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# Fine Thanks

I extended my hand with the ID and three neatly folded pink euro bills and I looked straight into his eyes. “Please don’t judge me,” implored my innocent beam. It was my fourth fine this year, totalling hundred twenty euros which was still comfortably below the annual city transportation fee fixed at three hundred. I used to travel legally for half that price until I turned twenty six and lost my youth discount. It wasn’t a country for old people.

“We never ever judge anyone,” the controller reassured me.

“We too pay fines from time to time,” added another one.

Both of them must have been nearly sixty and glad that I had cash so they didn’t have to worry about operating the card terminal. I knew they were hardly used to cordial conversations on duty. I watched them affectionately while one of them was copying my surname letter by letter, impossible to pronounce for him even if his life depended on it.

“Where are you from?” asked his colleague, trying to decipher my Polish ID.

I smiled. I just wished the first question people asked me was not *Where are you from* or *What’s your job* but simply *May I have your autograph, please?* Everyone usually assumed that I’d moved to Turin to either study or work and I always had to explain I just dreamed of living in Italy since I could remember, but to live one had to work and to work one had to study, so I was pretending to do both. In nine cases out of ten, the follow up question would be whether I had an Italian boyfriend.

“Do you have an Italian boyfriend?” The controller winked knowingly.

I smiled again and told him I was gay. “All I need is a genius, gorgeous, and gracious gay princess in a white Tesla,” I confessed. “Am I asking for too much?”

“You should meet my niece,” he shrugged. “She’s gay and she has a white S.”

My heartbeat stopped and so did my tongue, cutting off the cheerful monologue I had activated to entertain that stranger. I was a sceptical agnostic, but in my circumspection I prayed to Virgin Mary every night, trying to convince her how deserving I was of a little affection after all the good deeds I’d completed on the given day. Has she heard my prayers? Was the friendly man an angel planted on my journey by Mary herself to save me from emotional deprivation... or was he simply an old satyr pulling my leg? I fluttered my eyelashes and glanced at his badge. “Here’s your fine,” said Roberto the controller while tearing out a thin page out of his block. At the bottom there was a telephone number labelled *Veronica*.

He instructed me that the document counted as the missing ticket in case I’d faced another control before reaching my destination, and he wished me a good afternoon. The tram pulled up and I decided to jump off even though it was three stops ahead of the office. My body needed to walk fast to keep up with my mind that was already at work designing two matching wedding gowns. I could picture myself with the mysterious Tesla owner in the main city square of Turin, kissing passionately right above one of the fountains that were spouting from the pavement. I could picture our royal wedding outfits soaking and a bunch of smiling children littering the square with white roses’ petals. We should get married in the summer, I thought. February was romantic, but too cold for my taste.

Dashing impatiently for the three-tram-stops-worth of a distance, I slalomed through a river of men, women and non-binary people going about their business on that chilly Friday morning. The streets seemed much busier than usual, with many folks flowing in and out of shops and some staring longingly at Valentine-themed window displays from the outside, not daring to cross the thresholds, as if that seasonal shopping spree was forbidden for them. When I wasn’t in the rush, I liked to observe people and guess their stories:

single, divorced, closeted, going through a breakup, hunting for a double gift for a spouse and a secret lover. I dreamed of futuristic glasses that would recognise faces and display little labels above people's heads, revealing anything more than what met the bare eye, more than what I could infer from an estimated age, gender, and fashion choices. If only, upon noticing fellow creatures, I could silently learn not only their names and origins and jobs, but also their hopes and tastes, and most importantly their liaisons with one another... What would you do with such a superpower?

