

Il ritratto

The Portrait

by
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Partial English translation by Stefano Bortolussi

“Is it him?”

Silvia formulates the question with a slight toss of her head.

Her colleague just nods. “Him” is a kid – indeed, a very young kid, Silvia thinks. He is as thin as a rush, dressed like any other teenager: jeans, a sweatshirt with its hood pooled onto his shoulders, sneakers, a slim neck and a profile that leaves her dumbfounded. It is almost unbelievable: he looks like the incarnation of one of the members of the Korean boy band that she was crazy about as a kid. Same lean body, identical straight haircut with bangs covering his forehead, and a face with delicate features, soft lips and almond-shaped eyes.

Stock-still, his gaze fixed on the painting, he has been standing there for several minutes, too long a time not to draw notice to himself. He seems enchanted, paralyzed by the image in front of him. Perfectly motionless, he’s not taking pictures, nor is he sketching or reading a guide; he simply stares at the painting. Doesn’t move a muscle. Slightly worried, Michele, Silvia’s fellow attendant, called her on the phone: “We might have a small problem in Sala Giove.”

Museum regulations require visitors to be checked if they show the slightest inconsistency with what is expected of them. There are different types of patrons, such as guided groups, individuals with audio guides, teachers and students of art and humanities. The amount of time they spend in front of a single work ranges from a few seconds to a handful of minutes. Only the Academy students stay longer than that, usually armed with notebooks and ink. But you never see anyone standing so still for such a long time without drawing or doing anything else, just staring at a painting as if in a trance.

Gob forbid should a perfectly harmless-looking individual take out a pocket-knife or a marker and deface the frame or the glass. The world is full of madmen who aspire to violate masterpieces or even just scratch or smear their shockproof glass just to generate confusion and draw the morbid attentions of the media to themselves. For this reasons, the Galleria’s attendants are very careful. This is not a small suburban museum. This is the Galleria of Florence’s Palazzo Pitti. And this picture is not just any painting. It is a portrait of a woman with big, dark eyes, widened in apparent amazement within the rosy and opalescent oval of her face, framed by a long ecru veil resting on her jet-black hair and silhouetted against a neutral, dark background highlighting the diaphanous brightness of her complexion. This is the *Velata*, one of Raffaello’s most famous female portraits.

Silvia approaches the boy feigning nonchalance, stealthy as a cat, her hands behind her back. He doesn't move, but as soon as she stops a few meters away, he smiles and glances at her out of the corner of his eye.

"Don't worry, I'm just looking," he says. His voice is barely a whisper, his accent markedly foreign. Silvia was not mistaken: it is not just his hair that reminds her of the singer she had a teenage crush on, and whom she finds herself remembering so well. Now that he's almost facing her, he reveals a soft oval of a face, full lips, a thin nose, and two small obsidian pearls set in the slits of his eyes. She dismisses the thought with a touch of annoyance: what does obsidian have to do with anything? She clears her throat and asks in a calm, polite tone, "Do you need some information?"

He looks at her from head to toe, as if to better absorb the figure facing him: a young woman wearing a black trouser suit, a white blouse and a pair of low-heeled black pumps. Attached to the lapel of the jacket, the white tag with the name and logo of the Polo Museale Fiorentino, the association of Florence museums. The obsidian pearls seem to glide from her well-cut black hair to her thin lips brightened by a rosy gloss and arranged in a formal half smile, finally resting on the austere frames of her eyeglasses, behind which shines her watchful gaze, her pupils that no one has ever compared to any stone, obsidian or otherwise.

"Are you a security guard?" he asks in an almost childlike tone that moves her to smile with benevolence. Silvia decides to maintain a formal tone as she would do with an older person, so as not to give him the impression of being overly familiar or underestimating him. "Not exactly. I am a museum attendant, and I noticed that you were very interested in this painting. If you want, and if you have questions, I can give you some informations. It is a work of great value, but not everyone pays it as much attention as you do..."

He gives another quick look at her badge, then replies assuredly: "Thank you, Silvia, but no. I know everything there is to know about this picture."

"Oh," she says curtly. A rather presumptuous potential assailant, she tells herself. Keen to show off his knowledge of the painting, and speaking as if repeating a lesson to a professor: "*La Velata*: this is the mysterious woman's anonymous name. She was not a princess or a lady of the time. She was a common woman, but her beauty means something more than the fact that she was really Margherita Luti, Raffaello's lover. He painted her repeatedly, even as the Sistine Madonna. He thought her perfect, or maybe he wanted to elevate her to the ideal of perfection and make her immortal..."

Silvia finds the little lesson slightly irritating, even if his tone was not at all arrogant but rather sweet, perhaps due to his accent and to the slight hiss of his sibilant consonants.

“Well, it seems you are more into the gossip than the painting itself,” she replies with touch of irony.

He tilts his head back a little and squeezes his eyelids, keeping his gaze fixed on the portrait.

“Everyone is,” he says softly. “Any image is more interesting if there is a story behind it, all the more so when we know something personal about the artist.”

“No doubt about that,” she concurs while trying to define her interlocutor. Is he playing a part? Is he looking for her complicity? He is quite young, but maybe that’s just an impression. Judging by his hair, by the smoothness of his face, by his clothes and hightop sneakers, he looks like a teenager. Then there is his tone, mild yet assertive, which reminds her of her fifteen-year-old cousin. The girl is obsessed with the environment, to the point that it’s impossible to even start a dialogue on the subject: there is no way to disagree with her certainty that the Earth will be completely destroyed within twenty years, parched and riven with fires and explosions before disappearing below the oceans. To avoid her shutting down completely, Silvia can only listen and mumble something like, “Hopefully things will change.”

“Is the painting beautiful because the woman is beautiful?” he asks.

“What?” Embarrassed, she did not mean to answer so informally.

“Nothing, it’s just something I think of when I look at it. You are used to seeing it, you have it always in front of you, but I came here all the way from Korea to see it up close, in real life. It makes me think about a lot of different things when I look at it.”

“I understand that,” replied Silvia. She is relieved to know the real reason for his looking so pointedly at the painting.

“This white light does not seem real: that is why the woman is so beautiful and why the painting is so fascinating, because of this radiance,” he says almost in a whisper. Still Silvia hears every word he says, the sounds he makes almost a vibration, and clear even though his *r*’s are pronounced more softly, his *c*’s almost fluid, as if he is singing them. In the brief space that separates them, the air is filled with an invisible substance, a loaded, enveloping energy. It sends a shiver down her spine and glues her feet to the floor; she is suspended, as if she were listening to a concert.

“Hers is a fantastic beauty, both real and imaginary, the beauty of a soul, pure, and this is why she is so white and golden coming out from the darkness, from loneliness or fear, from the abyss that is inside each one of us. He could have called her *The Unveiled One*, because the veil is removed from her face and she’s looking at us with slightly widened, alert eyes, a small smile on her lips. One hand is resting on her heart because it is to the heart that she speaks, not to the mind.”

Silvia has tilted her head slightly. Her mind registers not only the words that she did not expect to hear coming from a supposed teenager, but also the passionate and delicate tone of his voice, as if he were giving a secret confession while interpreting a painting that many have studied and about which many interpretations have been proposed. She is surprised that the words of a young man she does not even know have caught her so off guard and created such an emotional reaction in her; he is a foreigner and yet he speaks about a painting that he loves so much that he could describe it perfectly with his eyes closed. She feels as if she is enclosed in a space that includes the painting and the boy, an energy field radiating from the gold of the woman's dress and her amber necklace, both so luminous that they reverberate in the deep, dark eyes of *La Velata*. Silvia can barely feel her own breath, as if it has escaped from her chest only to surround her, floating weightless in the air, as if in outer space. She is dizzy for an instant before the boy's tone changes, as if emerging from a magic spell.

The energy field evaporates as he turns and apologizes: "Please forgive my bad Italian." His smile is open, helpless. Silvia rouses herself, wondering what happened to her: perhaps a passing faintness, a sudden dizziness? The vibration has ceased, and she feels as if she has just been released from a passionate embrace. She mumbles a banality: "On the contrary, you speak it very well."

"You are very kind. I studied it in my country for months before coming here." The conversation is back to a superficial level and Silvia asks, a little mechanically, "And your country is...?"

"South Korea." For the fan of a Korean boy band of the Teens, this is a validation.

"Did you study art?" Silvia insists, knowing she shouldn't. If anything, her job would be to end this conversation and deal with the rest of the visitors. But she longs to be touched again by that intense emotion, to prolong its enchantment.

"I am still studying it," he replies, regaling her with another confirmation of her recent, elaborate conjectures.

She nods with a thin smile. "I thought so."

"But you see, Miss Silvia, art is not only imagination," he adds, as if trying to prolong their conversation. "I came here to watch it and smell it." He squints, and his nostrils vibrate as if he could really feel the aroma of a woman who lived five hundred years ago.

"Can you really smell something?" Silvia asks, astonished and doubtful.

He sets his eyes on the portrait and whispers, "Sure. The fragrance of time."

Silvia looks at the portrait for the umpteenth time, but now she tries to observe it as if she has never seen it before. It's not easy, because the image of what she already knows overlaps with the one she would like to absorb as something new, wonderful and enchanting.

Usually tourists pay cursory visits, stopping only for a few seconds in front of any masterpiece mentioned by their guides with a profusion of dates and names. Who doesn't know Raffaello? Actually, many people don't; but the guides shrewdly play on what everyone knows in order to save them the embarrassment of ignoring the history and art of the Sixteenth century. Better to say "five hundred years ago": it is an impressive and rewarding concept, and one cannot be expected to know everything after such a long time. Just Raffaello, not Raffaello Sanzio, because no one knows of any other Raffaellos in art. Then the guide goes on, saucily describing a "handsome man", adored by all, famous from a young age, a bit like a pop star. Younger than Michelangelo and more beloved, because Michelangelo had a horrid temper (and if anyone in the audience nods, it is because he or she has watched a TV show on the genius's life.) Of course, we're talking about the Renaissance, the guide casually adds, as if it were obvious. And it is, because everyone knows the Italian Renaissance – more or less. Better to gloss over it, as any good guide knows, and get back to the point: unlike Michelangelo, that touchstone of the Renaissance age, who was a sculptor, an architect, an engineer, and a painter (*Excessive, right? But what can you do? He was a genius!*, the guide jokes to the smug chuckling of the visitors), Raffaello dedicated himself exclusively to painting and was, let's say, specialized in magnificent, realistic, precious portraits. A few of the tourists stretch their necks towards the plate and read: *La Velata by Raffaello Sanzio, 1512-1515, oil on panel, 85x64 cm.*

"Three years in the making?" asks the lingering tourist, surprised if not altogether appalled, while the rest of the group is already moving to another room, another painting, another great story. It is usually at this point that Silvia intervenes. She approaches the curious straggler and addresses him or her in polite, reassuring tones: "No, it is just a matter of attribution. Raffaello possibly painted it in 1512, when he had just arrived in Rome from Florence; later it was bought by Matteo Botti, a wealthy merchant, who hung it in his house at the end of the Sixteenth century, when Vasari saw it and mentioned it." Although in answer to this, instead of being satisfied or grateful the visitor may seem a tad confused. The question transpires from his or her face: Vasari *who*? It is clear that Silvia is not a guide. She does not know how to make the most of a few, essential informations, seasoned with what are called anecdotes but which are more like gossip: the *Velata* was a beautiful woman of her times, and perhaps – and here an eloquent stress is put on the word and a knowing look is bestowed upon the audience in order to

gain its complicity – Raffaello was her lover and wanted to celebrate her by portraying her in a certain way... Doesn't she remind you of someone? Her pose, her look? The audience is speechless, unless one of them gets inspired and utters: the Mona Lisa! Very good, says the guide silently clapping his hands, because they are all connected by microphones and everyone speaks softly. Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa! And surely everyone knows Leonardo, even kindergarteners.

But now Silvia does not see the Mona Lisa reference, nor a woman who at the time was considered a beauty, nor an erotic subject, with that hand resting on her unbuttoned corset. She tries to gaze beyond a veil that separates her from the painting, a veil made of obviousness, habit, the routine of her job. Hers is a dizzy, abrupt journey back to the beginning, to her initial relationship with art. To what it meant to her, to what she was looking for and found. The fragrance evoked by this kid becomes the aroma of oil paints, turpentine, brushes, ink, charcoal pencils. It becomes the musty smell of the room where the models posed to be portrayed, of her tempera-stained hands, of the materials she used, mixed, and transformed; becomes the whiff of her efforts to give substance to an image, an idea.

She had thought she was an artist, or could become one. She liked the idea of working as an illustrator, graphic designer or set designer, all fantasies created by a mind inflamed by too many compliments. How good you are at drawing, Silvia! You are a born artist, Silvia! Sure, she was good at copying. But being an artist means drawing from others, not imitating them. She was unable to lift the veil that separated her from the essence, from the power of expression; she did not possess the talent or the will to do so.

Carnal and yet ethereal, the *Velata* regards her with a look that is half astonishment and half wryness. Every masterpiece holds a mystery, she thinks, and yet the dauber in you does not understand this one. You just don't get it, do you? You've never smelled the fragrance of time, nor have you ever been able to go beyond the façade: her swollen and shiny dress, so perfect that you can imagine yourself caressing its silk, her cheek lit by a mysterious morning light coming from outside. But see? The portrait melts into the shadows as much as it emerges from them. It pulls you along, like a three-quarter moon pushes you first to imagine, and only later to see its missing portion. But this you do not grasp, not because your eyesight is failing, but because you don't possess the quality you sensed in this young visitor, a gift that puzzled everyone around him because nowadays people stop not more than a few seconds, a couple minutes at most, in front of any work of art. Indeed, there is even a calculated average, there are statistics and numbers on which the comings and goings of visitors are regulated, until along comes a bizarre Korean boy causing concern and goading those who spend hours in here every day (that is, you)

toward a more sympathetic vision, a vision that you try to shirk with a somewhat fatuous observation: “You seem truly in love with this portrait.”

And as she utters these words, sensible Silvia regains her self-control, reminding herself that she might very well be dealing with a mental case, a lunatic who gets aroused by Raffaello’s *Velata*. She knows nothing about these things, but maybe the office psychologist could enlighten her. She is the right person to consult. She must speak to her.

“I told you, I’ve travelled halfway around the world to see her here, in her home.” The boy hesitates for a few seconds, then asks matter-of-factly, “Is it forbidden to spend too much time looking at it?”

“No, there’s no rule against that,” Silvia answers, shaking her head. “It’s just, shall we say, unusual.”

“Well, then,” says he, and thus seems to put an end to their exchange. If this is allowed, then where is the problem? But then he adds something else. “It’s a good start,” he pronounces. Silvia is bewildered by his funny comment, but instead of investigating its meaning she asks, “What’s your name?”

“Ah, you’re right. I don’t have a tag, and we haven’t introduced ourselves,” he replies with some affectation. “My name is Doyun.”

Silvia finally lifts her foot off the floor and makes as if to leave him. She does this with some effort, as if the soles of her shoes are stuck to the pavement. She switches to a formal form of address: “Have a nice visit. We have other works by Raffaello.”

“I know.” He curls his lips in a hint of a smile, looking a little like the *Velata*. A good start, Silvia repeats to herself, wondering what he meant. Maybe he just got it wrong. After all, even if he speaks a good Italian, he is still a foreigner.

It is just after five, and Silvia narrows her eyes, gazing into the shadows of her room. The screen of her phone is still lit. She was roused by a beep, but who sends messages at this hour? She grabs her eyeglasses, always at hand on the shelf behind the bed. The need to know where to find them is dictated by the survival instinct of the nearsighted.

A staggering crash from outside makes her cry out in terror. A thunder. It is just the sky outside, rent by a mere storm. The usual rains exploding like water bombs, short and intense. If she had consulted her app before going to bed, she would have known about the weather alert and taken note of the traffic advice, organizing her day in advance. On her scooter it takes her half an hour to get to her workplace. By public transportation it would become an hour and a half, so she immediately discards the idea, preferring to wrap herself up in her oilskins. But she knows that during the worst thunderstorms the traffic swells like a raging torrent; you have to estimate forty-five minutes for a slower and more cautious journey between the flooded potholes, the interruptions and the enraged traffic police. To this you must add the undressing operations in the lobby, thanks to the good heart of her colleagues who let her hang her soaked cloak, waterproof trousers, jacket and overshoes in the room at back of the entrance hall which all employees use as a sort of storeroom.

Just as well, then, that she is awake at this ungodly hour, scowling at a message from an unknown number.

“Good morning Silvia, how are you? This is Doyun. I want to thank you for yesterday. See you later.”

“Who gave him my phone number?” she asks herself through gritted teeth. But really, does she have to grumble like an old crone? Come on, Silvia, she scolds herself: at twenty you are already decrepit, talking to yourself and wondering how a Korean kid could have gotten your number. The real oddity is the fact that he is awake this early; perhaps he’s still suffering from jet-lag.

“Morning. I don’t remember giving you my number,” she types quickly; then she changes her mind and cancels the text. But now she’s left a trace: a deleted message. “Good morning. My number is no secret, but I have a private life and I’d prefer if you didn’t text me so early. Have a nice day.” This time she presses Send. Her tone was detached, resentful. She is a woman with a private life, not a little friend who responds with two hearts. How superficial are kids nowadays? Then she snorts, feeling sorry again: she just sent a text worthy a world-class stick-in-the-mud, a cold and sour woman. What a bad impression she must have made.

The screen lights up with an answer that is far from resentful – in fact, quite the contrary. “I didn’t think I would disturb you, this storm would wake up even the dead.” The boy has a certain sense of humor, and is not intimidated by a phony bully. A bully who hastens to reply, “I’m a deep sleeper.”

“It’s a good start.”

Again? What does he mean? It is five in the morning and she is watching her phone display, suddenly curious. He is amusing, the good-looking kid. Even interesting. Peculiar and surprising. Would she be able to tell him that he looks like the boy-band singer she had a crush on ten years ago without upsetting him?

She remembers him indeed. She just adored that Korean Peter Pan, thin and so very nimble, his hair mermaid blue, his eyes made iridescent by his colored contact lenses. She daydreamed about that fairy-tale character, picturing herself as she met him, seduced him and kissed him. What a thrill, what a folly. She was not the only one; indeed, she was just one of host of worshipers of V – as in Voice, the band’s lead singer. They all sighed and dreamt of loving him, being loved in return. A schoolmate of hers had even written a fan novel in which she imagined meeting V thanks to an incredible stroke of serendipity (although she did not bother to explain how it happened, it being a negligible detail) and went on describing their encounters, and especially their amorous endeavors, with a certain flair for detail. She had published her story for free on a digital platform which counted thousands of avid readers of the female persuasion, many of whom placed their comments with strings of hearts and ecstatic emoticons. Silvia herself had read it compulsively, in part excited, in part envious of the fact that her friend had been able to give substance to forbidden dreams and images, and also a little jealous because, well, V belonged to her.

Thunder brings her back to the present, its rumble echoing like a reproach. Why is it that this morning she finds herself digging up ancient times, and not even so pleasant at that? Because it’s not as if at the Academy she was so happy and carefree. It’s even possible that her raptures about that Korean singer were the sign of a slight depression. A dream fugue from a school she had chosen in order to avoid studying any abstract discipline and favor manual work, only to find herself sitting at a desk and listening to History and Italian teachers. Years suspended, years lost – which doesn’t mean wasted, because she still has her devoted India ink, her loyal pencils, her faithful charcoals that she always carries with her in a case, together with a sketchbook of slightly rough thin white sheets. Her choice of paper, too, is a legacy of the Academy: density, weight, composition, craftsmanship. She still experiences it as a minor obsession: choosing spiral notebooks of various sizes, bringing them to work. Sometimes she draws during lunch break in the Boboli Gardens, looking for a secluded place in order not to be

surrounded by gawkers: many think that drawing is a public act, that it is admissible for strangers to watch and even comment. Many feel even compelled to congratulate her on her skills, just because she has learned to smudge her charcoal or draw a confident line.

Does she owe that kind of refuge and personal space to her schooling or to her mother, who encouraged her as a child? A lot of her former schoolmates no longer draw, as if they have erased the precepts traced on their blackboards, having found them of little use in their careers as salesgirls, barmaids, stand assistants, check-out clerks or gardeners – to name only those with steady jobs and setting aside the whole gray area of precarious employment that for a while Silvia inhabited, too, a suspended state of small assignments, internships, under-the-counter commissions, and summer jobs.

The only one among them who made it is Poli. Who has also remained, by the way, the only staple in her social life, as opposed to an array of friendships by now evaporated or barely kept alive by a few sporadic messages and group dinners. Or perhaps she'd better say that she is simply trying to follow in his wake, for Poli is by no means a fixed point. Quite the contrary, in fact: he is always moving, like a speedboat whose destination is unknown. If you want to maintain contact, you can only follow that white foam, always ready to close again on itself. By the way, now that Silvia thinks about it, it's probably been a whole week since she last heard from him. She resists the urge to text him on the spot, sending him some intriguing words that would move him to answer. He would not appreciate it, at half past five in the morning. Not everyone is as understanding as she's being with this crazy Korean kid – who now has a name, she reminds herself, struggling to stop the image of V from overlapping Doyun's. Last night, during dinner, she tried to draw him, but her charcoal revealed itself less reliable than usual. She started with his hair and jaunty bangs, but when she got to his face she lost her focus, and the soft oval that resulted, drawn in two-thirds profile, was more similar to the *Velata* than to its young viewer. Silvia had torn the sheet out of the spiral notebook, rolled it up and threw it away, then she had turned on the TV on a talent show, drank a beer, tried to tidy up the kitchen corner, and prepared the separate bags of trash for the morning. She had treated herself to a facial mask, taken a shower, put on her pajamas, and proceeded to spend the rest of the evening online, watching videos and images, reading comments and following chats. It was one in the morning when she finally closed her eyes, and now thanks to this message she has only slept a few hours. And yet the fault is all hers: she should have unplugged the phone.

"See you later," he's written. Does this mean she will find him again in Sala Giove, standing in front of the *Velata*? No: this time she will not indulge him, let alone allow herself to be overwhelmed by that kind of emotional wave, surely caused by a surge of teenage memories. She will explain to him that stopping too long in front of a painting, although not forbidden,

creates a certain apprehension in the museum's personnel. It is highly unusual, if not unique. Ordinarily, those who study the masterpieces on display ask for permission to paint; they show up with easels and brushes or pads and pencils. And whoever spends a long time observing the paintings does so from different angles; they do not stand petrified in front of them. Sure, there is not an established way to look at a work of art. But it is also true that no one, in her experience, has ever claimed to smell its fragrance. She cannot tell this to Doyun, but she should report anything unusual. A museum of some importance cannot afford to disregard any unusual and slightly disturbing behavior. It may be a sign of a disorder or a mental confusion whose consequences could be dangerous.

She could suggest to him to drop by the museum's counsellor for a chat. She can almost see his surprised, doleful expression: is there a problem? She rouses herself. It may be because it is still so early, a time when she is usually asleep, but the fact is that she is daydreaming like a little girl. In her imagination, she is speaking to Doyun as if they are already at Palazzo Pitti.

What she should do is talk to Virna. Yesterday, after leaving the museum, she went straight to the gym with the idea of sweating away the residual halo of energy spurred by a secret and inexplicable connection, of accelerating her heart rate not for a sudden and disconcerting emotion, but for a physical activity controlled by her mind. And if later, at home, she has indulged in the romantic portrait of a childhood memory, if she has revived the erotic tremors of her teenage years, now that she has regained lucidity, as if the violent morning storm had washed her conscience clean, she can plan her day according to the rules dictated by the safeguard of her special workplace, which for her is not just any place but a home to protect more dearly than her own, even than her life itself. Hearing the last of the morning downpour, she feels more confident. Soon it will stop raining; the traffic police won't close the entrances to the Parco delle Cascine, and she will be able to take the shortcut through the park and save a quarter of an hour.

“Coffee?” Virna asks, solicitous. She is always like this; it is probably part of her job to be caring and sympathetic. How else could you inspire confidence in others?

“No, thank you.”

“A glass of water?”

“That would be good, yes.”

“It’s on the house,” Virna jokes heading towards the still water bowl in the corner of the room. She fills a glass and goes on, “It’s not plastic, you know. It’s totally recyclable with the organic waste. I went out of my way to obtain these biodegradable containers.”

Silvia studies the glass: it looks like it’s made of cardboard. She takes a sip, at the same time glancing at her phone.

“Are you in a hurry?” asks Virna. Apparently, nothing escapes her.

“Not at all. The doors won’t open for another fifteen minutes, and I asked Michele to replace me for ten minutes in case I’m delayed.”

“Of course. You’ll have to forgive me, sometimes I lose myself in chitchat,” she says with a smile. She has been hired a few months ago, in keeping with the museum’s innovations that provide counselors to relieve the employees of the stresses caused by the exceeding numbers of visitors during peak seasons and by the classes of students needing support staff in addition to teachers and guides. She also assists the visitors themselves, in case they should suffer from ailments such as dizziness or fainting or else display strange behaviors in front of the works. Like a young Korean staring relentlessly at a painting. A kid whose name is Doyun, by the way.

«There’s nothing to forgive. I’d love to spend more time here with you, relaxing,” Silvia replies, somewhat evasively. In her year at the museum she has mastered the art of diplomacy to perfection, and this does not escape the psychologist.

“Surely, though, you came to see me for a reason. A strange case, you said in your early message, right?” Virna smiles, her eyes alight. All psychologists have this same kind of smile, open, cordial and bright: Silvia knows this because she has had “psychological support” after her mom’s passing, and the specialist who treated her showed her that same warmth, conveying a feeling of well-being and optimism. Maybe they follow a special training in smiling techniques.

“Right. Although I wonder what you thought I meant with ‘strange’...”

Virna gives her a knowing look that plays against the backdrop of her celestial serenity. “Well, if it affected you, then it must have been strange, right?”

“I’m not the only one. It happened yesterday, and it was Michele who warned me. There was this boy who was standing in front of a painting. He must have stayed there for a good fifteen minutes.”

Suddenly curious, Virna tilts her head to one side and widens her eyes. “Really? Fifteen minutes in front of the same painting?”

“Yes, maybe even more. He was motionless, almost petrified.” Silvia stifles a laugh. Every time you report a case, its ridiculous side comes unbidden to the surface. There are those who burst into tears in front of a portrait because it resembles a deceased mother, those who start sweating, those who complain of palpitations, those who raise their voices. On his part, Doyun seemed paralyzed.

“I see. But he didn’t show other obvious signs? He wasn’t mumbling or anything like that?”

“No, that’s why we didn’t call you. He just stood there, as if he wanted to observe every brushstroke, every minute detail.”

Virna goes back to the beginning. “You said a boy,” she repeats. “How young was he?”

“I can’t tell you exactly,” Silvia answers evasively, “but I’d say he was very young. I don’t know, seventeen or eighteen? Possibly even younger, although his tone and attitude were not those of a fifteen-year-old.”

“And was he alone?”

“Yes. No family, no fellow students. He told me that he came from Korea specifically to study the painting”, she adds.

“Well, he has to be of age in order to travel,” Virna speculates, “unless he is part of some international study program.”

“If that were the case, there would have been a professor with him. They don’t let minors go around unaccompanied,” Silvia reasons, following the psychologist’s logic.

“And which painting did you say it was?”

“I haven’t told you yet. It was Raffaello’s *Velata*.”

Virna looks uncertain. She can’t remember each one of the hundreds of works in the museum; as opposed to Silvia and her colleagues, she didn’t have to learn the location of every painting, their plates, the often-unfortunate position of the spotlights, the site of every alarm. In order to apply for an attendant position, you had to memorize hundreds of images. You had to remember them all, because all the candidates were questioned about random photographs devoid of any captions and were expected to recognize authors, years, and titles of the works. Virna is neither an attendant nor a guide. She doesn’t need to know every single painting.

