

Modì, the Prince
(Modigliani: Il principe)

1920 – 2020
a 100 anni dalla morte / at 100 years from his death

by
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Eugenie Garsin

Of all the children the most beloved.

These are words than no mother should ever think and differentiate between her own children. Difference in love is unforgivable and has no justification. The solitude I exist in as a parent does not help me to overcome my weaknesses. I have a non-existent husband, whom I never loved, and whom I never see. A man who has always been absent, attracted more by the mines he owns than by our family and only able to get me pregnant every time he returned from his work in Sardinia. The Modigliani family does not exist; I, as a Modigliani, do not exist.

For everyone I am Eugenie Garsin, I am the man and the woman of the house, father and mother at the same time. I do not expect anything from the Modiglianis: neither help nor support, not even time to talk about my possible mistakes. In this solitude, I forced myself to accept all my weaknesses. My husband does not run the risk of favoring one over the other because he is basically indifferent to all his children. I love them all, but one in particular I adore because he is unique and fragile. "Of all the children the most beloved."

We Garsins are French Jews from Marseille. We also had some business in Livorno, where we finally relocated to. We are cultured, whimsical, refined and cosmopolitan, and free thinkers. The Modiglianis are orthodox Jews from Livorno, very rich but quite vulgar. Their Sardinian mines have been very profitable in the past but are now going down the drain. Originally they lived in the family palazzo in Via Roma with a retinue of servants. Today that house is gone, it was lost. At some point, good fortune gets tired of favoring always the same people. When I gave birth to Amedeo, my fourth and last child, piled on my bed were the most unimaginable objects of value because an old law, invented by who knows who, prevented the seizure of any object resting on the bed of a woman in labor. For this reason, seeing as with my labor pains arrived the bailiffs, we managed to save a few things of value. My beloved husband was not able to protect me even in that very painful and delicate moment. What did he know of contractions, lacerations, blood and placenta? He paid attention only to what came in, not to what went out. My husband returned to Sardinia and I rolled up my sleeves. I supported my children with the proceeds of my elementary school, the French lessons I gave privately and the translations I did myself. We Garsins always had a perfect knowledge of the transalpine language. As for my children's education, obviously I undertook it myself. From that day on I saw less and less of my absent-minded husband. I shaped Amedeo as I wished: cultured, refined, sensitive. I taught him French as if it were his mother-tongue. I encouraged him to pursue his dreams and fulfill his ambitions.

Unfortunately, a mother's care can do nothing against Nature's violence. At the age of eleven Amedeo became ill with pleurisy, and all the doctors gave him up for dead. Seeing him in agony was the hardest of gauntlets for me—I thought he was going to die, and I am ashamed to say that I even hoped that he would rather than suffer like that, wracked by pain, gasping and feverish. Everyone had given up on my son. No one ever conveyed hope in his recovery. We Garsin do not have a good relationship with faith. We are moderate athiests. Not knowing precisely which God would have been useful in saving the life of an eleven-year-old child, to be safe I prayed to them all. I prayed with the rabbi and the priest, I faked my piousness with both. I would have beseeched a Muslim, too, if only I had found one of them at hand, or even a medicine man, or a sorceress. I did ask an occultist to

concoct a magic potion, I talked to a palm reader, I lit candles and sprinkled Amedeo with holy water. I intoned the Ana El Na Refa Na La, the Jewish healing prayer, the same one that Moses addressed to God to save his sister. "I will be what I will be", it more or less says. Quite cryptic, I must admit. And yet I tried it, even knowing that in the eyes of God I am not as important as Moses or even his sister. I had long conversations with the rabbi. He was always there for me, ready to explain.

"Sick in Hebrew is holé, meaning 'hole', 'empty' or 'no longer existing'."

I listened to the rabbi's words, but I didn't understand them.

"Nature abhors emptiness. It is horrified by it, you see?"

"No, I don't."

"Nature sees the sick and becomes aware of the emptiness in them."

"And then what does it do?"

"It fills the void with the disease. It is a deep state of absence that will last as long as the illness. Do you understand?"

"I wish I could, but I can't."

"Do you know what empty means?"

"No."

"It means devoid of sanctity."

"Are you saying that my eleven-year-old son is not a saint? I don't see anything wrong with it, considering how young he is."

"Sadness and lack of faith are the source of all diseases."

"What should I do, concretely?"

"Joy is a great remedy."

"My son is dying, and I am sad."

"Faith makes us joyful, so if you have no joy you have no faith."

The rabbi had not convinced me; on the contrary, he had made me understand once and for all the reasons for our family's atheism. I had only one problem: my son. For this reason I turned to all of the divine possibilities, true or imaginary, and praying that they were all one and the same. I asked the various 'gods' to join together and become a kind of unique God and to grant me the favor of healing my son. And then the incredible, the miraculous happened. Dedo recovered by himself, just like that: suffering, sweating, coughing, eating and resting. After several days spent in the realm of the dead, Amedeo came back to me. Having prayed all the Gods I could think of, now I did not know which one of them I should thank. So I convinced myself that in the end the mystical, the mysterious and the supernatural made sense. And I said, "Thank you, whoever you are."

Unfortunately, after three years Dedo became ill with typhoid. Once again, high fever and atrocious headaches.

"Mother, my head... what's happening to my head... help me, mother."

"It's nothing, love. It'll pass, you'll see."

Then abdominal pains, diarrhea, skin spots. Once he lost consciousness, collapsing onto himself. Suddenly he was no longer there—I thought he was dead, suffocated in his yellowish vomit.

So I started over. It had worked once: it was worth a second try. Again I bothered the rabbi, the priest, the sorceress and the palm reader. Again I lit the candles, sprinkled holy water, intoned the Ana El Na Refa Na La and all the other chants. And Dedo overcame this crisis as well. I realized then that all these illnesses were useful tests. They were trials for both of us, obstacles through which we could become something else, special, better, stronger individuals. My son and I had found ourselves

united in our struggle, and together we had gone further. Anyone else would have been killed by those diseases. Dedo overcame them. Since then I often asked myself how it had it been possible. The doctors, who had given him up for dead in various occasions, spoke of a sort of resurrection, a miracle. My belief is that the true miracle was his desire to live. There is nothing more magical and superhuman than the pure beauty of being here.

“Mother, when I was feverish I saw people, but different from us.”

“Dear, they were dreams. Possibly nightmares.”

“They were nice people, gentle, but also sad.”

“Why were they sad?”

“I don’t know. They had slim, delicate bodies and they never laughed, they only smiled some. Sad smiles.”

At first I thought that it was just a bad dream induced by the high fever. But then I thought about it, and became convinced that those quiet, sweet, smiling characters were the inhabitants of his inner world, ideal figures, somehow more sensitive and controlled, beautiful and elegant than real people. Perhaps inside his suffering soul Dedo felt the need for a different sort of humanity. He needed control and beauty. In his descriptions he talked a lot about calm as a positive trait, about a serenity that excluded conflicts, nervousness and fears. Those characters, he often repeated, were not happy, but neither did they suffer. He described them as melancholy but peaceful. Perhaps this is what he wished for himself and for me: even feelings, far from any extreme, veiled at most by a thin shade of sadness, smiles showing acceptance of the human condition. Dedo was a child who grew up too fast, a sort of miniature adult who was already aware of death and pain. How can you not love a child like him more than anyone else in the world? A child who had entered the tunnel of fear and despair but remained so pure and thoughtful? I thought the tests he had been subjected to were over. I was wrong.

The next ordeal was the worst. Tuberculosis—an incurable disease, the first cause of death throughout Europe. There are no medicines to treat tuberculosis; this disease has ups and downs and lasts a lifetime. A life that can only be short. There are moments of peace and apparent calm, then the cough and fever come back for the slightest cause: an exertion, a chill, a common cold. Dark blood surges up from the lungs and into the throat. Its red stains sheets and pillows; then the disease subsides for a while, only to return later, more violent than ever. My brother Amedeo was the only Garsin with a flair for business and a great love for Dedo, who I had named after him. Knowing that in order to dedicate myself to my son I would be forced to neglect both my work as a translator and my commitment to the school I had founded, he offered his financial help. Then as soon as his consumption gave him some respite, Dedo got sick again—this time it was scarlet fever, yet another scourge. Enough already! How much must a mother’s resistance be tested? How much did Nature have to rage on a single soul? If there was a God who healed him every time, that same God kept inhumanly playing with our lives. I was too angry with all the deities I had appealed to. I wanted to rely exclusively on my son, on his resilience. So once again I stayed close to him.

“Mother, they’re back. The different people. They’re really beautiful, and they love me.”

“And what do they tell you?”

“Nothing—they don’t talk. They’re good people, but they have suffered, too. But they have beautiful colors. They smile.”

“Then they don’t suffer.”

“Maybe yes. Perhaps they’re good because they have recovered.”

How can you not adore a boy capable of formulating such reflections? Being able to relate goodness, calmness and serenity to the fact of having known and overcome pain is a very complex

way of reasoning. Dedo came through yet again. He recovered.

He studied at home with me, I taught him everything. He read poets and philosophers, he could count and often we spoke French for hours. Then, one day, he came up to me, smiling.

“I want to be a painter.”

Whatever he wanted to become, Dedo had my authorization to try with all his might to realize his dream. The fact of having overcome all kinds of sicknesses gave him a special claim on life.

Masters (1899)

For someone like me, someone who grew up without a father, the lack of a mentor is not so important. I have only ever had one teacher: my mother. For the few years I went to class I didn't even notice I had a schoolmaster, for my mother was better at it than anyone else. When I decided to leave school and paint, I realized that I needed a guide. When I met Guglielmo Micheli, I was well disposed toward him; all I was asking for was a mentor to emulate. Only later did I realize that you must always be cautious before growing too attached to your teacher. No one can disappoint you more than a father or a teacher. I was let down by both.

I'm here, in his shop, looking at him for months and I realize I'll never be like him. I can see that unlike me my classmates are fond of him; somehow they love him and follow his every word. He was the favorite pupil of Giovanni Fattori, who everyone considers a master; I, on the contrary, am just a boy who doesn't even know what he wants. I have no right to criticize him. Now there is him, and before him there was his master, but nothing has changed—their paintings are similar and equally boring.

Guglielmo Micheli was born in Livorno like me; at the age of twenty-five he'd already had an exhibition in Florence and one at the Fine Arts Exposition in Rome, then at thirty he founded his school, which Fattori visits every summer. Fattori is a *Macchiaiolo*, and Micheli is influenced by his teachings. They paint landscapes, boats, oxen, horses. One taught the other to draw animals, the other returned the favor with boats. Looking at their landscapes full of fauna and vessels, I remain totally indifferent. When I hear them speak I have nothing to say—I remain silent and listen, I watch them paint and get drowsy.

Micheli knows how to do everything, he was poor and now he earns a living from his art, from oil paintings, watercolors, pastels, incisions, illustrative design but nothing that he does makes me love his art. During his lessons I complete the things he tells us to do without much enthusiasm but I try to be precise. I never show hostility or unkindness, I am polite and silent.

Micheli is a post-Macchiaiologist, whereas Fattori was a Macchiaiologist: the difference between them is that 'post' put in front of the word. I don't understand why we need to use a word for this kind of definition. He says it is a decision that others make, art critics, gallery owners, art dealers. Maybe so. I am trying to learn something but I am always bored, and my idea is that boredom is always right.

Perhaps in order to teach one must have the desire to transmit one's art, but in this way one teaches others only to be like one's self. Fattori teaches Micheli and Micheli teaches us. Therefore? This method of teaching causes us all to paint in exactly the same way.

Micheli married the niece of the sculptor, Giovanni Paganucci, and every once in a while he speaks to us about sculpture. It is the only time that I am fascinated. Sculpting seems much more interesting to me than painting does, especially paintings of landscapes. Sculptures are alive, real, concrete and exist in all dimensions. I would like to learn to sculpt, however, perhaps it is not possible to learn anything, neither painting nor sculpting. One must only do, make the attempt.

Oscar

“Aren’t you happy, Amedeo?”

“I don’t know. Are you?”

“Me? I think so. Well, yes, I am happy.”

“Well, then, explain to me why you are happy, Oscar. So maybe I can understand.”

Oscar smiles at me, knowingly. I’ve never had any friends before, for this reason he has become my best friend here at Micheli’s school. He is almost eight years older than I am but this has never caused a problem between us. He is not competitive and never wants to be superior to me, he has never denied an answer to my question or a piece of advice. Oscar is very practical, he is exactly what I am not.

“Amedeo, this is how I see it. Painting is a profession.”

“It is not an art?”

“Yes, also. But art, without a profession, is not possible. Maestro Micheli says that first one must always capture what is true and then, with time, the art will come, if it is there.”

“Do you agree with him?”

“Yes.”

Compared to me, Oscar is a man, he has lived through many things, his father died when he was young, he had to take care of his family taking what difficult jobs he could. I am interested in everyone who is poor and in everyone who has had to work to obtain a bit of peace. I love Oscar because he goes to work down at the docks and sometimes he comes to Micheli’s with cuts on his hands, with his fingernails dirty or ripped, other times he smells of fish, or he is limping and complains of pains in his back. Oscar’s poverty is somehow linked to my misfortune with my health.

“I don’t know Oscar, but when I see your paintings of fruit or a still life I think that your paintings are better than Nature herself. Your colors are more beautiful, your apples are redder and they seem to be lacquered they are so shiny, they glow with a more beautiful light. I would much rather eat your apples than the real ones. Therefore, Oscar, your painting is better than the ‘real’ that Micheli talks about.”

“Thank you.”

Oscar laughs, he has fun with me. He cares deeply about me, and he is the only one who knows everything about my illness. The wonderful thing is that he knows how to keep a secret. I asked him not to tell anyone about the tuberculosis, and he didn’t. I know that I can trust him.

All Oscar has to do is to look at me to understand that I am not happy or that I am unwell. When I cough he glances at me, worried, and his eyes seem to ask if I need anything. What did I do to deserve the affection of a friend who is so much older than I am? I don't know. I realize that I am extremely lucky because his friendship helps me to grow, he speaks to me as if I were an adult. I envy his experience and he has admitted to me that he envies my skill in drawing.

“Look at us, sitting here in the countryside, painting trees.”

“Trees are difficult to paint. Keep working, this will be helpful one day. Micheli says there is always something to learn and then you can use it where you like.”

“Sitting here in the sun like two crickets. Look at everyone else.”

I indicate to Oscar our fellow students, strewn on the grass, the lucky ones now in a bit of shade while the others have put their handkerchiefs on their heads for protection.

“Dedo, you have to be patient.”

“It is just that here we talk a lot about Impressionists and Macchiaiologists but there are other painters in the world.”

“See, you really are not very patient.”

“I don't have time to be, Oscar. It's different.”

“Don't say stupid things that will make me angry.”

“They are not stupid things. You are the only one who knows everything about me.”

Oscar becomes serious.

“Do you know how many I know who have tuberculosis? And yet they work at the fish market or at the port, maybe right beside me. These are people who work hard every day. They have not died, they are still there, working. One doesn't always die, you know. If you eat well, if you don't act stupidly and stay out until all hours, if you don't drink and if you dress warmly in the winter, you can last quite a long time.”

“Oscar ...”

“Screw Oscar, you are more healthy than I am. I don't want to hear you talk about how you don't have enough time. Got it? I am bigger than you and older than you are, and if I land one right on your face you'll remember it.”

“All right, but still, I am curious to see what is out there.”

“You'll see it. You'll see it all, in time.”

I shake my head, unconvinced.

“You will have time to see everything.”

...

Snow

A thin layer of snow remains on the ground, it has been very cold. The freezing temperature has hardened the snowflakes that have fallen to the ground, forming a kind of pavement that creaks with each step. Until yesterday Paris was covered in that silence that a fresh snowfall brings. Today the silence has turned into a sound that seems as if many children are crunching on candy. The footsteps of people in the streets are not light as they were yesterday, the chill has created an orchestra.

It is meaningful that today in particular there is snow. I am about to enter into someone's life, into an existence that is not mine, and perhaps a veil of beauty will fall over me. The snow which is still so very white is proof of this. I know that something is about to happen even if I am not sure if it will actually involve me. I try to walk without placing my feet in the tracks left by others, it is my attempt to leave my own individual and unique footsteps. My desire is to be different from anyone else today, even from myself. I am preparing myself to be special even if perhaps I am not special at all.

The meeting is in front of the Palais du Luxembourg, inside the gardens. I believe this is the largest park in Paris. Picasso told me that there is something Italian about the place because it was inaugurated by Maria de' Medici in 1612. Pablo knows this city better than the Parisians do. *"You'll feel at home there,"* he told me. As I am walking, I see her. She is alone, Pablo has not yet arrived. She is dressed in black and her tall, thin shape stands out against the blinding snow.

"Good day."

"Good day to you."

I look at her and I realize that she is freezing in the cold.

"You are cold, aren't you?"

"I am Russian, you musn't forget. Even if I am cold I know how to resist."

"Please forgive me."

"It is not you who should ask for forgiveness but your friend, Picasso."

"Why?"

"He told me that he could not come."

"But how? At the very last minute?"

"It seems that a dealer found him a very generous buyer."

"I'm not surprised. I am sorry, though, if you wish we can delay our walk around Paris."

"For what reason?"

She smiles at me and I feel embarrassed.

"You are a married woman and to be accompanied by one man alone might be more embarrassing than by two."

She laughs, delighted, and she is even more beautiful.

“It is true that Russian men are very jealous ... but not as jealous as Italian men, do not worry.”

“As you wish.”

“Shall we walk?”

“Don’t you wish to drink something hot first?”

“I’ll warm up by walking.”

Now there is a long silence broken only by the sound of our footsteps on the snow. This unique and bizarre way of being silent underlines the depth of the two souls who have just met but who are able to stay silent without any difficulty. In the silence I feel that her allure exceeds her beauty. That which is not expressed is even more desirable than that which is visible. Many times I have asked myself what beauty is and how it can be objectively proven. As in art, it is the appreciation of many that proves in an almost scientific manner the existence of beauty. Allure is a subjective element, one is subjected to it in a solitary fashion and it escapes the desire to render it objective. Anna is both beautiful and alluring even when she is silent. It is her soul that emits her essence. Her soul is borne by her body which is made up of large, tender eyes, white, translucent skin, long and elegant shapes, a warm and sultry voice.

“So, Monsieur Modigliani, shall we introduce ourselves?”

“I think we already have.”

“I am Russian, my name is Anna Achmatova, I am married, and I write verses. All of this you already know. I, however, know nothing of you. Can you help me?”

“Certainly. Amedeo Modigliani, Italian, Jewish, I am not married and I am a sculptor.”

“A sculptor?”

She responded with surprise, almost incredulity.

“Are you surprised?”

“Of course.”

“And why?”

“You don’t look like one.”

“And what would a sculptor look like?”

“More rough.”

“Rough? I like that.”

“You wish to be considered rough?”

“Yes, I like my sculptures rough, too.”

I smile at her, our conversation rests on a plane of light allusion, and I am not taking either of us too seriously. It is not yet time to do so, however I feel that soon we will have many occasions to become much more serious with one another.

“You, Modigliani, are not rough. Especially not today.”

“It is the second time you have seen me.”

“Yes, but last time you were with Picasso.”

“And so?”

“Men become harder when they are in competition.”

In very few words she was able to describe something that I have never been able to perceive or to explain. I try to reply decisively.

“I admire Picasso.”

“This is evident.”

“I am not envious of him.”

“I am sure of that, envy is not a noble sentiment. Competition, instead, exists in nature. It is a positive energy that allows us to improve.”

“I agree.”

“Now you are more delicate without the cumbersome presence of your friend Pablo. Even the wolves on the steppe are more refined when there are not other males around.”

She smiles slightly maliciously at me, demonstrating to me that nothing escapes her. Actually, I believe I would have felt less uncomfortable if we had not met alone, just the two of us. Moreover, because I did not expect to be alone with her, I was not able to prepare myself, not as I would have liked to. Now I need some time to get used to this and to become familiar with this unexpected *tete-a-tete*. Her face is not perfect but, mysteriously, her features seem to be far superior to perfection. Her defects manage only to deepen her charm.

“The other day, at La Rotonde, after we got up from your table my husband and I stayed to talk with some friends, and through the window I could see that you were looking at me.”

“If you realized that I was looking at you it means that you were looking at me.”

“I always look at everything, it is a handicap of my profession.”

“Then poets are no different from painters, who look at everything.”

“Exactly.”

“And how is your honeymoon?”

“A bit strange.”

“Why?”

“Things always happen when you don't mean for them to.”

“Such as?”

“My husband is very excited about his lessons at the Sorbonne.”

“That's understandable.”

“Naturally.”

“I am sure it's not the only thing he is interested in.”

“The meetings he has here in Paris are also interesting for him.”

“I detect a polemic tone in your voice.”

“And why? No, absolutely not. I too am very interested in the people I am meeting in Paris.”

She glances at me and smiles. I realize that this woman is able to make me feel fragile, and I reflect on the fact that I am the one allowing her to do so, because every word she speaks astonishes me.

“Have you already had interesting encounters in Paris?”

“The most interesting is always the most recent one, the one that is ongoing, I believe.”

“So I should feel flattered?”

“I am the one who is pleased. And amazed. I've never met an Italian who knew Baudelaire by heart.”

“Are you surprised that an Italian knows Baudelaire?”

“No, only that he knows how to recite it so well. Are you perhaps an actor?”

“Absolutely not.”

“You seem to be. You speak such perfect French.”

“I learned from my mother.”

“Would you recite some more for me?”

“I’m not sure ...”

“Please, I beg you.”

I smile at her and I obey, as one would obey a child. I stop and I gaze at her.

“Always the sea, free man, you will love! Because the sea is your mirror, you contemplate your soul in the infinite churning of the waves, and an abyss is your spirit no less bitter.”

She interrupts me.

“Do you love the sea?”

“Of course.”

“You come from a city on the sea?”

“Yes, it is on the Tyrrhenian Sea, in Tuscany.”

“The land of Dante.”

Pleased, she smiles, and is silent, and I too am silent. I can hear the sound of the crystals of snow as they burst beneath our feet. We are two very special people who have met one another. I have never felt such a gratifying and complex sensation in the company of a woman and I have never felt this special. It is surely her inaccessibility to render her so unique, she is newly married to a very handsome and cultured man, who is also probably very wealthy. It is also true that what is prohibited is more attractive than what is permitted in the light of day. As I am buried in my thoughts she smiles and begins to speak as if she were reading my mind.

“It is curious our walking along in silence, is it not?”

“Yes, indeed it is.”

“We both know the reason for not speaking, don’t we?”

“I believe we do.”

“You are a very beautiful man Mr Modigliani, you are charismatic, cultured, and you even seem to be a consummate actor. You are probably very good at pretending. Maybe women allow you to.”

“On this point, you are wrong.”

“You have aristocratic ways, I am sure you understand the art of concealment.”

“It is not a part of my character. I assure you. I never hide my intentions. Rather, I would choose not to say anything at all.”

“Like now.”

“Yes, like now. As you are doing, too, I can see.”

Anna smiles and understands that between us there are no barriers, and no reasons for being any different than exactly what we are. I stop and I turn to her to speak directly.

“I am curious to know what a marriage between poets is like.”

“My husband Nikolaj is not only a poet, you know?”

“He is a military man, I know. His impeccable uniform of a Czarist official did not escape me. You love him also for this, I imagine.”

“I refused him many times before agreeing to marry him.”

I am surprised by this confession.

“And what convinced you to accept?”

“Maybe it was his suicide attempt...”

I look at her in surprise. This woman has no filters whatsoever. She speaks in absolute sincerity, she is not even embarrassed to tell intimate details of her life. She observes me with a smile, amused by my shock.

“Tragic personalities fascinate me. I am sure that underneath your suit of a well-educated Italian you are tragic as well.”

“Tragic?”

“Yes.”

“Probably.”

“My husband is the kind of person who becomes more interesting with time.”

“While you were fascinating to him right from the start, I can understand.”

“He loves me.”

I smile at her and decide to stop and to block her path. I look into her eyes and I take her hands, in their leather gloves.

“It is not difficult to love you. An aristocratic beauty, fascinating, strong, and mysterious. In this moment you are the most beautiful woman in Paris.”

“Do you think so? Do you know all of the women in Paris?”

“I know that there cannot be one that is superior to you.”

“Liar.”

“I want to create something wonderful with your shape.”

“Do you want to paint me?”

“No, I don’t want to paint you.”

She looks at me, disappointed.

“You don’t?”

“I want to study you, then I want to sculpt your face in marble.”

“You are not a sculptor, Modigliani. You never will be.”

She is wounding me. And herself.

“What do you know about it?”

“I am a clairvoyant. I can see into your thoughts and into the future. In your life there is no space for marble and stone.”

“And why not?”

“They are too cold. I see colors, many warm and bright colors. I see the faces of women, sad and impenetrable, but not only. I see nude, sensual bodies. Women who are resting, stretched out on their thoughts.”

I am silent as I look into her eyes. She is cold, she trembles. I do not give in to the desire to hold her in my arms to warm her, but once again it is she who amazes me.

“I’m cold. I’d like to see your studio. Then I would understand much more about you.”

I understand immediately her attempt to put me to the test.

I say nothing. She studies me, waiting for my reply. It is evident that she thinks that she is standing in front of the usual predator accustomed to the worldly women of Paris. She wants to understand, as if in a laboratory, if the specimen she is examining, that is, me, has already developed any fantasies about her and about her sexual availability. She wants to verify if, by chance, I am confusing her with all of the others. There is a long silence as we look at each other. I must look inside myself and understand what I am feeling. I do not want her yet, I am not at all certain of my desires, my overwhelming feeling is one of fear. I have

never met a woman so mysterious and the idea of her sex and of her naked skin, now, disconcerts me. I am not ready and I am not even so interested in her body; the essence of her humanity is so profound and at the same time so impossible to grasp that the idea of possessing her weakens me. When the mind is so vulnerable and the emotions are so strong, the lower regions of the body become so secondary and to lose all importance.

“Do you want me to die of cold?”

She looks at me with a glance and a smile.

“I will take you to the Louvre.”

“And not to your studio?”

“No, there is no rush to see my art.”

She smiles at me, she seems surprised in a positive sense.

“I will take you to the Louvre, and I will show you the Egyptians. Then one day I will paint you as an Egyptian queen and we will go so far away together that we can get lost, if we wish to.”

“The wait is more exciting, isn't it so, Modigliani?”

Anna Andreevna Gorenko

You see, Monsieur Modigliani, the problem is that no one is aware of the poet inside of me. Everyone sees immediately my figure, my shape, and of course I too am aware that I am beautiful and attractive, that I am not stupid and that I am not a masochist. Unfortunately, however, it does not make me happy that my long legs attract more looks than my soul does, or that my slender arms cause others to imagine seductive and voluptuous movements in the eternal embrace that are considered to be more interesting than my verses are. My alert gaze makes one think that my will could be similar to that of a man but then I am not considered as a man is, not least when they are looking at my décolleté. I am a woman and I am feminine, but my poetry should dominate the exterior signs. This is the way in which I would like for men to consider me, but they do not. You are a handsome man, seductive and also Italian but you would not like it at all if for me you were only an object of desire, seeing as you are also a painter and an artist. If I wished for you to possess me physically and I did not care for your painting, I am sure that between us it would be difficult to create a good relationship. I appreciate the effort that insist on making to suppress your instinct, I also know that in you the attraction you feel for what you see of me is stronger than the attraction you might have for what fills my soul. I cannot blame you, we are young and full of physical passions, even I cannot avoid thinking of your sex and your body, your hands and your beautiful face. Our reciprocal desire is so evident, it risks becoming banal and obvious. Too many times I have seen the same expression on men's faces, even on that of my own husband. This is not what I want from you. I wish that you would perceive me for the depth of my heart and for the feeling of respect that you feel emanating from me, for the way in which I am silent and for the attention with which I listen to your words. I want for you to see me as a Russian poet, a composer of words and feelings having nothing to do with my sex.

Monsieur Modigliani, my name is Anna Andreevna Gorenko, and I was born in Odessa in 1889, you were born in 1884. There are only five years of difference in our ages. We are little more than two youths, attracted to one another. But you must know everything about me, because the short life I have lived so far is enough to make me quite unique. I love the green pastures of my homeland, I love horses and I love my mother tongue. I wrote my first poem when I was eleven years old, it was unfortunately very bad. Possibly for this reason my father, a naval engineer, did not encourage me to write. I paid no attention to him, seeing as he was the first hostile man I encountered in my life. I disobeyed him with great satisfaction and he did all he could to encourage me to use a pen-name in order to safeguard the reputation of our family. I cared nothing about his good name, therefore I chose Achmat, the name of the ancient Tartar chief who led the last revolt of the people against the prices of Moscow. I wanted a name that would take me into battle, I wanted to feel like Genghis Khan. Now, my name is Anna Andreevna Achmatova.

...

January 1920

Disorder...

It's all so messy around me. Disorder is not creative. It's a scam I've always believed in, but that I now know to be false. What I need is order, but I cannot have it anymore. I used to despise and shun it, but it was just because I was afraid of habit. Order belongs to the bourgeoisie, I used to say; to those devoid of fantasy. We all said this; we all thought so. But the truth is, order within your heart and your mind saves your life, and the lives of those around you. Order is the delight of reason, it can appease you. Strong emotions such as misfortune, fear, rage and passion are the offspring of chaos and they have never taken me to a good place. Now I am in this dirty apartment with a dusty bed, a table, four lame chairs, an empty sideboard, a few useless trestles and three paintings. Just three pictures, three portraits, one of Lumia, one of Jeanne and one of... I don't even remember the man's name.

"What was his name? Who was he?"

He came here to have his portrait made, and now I have a great emptiness in my mind and a pain that drills into my skull bones and my eyes. It's this pain that makes me forget. I had been forewarned—all this was announced to me far in advance. Who was that man? I do not remember his name. I painted that face, and yet now it tells me nothing. Three portraits, one of Lumia, one of Jeanne and one of... but where are the others? Where are all my paintings? They stole them from me. I must tell everyone, I must shout it.

"Where are my paintings? They take everything away, the thieves!"

On the floor, only empty wine bottles. They took everything, even the wine—they stole it along with my paintings. Now the wrong path is the only one that remains for me, and it's too late to choose another. Therefore I want wine.

"I want a drink! Where's my wine?"

The only answer comes from the neighbors, who hate me by now.

"Enough! Let us sleep."

They hope I'll die soon so I won't bother them any more.

"I want my wine!"

"Get lost!"

"Where do you want me to go?"

Can't you see I'm naked?"

The only thing I have is this coat, Emanuele's old coat. My brother's old coat.