I checked out Veronica, of course. On entering the office a quarter hour late, I notified my coworkers of an urgent business I had to attend that could delay my productivity for another quarter. The only good thing about my useless job was the flexibility. Even if it meant working all day and night on the eves of deadlines, I appreciated the days when I could fool around with nobody batting an eye, getting paid for coming up with unfeasible drafts as much as for stalking and chasing people on the internet. I felt a rush of adrenaline while opening more and more tabs to search different platforms simultaneously. I copied the precious phone number and with a few clicks found a Veronica Lombardi who was connected on Facebook to a friendly GTT officer Roberto Lombardi, the brother of her mother. At a Christmas dinner they looked like an ordinary happy family in an ordinary little flat. Only Veronica was wearing Prada.

I dived into her world. She lived in Milan where I had spent forty thousand euro on a *Graphic Design And Art Direction* degree that landed me in this charming little office so that I could spend my youth just like a half of this generation, in a rat race to the bottom of internet users' brain stem, toiling heroically for a second of a stranger's attention so that she or he or they would click on an ad. It seemed Veronica had managed to game that broken system. Instagram confirmed that she possessed a Tesla, or at least drove one all the time. She really liked the frame with her hands placed on the steering wheel. She checked in from ski resorts and scuba diving retreats and Michelin starred restaurants. She waved to her followers from the front seats at haute couture shows and from galleries at La Scala. She was living a life I dreamed of living,

and the reason for which I dreamed of such a life was precisely to stay around people like her. Replaying a looped video in which she stroked her hand through her blond-to-pink ombre tresses, all I could do was to fall in love, dying to just touch her fingers, each one covered with precious metals and stones and crowned with insane manicure. I imagined I could rest my own fingers close to the corners of her eyes adorned with perfect pitch-black cat eye lines. For three minutes I kept replaying a three-second video in which her glossy lips switched from a pout to a disarming smile that showed off both rows of her snow-white teeth.

LinkedIn explained where Veronica's wealth had come from. A few years back she had founded a startup and led it into an exit with an undisclosed value. Now she served as a Chief Growth Officer of another venture, not sparing enthusiasm to educate her network about the potential of blockchains. She spoke at a TEDx and in Davos and at countless industry meet-ups, a dazzling pink-blonde femme clad in an unmistakable black suit, one day in a sea of crypto-anarchist boys in hoodies and the next one ruling over senior executives who didn't seem to follow everything she was saying, but clearly understood they were going to score quite a profit.

Scrolling through Veronica's past and future speaking engagements, I noticed she was going to appear at a conference in Milan on the very next day. I navigated to the event's page and skimmed the programme. There were a few tickets left. I clicked on the green button leading to the registration. The events platform remembered all of my details, so I only had to confirm my whim fast enough not to have time to think about it. My phone chimed, announcing the updated account balance. I tightened my lips. I had forgotten I'd already gone beyond the budget on the previous day, but in the following week I was expecting cash from a side gig teaching English. I would be fine. With no immediate threat to life, panic was inadvisable.

At least it wasn't my turn to offer lunch. I always ate out with Luca, my wonderful office friend, and we took turns paying the bill. For some reason, when it was on him he always insisted on sushi or gourmet burgers, but when it

was my treat, he'd only digest cheap pizza. Now a good burger was exactly what I needed, or maybe a medium-rare steak. I felt butterflies in my stomach and squinted my eyes wondering whether it was love or hunger. I looked at the clock and realised I had been stalking Veronica for a better part of the three hours that divided my check-in at ten and lunchtime at one.

My gaze panned from the clock in the corner of my iMac towards Luca's desk on another side of our open office. Mine was positioned strategically right in front of the main exit, convenient for sneaking in and out. I was about to summon Luca with a discreet nod when I saw him immersed in a conversation with the new intern. Luca noticed me and they approached together. "Rick told me his sister is coming to town for the weekend," he explained.

"She's on her way from the station and should be here in five," Rick raised his eyes from the screen of his phone and slipped it into his pocket.

I liked Rick very much. I had been an intern myself until a short time ago and felt a sense of solidarity towards him. Besides, I was still drunk with happiness from learning about the existence of Veronica. