faraway it's hard to believe such places exist. Women give birth through their ears, men walk on their hands and play violins with their feet. Or so I've heard." Ser Panino's brow squinted over his round glasses. He seemed to have trouble seeing us, even though we were right in front of him.

The colors squeezed on his palette were the key to a map of unimaginable places. I asked him if I could paint too. I searched my breeches for a robin egg I had found in the piazza. That seemed like a fair trade.

He said no. Yet he seemed to consider something profound. "But I could use some help in the studio. Someone to be the notary when I'm gone." Ser Panino looked at Papa. "You'll need money more than some help in that little backyard."

I nodded, though nobody noticed. Both thoughts were true. And for the toothless majority in Vendini, pork was hard to chew.

"I need Binino at home, in the sty." Papa looked at me hesitantly, as if he didn't quite believe what he just said. I felt ashamed of my body, too soft to toil in muck and heat. Even by the age of twelve, the heat had failed to melt my baby fat. The old men on the gossip benches had always teased me, and once even threatened to eat me. My arms and cheeks were dough rising in an oven, they cooed, sunburned and plump. My eyes, lacquered almonds. I first thought these were terms of sweetness and longed to join the men on the bench. But the rough old men rejected me in the end. They mistrusted my dimpled hands and long soft fingers. They said my black hair curled wildly, and my lips seemed pursed all the time, as if I were about to whistle.

In recent days, I had begun to notice that I was plump and feminine. I actually had breasts, like a young girl, jiggling

along with my belly as I huffed and mixed turgid pig-feed in the backyard sty. The sight had repulsed and worried Papa. He sent loud and furious prayers up to heaven, before weariness and wine dragged him into sleep. But maybe that shame could work for me now. Maybe he would let me work here in this studio, all light and weightless and wonderful. I looked up at Papa and smiled so my soft cheeks puffed in sweet rebellion. But the old feelings of shame returned with a wary glance from Papa's eyes. Even to this day, Papa's shame has left an imprint in me, like a boot in mud. I stopped smiling.

"But who needs these mementos?" Papa looked around the studio.

"Paintings," Ser Panino corrected him.

"I remember what I need," Papa said, "without the help of trinkets. Binino, trust me, it's better to forget what you can than to hold onto what's painful." He winced at some deep thought, or more likely, the pain in his mouth. He rubbed the stubble on his wiggling jaw. Even if Papa never complained about it, I knew that an ill-humored tooth throbbed deep in his gums. But then he cleared his throat.

"How much for him?" Papa glanced down, and stepped away from me. Was he talking about somebody else? Not me. He seemed embarrassed to even be asking Ser Panino a question. I looked up at Papa, unsettled by the sudden softness in his gruff voice, as if he were winded from lifting a pig. I can still hear that question even today, unassuming in tone but oddly cunning.

"He's for free," Ser Panino said, looking vexed. "How do I know he won't steal?"

Papa paused, wiggled his bristly chin some more. I had no reaction at that moment. Maybe I was too distracted by the colors of the studio, or too young to appreciate what was about to transpire. I had never known of another world outside this bedraggled little hilltown; I had yet to see the laughing patrons at the Florentine ball, in their brocades of sparkling blue jewelry and gold. But now I can see how Ser Panino's purchase of me from Papa (he would pay double for the pig bladders) shadowed my apprenticeship, and all that would come in later years of misguided devotion. That shadow assumes the daunting shape of Papa from an early memory. He tramped in from the sty and stood like a statue, weathered and distant, black boots pricked

with sunlight, the sun beaming in from the open back door to spread his shadow across the floor. I never believed I could grow into that presence. Now I know that feeling was mutual.

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Was this what it was like for the little slaves who made the church frescoes, or for all the little girls I had known, sold off to the distant convent for a few beaten down coins? I had a surrogate Papa now, and it wasn't my choice. Ser Panino acted like a puppeteer, my body hewn from pearwood and tethered to invisible strings. Sinister-handed, he said. I drew with my right hand. I need yellow. I mixed crushed stamens. Giuseppe Caldarone is very ill now, cut his hand on a splintered clock. I primed an oak board with sheep-bone paste. Give me green. I stained leaves of copper with vinegar.

Go to bed, say your vespers. I slept on a bed matting in the studio. I returned home to Mamma's tears and kisses only on the weekends, when Ser Panino said I could, shoulders slumped and eyes tired after a few months. You're my church bell, my angel without wings, she'd cry. We'd draw together on the erasable board.

Mamma was not always Mamma. Once she was Lucia and she was in love with my father, the quiet pig farmer. Yet she spoke about her past only while drawing. I never asked her questions -- children often think that they alone define their parents. That life before my birth may as well have been lived by somebody else. I glimpsed her past only in the convent chest kept under her bed, her only possession from that long ago time. It held only an ivory comb, some cinder-dyed wool for winter and linen for summer, and a dull spoon. Mamma had her secrets; I was beginning to have my own. In the past, when a girl passed by, Mamma would smile and say sweetly, Binino, you look like you've just eaten a rotten truffle. No wonder -- horrible twin sisters tormented me, Celia and Annabile. They had freckled faces and messy brown hair that seemed red in the daylight. From a distance, I saw them everywhere: Celia and Annabile laughing, trying to milk bleating sheep, chasing pigeons, throwing squash, smashing clocks in the piazza. They didn't seem to have parents. Maybe they recognized the devil in their daughters and fled on the back of a mule to another hilltown, maybe Todi or Spello.

I could discern one twin from the other only on those unfortunate occasions when they sat too close to my family at church. Celia's nose upturned slightly; Annabile sported a faint hairlip. One time, Celia sat near to me on the pew and looked me over, scowling. I think she lingered over my plump curves. While everyone else recited Franciscan prayers, she threatened me with marriage; when I stood up, swiftly she kicked me in the back of my doughy knees. On another red-letter day, the friar showed up late, still dazed from flagellating himself with an oxtail whip the night before -- his typical excuse. Annabile sat next to her sister in the pew behind me. In mute misery, I stared up at the empty lectern. Annabile leaned into my ear. Her voice was an octave lower than her sister's, and she whispered so huskily she tickled my captive eardrum: Bino Secco, one day when you're sleeping, I'll stuff a funnel in your face, feed you overcooked spinach and noodles.

Natalia

Draw only angels. I sat by the shambling stones of the outer-wall, trying to follow Ser Panino's orders. In the breeze, flowers strung-up like purple bells jangled on their stems. My angels only pleased me when I turned the board upside down. They looked like they were plummeting to earth. I chuckled to think that Ser Panino would praise this drawing, looking at it from the wrong angle.

Scusi, she said, leaning against a nearby silver-pink stone. I had seen this girl in Vendini before, dragging her lame leg. The men on the gossip benches called her Natalia. She had broken her ankle while playing in a lumpy turnip garden. She wrecked it so bad that the bones popped loudly, like an uncorked bottle of wine. Of course, everyone knew she was destined for a convent, her lame leg sabotaging her prospects for marriage. I expected to see a note of sadness in her face, a quiver in her lip. But instead I saw only determination, a lifetime of stubbornness forged in her features, blunt and improbably soft in all the right places, the cleft of her lip, the underside of her chin. She had left her cane at home. She hopped closer to me, grunting a little from the effort. I looked at her only from the corner of my eye, but my heart beat like the painted wings of a butterfly.

She plucked a flower from a seam in the stones, and

tucked it into the nape of a dress, dove's throat grey. Her collarbone peeked, white like a slab of butter. Sweat blackened the kerchief tied around traceries of her hair. Finally, I spoke to her. Good morning, I squeaked, but I thought, my love, my dove, my fairest star. My hand hurried to the board, and I looked down. Surely the movement of my drawing nail would bring her even closer. I looked up at her again; she was gone. She dragged her way up the weedy hill, her image becoming miniature, blurred in the heat like a plucked lute string. Weeks passed by and I didn't see her, and that only intensified such a memory of closeness. Even when I sat by the eye of the well and drew with Mamma, guiltily I thought of Natalia. I imagined her reflection in the dancing light of the well water.

Natalia still makes me feel this way. Unknowingly, she struck a note inside of me, a liquid and elusive sound reminiscent of colors on a painter's palette, high-pitched reds and low-cool blues. No wonder I had no words for her when we met again that wintry night in Florence. Children still played on ice. Rosso helped her to the banks and kissed her on the forehead; I nodded at her. She looked at me, mouth ajar, recognition dim in her eyes. Natalia. That night, walking home, I felt just like a bottle tossed carelessly into the river, drinking in darkness and heaviness, borne ceaselessly and swiftly by a current into my past.

Before Florence, during those long and unordered days in the grotto-grey convent, a white mouse would visit me. I had to sit perfectly still on my bed matting. Vicenzo, Vicenzo! He looked at me, eyes beady and curious, jaw jigglng. An even smaller creature had gnawed one of his pink-petal ears. But Vicenzo would listen to me; he was the most patient mouse I had ever met. He was naturally plump. I didn't need to steal parmesan cheese or beans for him. I became convinced he simply wanted to see me. Saint Francis talked to birds and babied worms plucked from the earth, so why not speak frankly with Vicenzo?

"You'd be sad too," I said, nudging the mouse with my pinky. "Say you found the mouse you loved, let's call her Francesca. And even though Francesca lives in the grain cellar, and you live in the convent walls, you want her to know you've committed your life to her. But in doing so, you run into a trap.

Your pink feet scamper but don't move. Claws scrape on the ground, but who hears? You begin to think of Mamma, who you have abandoned. But in truth there's no way back, even if you make a sound. Yet you feel no bitterness, your love of her pungent as any cheese. Vicenzo, Vicenzo, what would you feel?"

Thankfully, Vicenzo said nothing in return. My story made him sleepy. His eyelids blinked heavily. He waddled away from me, across the floor as if drunken, and vanished into the jagged hole in the wall.

For months, I waited by the outer-wall for her return, my drawing board in hand. Red-orange flowers closed up into fists. Ice streaked purple bells. The cypress trees flaming down the hillside grew sickly, patches formed like little windows. In the valley, olive tree leaves blanketed the earth with silver. I began to draw those abominable angels again, their faces angry, floating in white space. And then she appeared, one arm leaning onto the low and stony wall.

Good day, she said. I suppose this is my last chance to gather flowers. I mentioned that they were dying. She frowned, stooped down, and picked some sad withered cloves instead.
I said that I could draw some flowers in bloom for her, even if the real ones are all withered. I was even willing to give her my erasable board, which Mamma adored. She leaned over me, her shadow slanting. I tried to draw the flowers, the sweeping caress of bells dangling on stems. But my hand was so shaky, it veered off the borders of the board. She's so close to me, I thought. I could even smell sliced onions in her sudden laughter. What is that, she said? Helplessly I looked down at the board, the looping lines. This girl somehow made my palms clammy and my drawing a mess. I gave the board to her anyway, hesitating only briefly. I noticed a smudge on its surface, from one of Mamma's rough fingers.

Although she seemed confused, she also seemed a little honored to receive such an unexpected gift. I don't know what it is, she said, but obviously it means a lot to you.
Not really, I said. Of course, she limped away and I leaned against the wall to recover lost minutes of breathing. I should have said yes, it means everything to me, but I want you to have it. I returned home. Mamma sliced lima beans on the kitchen

table, thin slivers slinking from a dull knife. Normally we'd draw together in the afternoon. I thought I should find Natalia, and recover my board, if only for Mamma's sake. But I never did.

Winter, a warm night

The Arno River would remain frozen for an entire month, but I didn't know that one warm night. I stepped onto the ice, now lit by a starry sky. I could hear chunks of the ice break off in the distance, like paper tearing. Once I was a peach and sweet. I stomped on the ice with my left foot. In a short time, Rosso and I had become friends as we never were in Vendini. Everyone agreed that he was just a fabulous young man despite his red hair. His story had already captivated the elite of Florence. He had fled his superstitious hilltown and become rich by re-selling flour. How he overcame the unfortunate hue of his hair! Did you know, they said, he's a hero too, he married a crippled girl, saved her from a convent.

Yet I had pushed poor Rosso into danger. He had forgiven me. Don't worry yourself, Bino. There's no controlling fate. He even complimented me with a quote from some famous Florentine he knew: You're an artist. In your hands lays hidden the idea of a new nature. I was less forgiving of myself, too easily pushed by the hand of fate. Now I deserved to join the black waters below the thin shield of ice, streaming with the guts of slaughtered pigs and rotted sheep's wool. I slipped and fell onto my knees, pained by the hardness of the ice. I closed my eyes. Let me lay here until there's no ice. But I couldn't stop thinking. Children played marbles right at this spot. Little blue marbles rolling on the ice, some missing each other, others slowing and meeting with a tiny clack.

Up close, the ice reminded me of that first time I saw the erasable drawing board, its surface at once intimate and vast, its pure whiteness still unscarred by the rusty drawing nail that would skate over it. It was Ser Paninio's only gift to me. Practice by daylight, practice by candlelight, he said. I made a drawing of Taddeo the cat on it. I can still feel Papa's hand grip my shoulder one Saturday afternoon at home, his hooded eyes widening. You've found something you might be good at after all, he said.

In this way, maybe he could feel less guilty selling me off to Ser Panino; or maybe his feelings were genuine. He

considered the drawing of Taddeo on my board for a long time. Words tumbled out of him as they never had before, even when he was drunk. He recalled the lines I'd draw with a stick in the muddy backyard sty, when I was only a baby. How closely I looked at the angels at church, how much I was like Mamma, who used to paint manuscripts. Mamma. She stopped scrubbing the floor, surprised to hear Papa talk so much in such soft tones. Soap bubbles floated all around her, swirling red and yellow and blue in sunlight.

I stood up on the Arno River and shivered. A shiver, a love shiver, a shiver of the memory of love, of Mamma, a time amplified by its loss -- innocence and promise and warmth. I looked up. Stars shivering. Along the river, some windows were still lit. Ice, moving and melting, had scribbled dingy sheep's wool over snowy banks. I stepped back from the ice, groaning under my weight. That night, I slept on the river's bank to the sound of ice breaking.

Incident in blue

All of the marriage portraits look alike -- precious figures face each other but never touch in a petrified dance. Ser Panino has re-imagined bone as wood, and flesh as stone, with no hint of life, a past love or future intimacy. But these portraits are really a collective portrait of Ser Panino, who never married, who spent his life alone in the cold light of his studio, grinding his pigments with mortar and pestle, thinning his brush-tips between spidery fingers, painting embroideries of silver thread into fictive gowns. His world of imagined riches -- paintbrushes, fogged glasses, mirrors, and magnified lenses.

Pity Ser Panino. I no longer despise him. I arrived on Mondays for my apprenticeship. He always waited for me by the door, his smile a rictus that conveyed something other than happiness. For the first month, he followed me around the studio, worried that I would steal some of his precious pigments. For lunch, he drizzled tiny spoonfuls of truffles in olive oil onto saltless bread. He'd watch me without touching his own food. I ate the chewy bread, and tried to tear off husks of it with both hands. Eat with your right hand, he'd remind me. He invoked images of oxtail whips and an iron device that would pin my left hand down until it tingled and lost feeling. Once I wiped my face

with my left hand, and without warning he whacked me on the back of that hand with a maulstick. He was so frail that the swing hurt him more than me; the sting faded in seconds, but he rubbed his right shoulder the rest of the day, wincing behind his glasses. If I didn't think, I'd use my sinister hand. So I began to hold a dull spoon in my left hand at all times.

Ser Panino noticed the spoon and praised me for my ingenuity. Finally he began to trust me a little more. He would work in the kitchen as I took care of the chores: grinding pigment, pulverizing rocks, mixing colors. Once I dropped the precious blue rock from Badakshan on the floor, chipping it, scattering blue dust and flecks of gold from its hidden veins. Ser Panino would kill me. He once told me how in faraway Badakshan, they inlaid that rock in the carved pupils of a giant statue. It stood in a cliff-side above a dusty village; its arms moved up and down each sunrise and sunset to the bugling of prayers through horns. But the giant's blue eyes remained its most startling feature.

I had to tell him. No, why should I? His rules frustrated me. Even when he relaxed, he did so with a childish petulance. It would be better to keep this a secret. I could hear him slurping on a pear in the next room. So I simply smashed up the rest of the rock under my foot, and blew the blue dust from my cupped palm out his window, my blurred reflection in a nearby mirror like a baby angel playing a trumpet. I pocketed the rest of the rock, and looked at the floor, already dusted by a crushed bouquet of color. I'm safe.

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The next day, I opened the door to the studio, but Ser Panino was unsmiling. He didn't speak to me for long hours grinding pigments, his face a plaster death mask. I gnashed my teeth as if into a stale wedge of parmesan cheese, and worked more dutifully than I thought possible. But he sat on a table within my view, absently studying a bear's paw, its nails long and curved. I kept glancing at him, but he wouldn't look up. The silence, broken only by the buzzing of a horsefly against a windowpane, dampened my palms with sweat. Even when he moved about the studio, he made sure to position himself so I could see his reflection in a tilted mirror.

"Let's take a break," he said, reaching for his maulstick.

He opened the door and led me down to the cobblestones in the sunny piazza.

I squinted. I had never been outside with Ser Panino. But then I spotted my footsteps, a softly powdered blue on the cobblestones. Like a bad joke whispered in the church pews. My ears reddened. I looked to see if anyone else was in the piazza, but only a few pigeons sat under a colonnade, wings tucked and cooing.

“I may have poor eyes,” Ser Panino said, his glasses lit white by the sun, “but I have a nose for color. Especially that blue. I won’t -- “

“ -- I’m sorry -- ”

“ -- be needing you anymore,” Ser Panino sniffed. A baby vein bulged in his forehead. “Nobody steals from my studio. And you’re not fit to become the notary anyway. All those ugly drawings you make.”

The lighter part of me wanted to thank Gésu and toss birdseed to goldfinches wheeling in the air. Yes, I’d huff away humming children’s songs, until Mamma’s warm embrace muffles all words. But down the dark well of my soul, I began to reel. My newfound dream of becoming an artist -- once palpable as the colored dust sifting through my palm -- now as illusory as a moonlit reflection in water.

I felt sorry for myself. Back then, I never felt sorry for smashing up a blue rock, Ser Panino’s most precious possession. But my heart was like a bucket, heavy and teetering with water. A bit self-consciously, I began to manipulate it. I thought of the fruit and vegetable portraits I wanted to make, but now never would; the paper I wanted to draw upon; I thought of Mamma alone by the water well; an image from early in my life, a baby bird fallen from its nest, its skin translucent and faintly beating, chipped bones the size of orzo grains. I thought of Natalia, how I would never have the chance to speak to her; soon she would be sent to a convent, all because of that lame leg. Salty tears sprung out from my lids and streaked down my cheeks. The crying took on its own life. My chest heaved and my mouth blurted. Hands on my knees, I gasped for air.

Ser Panino wavered and blurred, but he stooped down to check on me. I could still see how surprised he was at the depth of my feeling. Soon he would be alone in his studio, surrounded

by portraits of the dead and piles of colored dust. The rawness of my emotion bowed his head. Perhaps gratified to be the source of that emotion, a faint smile flickered on his face before he spoke. His thin neck twitched from the cocoon of his green vest, his caterpillar eyebrows raised. “Bino Secco, I’ll see you next week.”

A plan

My parents slept. In my bed, I ate drizzling palmfuls of oats, pilfered from the backyard sty. On Monday mornings, when Ser Panino wasn’t looking, I measured my profile in front of a tilted mirror. Yes, if I draped a kerchief over my head, I would look just like a girl. I had begun to devise my plan, so frighteningly selfish, grand, and illogical, it could only have been made by a thirteen year-old. What would the convent look like? The place where little girls were sold off for a few soldi, to marry Gésu and paint illuminated manuscripts. I’d paint and wait for Natalia.

The friar had told me the convent was perched on a hill far from Umbria, on the outskirts of Florence. Before he burned all the books, he tried to show me a drawing of the city on tracing paper, which he liked to use for the forgeries he hawked about town for extra money. He made the tracings by bathing vellum in linseed oil. Then he dried and pressed it on a page from his book of cities. He traced the deep grooves through the translucent paper, and he rose the image above a candle flame. It spread like a sunrise over the beehive dome, the church towers, the outer wall, and the snaking river. I tried to think of Florence as a real place, but I had never seen any other city before. I thought only of le fiore, a pretty word, the flowers dotting the outer wall, red-orange, purple bells. The flowers Natalia collected. And beyond those flower-laced walls, the fearful forests of Vendini fables: truffles, black bears, and wandering monks.

A vow

One night, Ser Panino lit a coal brazier and unrolled my bed matting, only to see my drawing of Natalia on the board. I hadn’t erased it. During the week, I slept with my dogskin shoes on; I only took them off on the weekends so I could truly feel

the coolness of night against my nude toes. I'd hold up Natalia's image above my eyes, tap my shoes together, and stare up at Ser Panino's oak-beamed ceiling, sleepless. He picked up the drawing, smeared with my thumbprints. In a glowing red light, he sat down, took a whetted hog's hairbrush, and scrubbed the image away. I stood helplessly before him.

"You want to be an artist, you have to save your hand. What have I told you? Don't throw rocks, don't lift heavy bars or stale bread. How old are you?"

"Thirteen."

"How timely. You mustn't ever touch a woman. When in their company, your hand will grow unsteady. Keep your thoughts pure and distant, as I am to my paintings. You must know the human body is full of unsightly blemishes, unfortunate sprouts of hair, even fetid gasses." He paused, as if relishing the sound of his own voice. "You can't dabble in beauty and the pleasures of the flesh all at once. And that's true not just for painters. Look at Guidobaldo Scazzatorre, town beggar. He wasn't always that way. Each autumn he yanked golden beets with his own hands. Out in the piazza, during Sunday market I saw many crates of his golden bulbs, the hairy roots all frenzied and tangled with each other. Oime, it was glorious!

He sold them like charms, his hands flourished in air, doing as much talking as his mouth. He met a woman through his parents. A marriage was arranged. But everyone knew he wasn't happy; she was barren. He was seen giving amorous looks to a married woman in the piazza. Don't fall for her, the men on the gossip benches said, she rubs belladonna in her eyes! But they began to visit each other at night. Soon his hands began to tremble."

I watched Ser Panino's shadow hands scamper like spiders across the reddened wall. He seemed eager to describe poor Scazzatorre's fate, even the lurid details. "His hands, he couldn't control them, had to shove them in his pockets when he sold his beets. His hands actually fell off, you know. His arms are just stumps, like the bulbs of the very beets he used to brandish in those golden days before he first touched a woman." Ser Panino made me vow to never to touch a woman. It's a vow all artists take, he said.

It's funny to recall how afraid I was at that moment, how

quickly and sincerely I said yes to his vow, even though I wasn't sure the story he told was true. A child needs only a filament to tether a fable to experience. I thought of that one drawing I made beneath Natalia's shadow. How messy it was, how swiftly my heart beat, my right hand trembling with my breath. Yes, my hand shook so much, I even considered switching to my left hand, even if it was evil. I can admit this only now. I wanted to touch Natalia, to smooth my hand across her eyebrow, smudged like charcoal across her paper pale face. Yet I didn't want my hands to fall off. I'd have to draw with my vine of charcoal clenched in grating teeth. So I couldn't touch her, but I wanted to woo her. My love was so pure, I once thought, I could fulfill that vow only by suffering for her, on her behalf.

Ser Panino wore this vow like a chastity belt. He moved like he was shackled in an iron undergarment too, always stiffly and nervously. Yet now I believe Ser Panino struggled with the vow, jamming a rusty key into the lock while I wasn't around. I'm convinced many of the most beautiful portraits on the studio walls are of women as fictive as Guidobaldo Scazzatorre. He painted them with the finest brushes -- the embroideries on their dresses creeping and delicate as grape stems. I shudder to imagine Ser Panino alone, leaning closely into the board, his fogged glasses laid on the table, his lank white hair licking the paint. His lips smear with paint, white and pink. Paint tastes so chalky on his ululating tongue, pointy and parched.

Dovecot

His beautiful portraits compete with my ugly ones along the walls. My paintings are like rumpled pigeons cooing in a dovecot that he created. First, Ser Panino's doves: Giuseppe Caldarone, without his jutting chin and cloudy eyes. I wouldn't have recognized him were it not for an insignia on his feathered cap: the Caldarone family arms, three chickens and a griffin. He built clocks that never worked, and since his death, his son took over the business of making clocks that never worked. In the painting, Giuseppe Caldarone is outside of time, young again. His jaw-line stately and his chest swelled, wearing a bright blue vest and a velvet-red cap with a dandy chicken feather bobbing from it.

And more -- profiles of Giulia Gustamore and her two daughters at her side. When I was ten, they all perished in a famous collision between a drunken mule and a case of dry manure. They wore pearl necklaces that they could never have afforded, and a tracery of yellow flowers and cloves still on their stems, woven like crowns around their foreheads. They all smiled shyly, blushed in springtime hues, their profiles facing left, as if gazing into the past without sadness.

My paintings, the pigeons. Just look at Signore Fetufui, the smears evoking the squat man who wore a black smock everyday and reeked of slop. At first this face appeared grotesque to the people when they viewed it at church. But then they reconsidered. Yes, that's his broken nose, yes, that's his jutting, hairy jaw. It was disconcerting but compelling to see Fetufui but not smell him. Fetufui's odor had banned him from church -- especially in the summer -- and he muttered his days away on its steps, divining the future through lumps of mud and stones. I often spied him from Ser Panino's window overlooking the church and the piazza. But Ser Panino would run over to the sill, block the way with his lithe profile, and say, "You mustn't

contemplate ugliness, even beauty must be seen only from a distance."

I tell my apprentice this story. To my surprise, he insists Ser Panino was correct. After all, he says, time is a type of a distance. And even though he was forced to leave his village in Hungary, his home set on fire, even though the Magyars accused the Jews of dancing like devils and baking blood into their matzo, even though he was forced to wear a Jew Hat, triangular

and knobbed at the top, even though he could only love his shikse, a Christian woman named Borbola, in the cool forest of the Carpathian Mountains, even though chickens strutted about his house, even though his father had a face like a pink cabbage and cried himself to sleep every night, and his mother's ankles were swollen and bulbous -- even then he missed home. Memory accentuated the sweet things: the children singing stork, stork, turtledove at his door for winter solstice, clanging sheep bells; the wedding cakes of stacked gingerbread horses and stars, edged with thick icing, lit by candles in tin cups so high they touched ceilings; the way the shikse kept his faint moustache well cultivated, brushed sand from it when they lay by the vintners, called him Lala instead of Laszlo, called him her nut tree. Laszlo looks at me dreamily. "And we were like two golden apples as the minstrel songs said, szuret Lala, and Lala szuret, she sang into my ear." What does that mean, I ask. Laszlo loves me.

Just before Laszlo tells me about his childhood, Mamma interrupts from her bed. On the easel, her portrait is nearly painted (I don't want to finish it.) Yet she hears soft Latin prayers, feels the faintness of rain outside. Onion soup wafts and a ladle clacks, wood against clay, and swish, the broth swishes. And she's by the weedy leaning tower, feeding pigeons, flinging a pebble into a puddle. I see the circles of blue light, she says, above me like haloes and like the ceiling is a puddle and I've just thrown my pebble in it. Mamma calls Lucia! Lucia! She spoons more onion broth and it burns my tongue, my eyes salty with tears, and it's as if --

-- She forgets. She begins to cry, a little girl in an old woman's body. Hot teardrops roll down her cheeks like candlewax from a flame. Laszlo holds her hand, lets her knead the rosaries between his palm and hers. To see the world like a child again, I think. I dry the tears thickening on her lids, red-rimmed and tired; I dab them from her hollow cheeks. My palms, stained blue, paint unwitting children's pictures on her face -- maybe a bird, a sparrow flapping its wings. I wish she could see them in a mirror nearby the bed. Mamma, we're by the water well again. But her eyes close. Laszlo lights the coal brazier; I pull the yellow blanket up to her neck. She sleeps beneath the dovecot, tucked in her blanket, soft as a pigeon's throat.


Per chi ?
— Per me.
felice
esclamò Edm
uomo.
— Che fai?
Oh, mio