"My brother is a socialist, did you know that?"

"Shut up!"

"He fights for a better world."

This makes me laugh : a better world does not exist. There is only a worse world, the real one.

"Quit it, Italian."

Italian. For them I've always been a useless Italian—as futile as my brother's coat, which cannot even protect me from the cold inside this house. An Italian who cannot even enter hotels. Italian, and Jewish to boot.

“What on earth do you have against the Jews? Don’t you know that their God and the Christians’ God are the same?”

“Be quiet!”

“You hopeless idiots are such ignoramuses, you entrust yourself to a divinity you don’t even know. I for my part put my faith in wine. Where’s the wine?”

The chills are so strong they make me stagger, hampering my balance. Rather than walking, I crawl along the floor in search of the bottle. My hope is to find at least a few drops of wine, enough to placate the cold and the fever: I’m not asking for more. The bottle is under the bed, I know— that at least I remember. I drag myself along the dirty floor, I reach out feeling its iciness and feel something crush under my chest, cutting me. It is an empty sardine tin, rusty, sharp as a blade. I see the blood leak out of my ribcage. A Christ-like wound. But mine is superficial; if only had it been as deep as his, at last all would be over. Instead I just cough. My cough is the keeper of all of my secrets.

“What do you know about me and my secrets?”

“Italian, we just wanna sleep!”

“You know nothing about me. I have a woman I love and who loves me back, and she gave me a daughter. Her name is Giovanna.”

Giovanna: where is Giovanna? Why isn’t she here with her father? They are hiding her from me yet again.

“Where’s Giovanna?”

Pious bastards. Little Giovanna cannot see her father because he’s sick. The child must be kept away from him, lest he contaminate her with his illness. Anyone close to him could get infected.

“That’s what you say, don’t you? Where’s my daughter? Give me my wine, give me my daughter. Zbo! Have you got Giovanna? The fact that you sold my paintings doesn’t give you any right over my child.”

“Shut up!”

Leopold, you know this: it’s not alcohol that’s bad for me, it’s not consumption that’s killing me. It’s the world’s greed and indifference. Yes, yours too. The Zborowskis are so affectionate with poor Modi, so caring. Why shouldn’t they be? They can afford to live in such a swell palace by selling paintings by Modigliani. How much do you sell them for, Zborowski? Under all your polite airs, Zbo, you hide the black soul of a merchant.

“You know we’re getting close, right?”

You wait patiently, like a true businessman. Why sell now, if in a few days you could earn four times as much?

“Jeanne! Where is poor Jeanne?”

“Shut up! Enough!”

Poor, wistful, unfortunate Jeanne.

“Jeanne! The wine is finished! There is no more coal!”

For a week I have been eating canned sardines. Only my colors have remained. Zbo always takes care of that. We wouldn’t want Modi to feel like painting and not be able to do so.

“Quiet! Let us sleep!”

“Sleep, sleep— all you do is sleep. You’re not in a hurry like me.”

If only I could sleep, I would make love to this bed. I would adore it, I’d kiss these dirty sheets. If only I didn’t have all these colors in my head, all these colors keeping me

awake! I can only think of London.

“I have an exhibition there! A personal show in London!”

“Cut it out! Animal!”

“Animal? I’m a father!”

My daughter is named Giovanna, she has an Italian name. Soon I will have another child—he will be a boy. I will collect my children and take them to Livorno, to my family, to the sun. We will breathe the sea air and I will heal!

“I will live an orderly, boring life.”

But what are those? Moving blots. These walls weep dirty water, red water—there’s blood on the walls.

“Could it be your blood? Tell me, is it yours?”

“Italian, we’re calling the *gendarmes*.”

“Who bleeds the most between you and me?”

I hear noises, steps, someone approaching.

“Amedeo.”

My love, my Jeanne, the mother of my children. It is her: she has come back, and she carries a bottle of wine in her hand.

“Jeanne, my love, have you got the wine?”

She shrinks away. I know she does it for love. For love she has brought me the wine and now, for the same reason, she wants to take it away from me.

“Give me the wine.”

She hides it behind her back and moves closer. She puts her icy hand on my forehead.

“You’re hot, you’re burning.”

“It is your hand that is cold. It’s freezing outside, right?”

“You’re running a fever.”

“Give me the wine.”

“Your temperature is too high.”

“I’ll take it down a notch, you’ll see.”

I take the bottle from her hands, uncork it with an energy I didn’t think I had, drink from it. Now she is begging me.

“Get in bed, your fever is peaking. Stop drinking!”

I slump at her feet.

“I, Modigliani the Jew, swear that I will marry Jeanne Hebuterne and make her the legitimate mother of my two children. You must tell your parents there is no need to hate us any longer, because I will marry you under a cross, my love. Thanks for the wine.”

I embrace her legs to show her all my gratitude, then drink avidly again to deliver myself from the pain.

“Gently, now—drink slowly.”

I cough, choke, spit wine on the floor. The pain stabs at my chest and head.

“Amedeo, that’s enough.”

“Have you seen these walls? They’re wet with water and blood.”

“No, Amedeo...”

“Look at them!”

“Come on, get in bed.”

“No, I want to paint. Now that I have wine, I want to paint.”

“No, there’s no need to paint. Lie down.”

“I have to deliver the paintings for London.”

“No, my love, no...”

“Zbo is waiting.”

“No—calm down, lie down, you’ve got to rest. The exhibition is over, it’s done.”

I don’t understand her words—they sound like a joke, a game, an insult. I drink and cough again, all the while keeping an eye on the spots that move on the walls.

“So I can’t trust anyone, not even you?”

“What do you mean?”

“The exhibition has already been held? Why are you saying this?”

“Believe me.”

“No, that’s not true. I—I don’t remember. If there was a show, then Zbo has to pay us.”

“He did pay us.”

“Then where’s the money? Why don’t we have coal?”

“Amedeo, there is no more money.”

“It’s not true! There was never any show!”

I drink again and wonder how come she’s not afraid of these spots that move and grow ever wider and redder. She must see them: they are enormous. Blood has always been a torment for me; I’ve spent my whole life checking and hiding my blood. Jeanne sees nothing; now she’s started to look for something in the room’s clutter. It is always so hard to find anything here. She shows me some newspaper clippings.

“Listen, Amedeo. Listen to me.”