Silvia shows her the portrait on her phone screen.

“Yes, now I remember. It is gorgeous; maybe the kid was fascinated by her direct look?”

“I don’t know. His name is Doyun, and as I told you he’s Korean. A great enthusiast of Raffaello, very knowledgeable. He gave me a sort of lecture on the painting.”

“He did?” Virna widens her eyes; her thin eyebrows shoot up. “How come?”

“To show me that he didn’t need my input, that he knows almost everything there is to know about it. To let me know that he’s a scholar, and not a potential vandal or a lunatic.”

“And yet you’re not convinced, If I understand it correctly.”

“I’m just being scrupulous, you know. He seemed sincere and harmless enough, truly awed by a justly famous canvas, but I would prefer not to rely solely on my impression, biased as it can be by the fact that he’s a foreigner and that his way of looking at a painting is the byproduct of a culture which for all I know might sanction immobility...”

“I understand,” Virna says thoughtfully. “Do you think I should have a chat with him in order to compare our notes?”

“I’d like that. I don’t know how to read other people’s reactions. You’re the expert.”

“Portraits exert a great fascination on everyone, you know. Faces from other times and other worlds that not only we observe, but whose gazes we might feel upon us. There is neurobiological research showing that a work of art activates the same areas of the brain that come into play when we fall in love,” says Virna. Her tone is ironic, almost as if she is joking, and Silvia feels compelled to ask, “You think?”

“It’s not what I think; I’m talking about studies by researchers that make us understand how we react to a masterpiece and allow us to use these informations at a clinical level. Think of art therapy, for example.”

“So, I was right when I said that this kid fell in love with the painting?”

Virna lifts her eyebrows, then takes a cautious breath before replying. “You know, a work of art can elicit peculiar feelings, cause a projection in the viewer or the artist himself. Indeed, this is often the aim of its creator: a projection of emotions, of memories... And this kind of projection beyond cultures is very interesting: a young Korean who loves a portrait by Raffaello.”

“But it is not so unusual,” Silvia objects. “Culture is a sort of grocery store, as our director said in one of his last conferences.”

Virna frowns, then asks with a touch of skepticism, “Are you referring to the theory of culture as a good available to everyone, like in a giant grocery store where people desire the products that advertising depicts as exotic?”

“Exactly.”

“And do you find it fitting?” she insists, smiling suavely.

“I believe it explains the needs of those – and there are a lot of them – who ask for a pound of Renaissance.”

They both laugh, then Virna goes on, “Until one fine day a seemingly harmless kid stares at a painting for an eternity, then exits the museum and attacks a woman. Or possibly the nice attendant who bothered to explain the painting’s details...” She is joking, of course, but only up to a point.

“I think today he’ll be back,” says Silvia, choosing not to reveal his five o’clock text. Virna shoots her a penetrating glance, as if trying to finagle her into revealing whatever she is leaving unspoken.

“What makes you say that?” she asks her, without losing a single ounce of cordiality.

Silvia withdraws behind an inscrutable expression. “Just his attitude. He’s not any old visitor: he came especially for that painting.” Has she lied to defend herself and the fact that she lowered her guard, or else this stranger who managed to interfere with her life? Wouldn’t it be better to reveal that this apparently harmless kid has tracked down her phone number and already sent her personal messages? It would, and yet she can’t bring herself to do that. It is as if an invisible barrier has been raised to protect the vibration that she can still perceive inside her, and which could vanish if someone else gets in the way.

Virna’s fixes her gaze on her for a few more moments like a freeze-frame, then rouses herself. “I understand,” she says. “But do let me know if and when he comes. I’ll be ready.”

Silvia leaves the office and checks her phone. It is a quarter to nine; the public will soon accede to the Galleria Palatina, but for now only her steps resound within the gilded halls that the lighting system transforms into the stuff of fairy tales, where a handsome prince could suddenly appear from around a corner.