She reads a sentence aloud.

“*Modigliani’s nudes are the fruit of Italian Renaissance art, reminiscent of Titian and Giorgione, his shapes reveal a new soul, Modigliani combines all the qualities of his native Italy.*”
You see? The exhibition has already been held. Now calm down.”

She hands me the clippings. I only read the headlines. What she is saying is true. True for everyone but me. I don’t remember anything.

“Did people like them? Did London like my paintings?”

“Yes, love. They liked them.”

“Titian, Giorgione—I don’t remember.”

“It’s true. Trust me.”

I let myself fall on the bed, clutching the clippings to my chest, then realize immediately that even the ceiling is stained with blood.

“I feel something inside my head. I’m cold.”

She squeezes me and tries to warm me with her body; I feel the pressure of her swollen, hard belly holding my son. I feel Jeanne’s hands rubbing me in a useless attempt to generate heat; she talks to me and tells me things that are usually said to small children to distract them from their suffering.

“Our friends told me that soon they’ll bring us coal. They’ll pay for it, and we’ll light a fire and warm you up.”

“No! Zborowski has to pay for the coal. Right now! With the money from my paintings.”

“I’m here now, I’ll warm you up.”

“Why can’t you get the money?”

“Everyone sends their best: Hanka, Lunia, Ortiz de Zarate, Kisling, Soutine. They all asked about you, even Pablo.”

“Picasso? Picasso doesn’t care about me. He’s warm, all right.”

“And I saw Utrillo.”

“Maurice? Is he alive?”

“He sure is.”

“Lucky him.”

“He’s better. He doesn’t drink anymore.”

“It’s not possible.”

“He stopped—everyone says so.”

“You must tell him to come see me before it’s too late. And to bring some wine.”

“Maurice no longer drinks.”

She tells me this as if it were a punishment, an example that ought to demonstrate my weakness of character. If even Utrillo got better, only a spineless idiot like myself dies without a fight.

“Impossible.”

I realize I am whispering and keeping my eyes closed; I am afraid to open them, I don’t want to see the blood stains. Jeanne insists on telling me about Utrillo, as if he should become an example of self-healing.

“They offered him some absinthe and he refused it. Everyone saw it. Since he was dismissed from the hospital he’s no longer delirious.”

“Maurice is not consumptive.”

“He started painting again.”

“He’ll live longer than me. Imagine that.”

No one was able to bet a single franc on that drunkard. I myself always thought that I would outlive him. For once I was an optimist, and in fact, I was wrong. I laugh. Maybe I am in an opium haze, it has happened before. Jeanne calls me back to reality.

“Zbo managed to sell Maurice’s new painting.”

“What about mine? Why doesn’t he sell mine? I’ll tell you why: Zbo knows to bide his time.”

“For what?”

“Better for him to stop selling for a while. Everyone knows this: when you’re dead, your value increases immediately.”

“Stop it! Zbo’s not like that.”

“Poor Jeanne, you don’t know what the world is like. Zbo is like everyone else—he just wants to make more money.”

“It’s not true.”

“He’s just waiting. It’s only a matter of time.”

“No!”

“Jeanne, look at me. How long do you think I will last?”

“Please. You are not dying.”

“Look at me!”

“I’m looking at you.”

“I can’t see you Jeanne, look at me. If I die, make him pay. He should give you the money. My paintings belong to you and the children. Don’t let him rob you, Jeanne.”

“Zbo loves you—they all love you.”

“Then why doesn’t he sell my art?”

“I have no idea.”

“He should want to recoup his investment, right? Instead, nothing. He just waits. Did you see his coat? It has a new fur collar.”

“He is preparing your personal show at the Devambez Gallery. It’s almost ready now.”

“I won’t be there, and he knows it.”

Jeanne flops down onto the bed: she doesn’t have the strength to listen to what I’m saying. But I want her to know what she’ll have to do; I won’t be leaving my family penniless.

“Jeanne, by the time the exhibition will open I will be dead. *Then* Zbo will sell.”

“That’s enough! You won’t die, do you understand?”

She shouts it, her voice metallic and desperate.

“Where is Giovanna?”

“She’s at Zbo’s with Hanka, nice and warm.”

“Warm and far away from her consumptive father.”

“Would you like her to come here?”

“Yes, at least for a visit. Just one more time.”

“She’s safe at Zbo’s.”

“Of course, Leopold has my paintings, my daughter, a warm house and a fur collar.”

“He found a doctor who can come here, he could admit you to a sanatorium.”

“And for what purpose? Do you want them to bore holes in my lungs? To torture me? Do you know what they do to patients like me?”

“I love you. Would you listen to me, for once?”

“I don’t want doctors! They’d just see a dead man.”

“Let yourself be cured.”

“Pass me the wine. I’ll show you how I cure myself.”

“No. You’ve drunk enough.”

“Give me that!”

I am forced to open my eyes and stand up. The room is full of blood, and it is spinning around me. I glimpse at the bottle. Jeanne tries to take it away from me; I lean on a chair, making it topple over, then I stumble and end up flat on the table. I get back up, reach Jeanne and take the bottle from her hands. I drink. As usual, the drink makes me cough. I spit wine and blood. I can tell the difference because the blood is thick and sticks to my hands, whereas the wine slips away. I show my hands to Jeanne.

“See this blood? It’s in my head, too. The doctor was right. I have only part of my brain. Please, Jeanne, stop those blots on the walls.”

“What blots? My love, there is nothing there.”

The ceiling spins, covered in spots. I realize I have fallen on the bed. Jeanne rushes over to me.

“Amedeo!”

Her voice is far away; I hear it as if it came from outside the house.

“Jeanne, I can’t hear you, I can’t hear your voice.”

“I’m here my love, I’m here.”

“I can’t see you. The universe is inside of a face ... yours.”

I hear her steps and the front door slamming. She’s gone. My love—she thinks that

by seeking help the situation can change. Poor Jeanne: she has not yet understood, she just won't give up. But it is only by surrendering that the pain will end, for both of us. Staying alive means wishing to fight, but my main enemy is precisely the will to struggle. It has always been like this. Final surrender, on the other hand, at long last creates peace. And yet there is something that still binds me to all this blood dripping from the walls and ceiling. It is the mystery that makes me still love life. Someone is coming to greet me: it's those floating shadows on the walls, indistinct within the dripping blood. There is someone here with me, and it is not just shadows: they are presences, vivid and real. They want to help me understand, perhaps to accompany me as they have done other times, holding my hand and supporting me. The blood forms their figures. Now someone is laying out that red for me, is applying the primer for new images. Or maybe I am painting once again, but in such a real way that the shadows detach themselves from the walls and the color.

"Mother."

"Dedo."

"Mother, can you see me?"

"Yes."

"I am not afraid."

"I know Dedo, I know."

"I'm not even afraid of death."

"I'm well aware of that. You always had a lot of courage, even as a child."

Another voice comes off the blood.

"It would have been better if you had a little less courage, Amedeo."

"Who's there?"

"I always see you in the snow."

"Anna."

"I'm here."

"You are always in my dreams."

"I have never left."

"Amedeo."

I hear another voice.

"You are backlit, with the sun coming in through the window."

"Beatrice?"

"I'm here, having a drink with you as you paint. Pour something for me."

Another voice, another figure.

"I came to see you laugh. As always."

"Kiki? It that you? I don't laugh anymore."

"Why not?"

"Don't you see how sad a dying dream is?"

"Dedo, dreams never die."

"That's not true, Mother."

"They can't die because they have no life. Dreams only need to be dreamed and then abandoned. Now rest, close your eyes and stay calm."

"All right, Mother."

At dawn Jeanne threw herself from the fifth floor of her parents' house. Her body lay on the ground for two hours before anyone realized that she was gone. Amedeo's funeral took place on January 27th, and a large crowd followed his casket all way to the Père Lachaise cemetery.

Good Catholics that they were, the Hébuternes were offended by their daughter's union with a Jew and for her scandalous suicide, and they therefore refused to bury her body near Amedeo. Five years later, thanks to the efforts of their friends, the two lovers were reunited and placed one next to the other. Jeanne's tombstone reads, "Devoted companion to the utmost sacrifice".

Despite the fact that he lived in poverty and without recognition, Modigliani's sculpture entitled 'Tete' was sold for \$70.7 million dollars, and the painting 'Portrait de Paulette Jourdain' was sold by Sotheby's for \$42.8 million dollars. In November of 2015, Modigliani's painting entitled 'Nu Couche' was sold by Christie's for a record \$170 million dollars. It thus became the second most expensive painting ever sold after Picasso's 'La femme d'Algier' which was purchased for \$179.4 million dollars.

Author's Note

The facts and the characters present in this novel are all real and were all a part of the life of Modigliani. The careful reader and expert regarding the artist will have noticed a slight forcing of the narrative regarding Kiki de Montparnasse. She and Amedeo met after he had been living in Paris for a few years, but I decided that in this novel they would meet earlier, hereby transforming Kiki into a symbol of the women that Amedeo kept company with but who were not his permanent companions. I desired to create a constant companion for our Bohemian artist in Kiki, who could act as a kind of Virgil and who would be capable of revealing his soul to us due to her deep feelings of comprehension in his regard.

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I have been hungry for your mouth for days.

Chapter 66

Jeanne Hebuterne

Being young is unfortunate, one cannot expect attention nor consideration from anyone.

Chapter 67

Fidelity

"Hi Modi."

"Hi Kiki."

Chapter 68

Anna and Jeanne

I am crossing the park on foot, walking slowly so that time will pass, seeing as I am early.

Chapter 69

The End

We met a few blocks away from my studio, in a small street where no one could see us.

Chapter 70

Goodbye

In the pocket of my coat I am clutching the note she had sent to me.

Chapter 71

Tears

I watched them saying goodbye through their tears.

Chapter 72

Smiles

When I do not feel well, Kiki is always there.

Chapter 73

Hunger

"Hey luv, it's been a while since I've seen you."

Chapter 74

Beatrice (1914)

I am exhausted. I have been sculpting all day.

Chapter 75

Meeting

He is thirty minutes late.

Chapter 76

Italian

This woman is nervous and ambiguous.

Chapter 77

War

While all of us are talking about art, suffering if we are not understood or rejoicing in our successes ...

Chapter 78

Smoke

Now I can breathe.

Chapter 79

Public

Ever since Beatrice gave me the keys to her house, I've become very informal ...

Chapter 80

Leopold

I am out to dinner with Beatrice, Leopold Zborowski, and his wife Hanka Zborowska.

Chapter 81

Passion

The bombs are always announced by the sound of a siren.

Chapter 82

The End

When I come in I see her sitting on a chair ...

Chapter 83

Jeanne

I am walking along Boulevard Montparnasse.

Chapter 84

Changes

"Dear Amedeo, I insist."

Chapter 85

The Cross

Mother, Father, I love him.

Chapter 86

Always Kiki

I am sitting at La Rotonde drinking a glass of wine by myself.

Chapter 87

Cannon

With irony and beauty ...

Chapter 88

Sunday

The good Christians who leave mass on Sunday morning ...

Chapter 89

Nudes

They are all there.

Chapter 90

Personal

"Amedeo, what we are doing together is wonderful ..."

Chapter 91

Destiny

My destiny continues to repeat itself.

Chapter 92

Hospital

I open my eyes and do not know where I am.

Chapter 93

Family

"Amedeo, now that we are alone you and I must speak sincerely to one another."

Chapter 94

Diary of an Evacuee

A long train ride with a very improbable and not very happy group.

Chapter 95

Return

"Amedeo, I am too tired to return to Paris immediately."

Chapter 96

Party

Paris. How I've missed it!

Chapter 97

Light

If this is death, then it's really not so bad.

Chapter 98

Lunia

"Amedeo, have you heard from Jeanne?"

Chapter 99

Betrayal

Alcohol is the only way to stop thinking of something that I don't understand.

Chapter 100

These Paintings

I've taken a little time for myself, time to be alone.

Chapter 101

Tremor

The sun is warm in the little dehors in front of Chez Rosalie.

Chapter 102

Diagnosis

"They say you absolutely must not travel in your condition."

Chapter 103

Dreams

Whoever has had the good fortune to love someone in an absolute way should stop loving all together.

Chapter 104

Mirror

Everyone has disappeared, they have left me alone.

Chapter 105

Gratitude

Amedeo, who am I?

Chapter 106

January 1920

Disorder ...

Chapter 107

Night

It is not yet over.

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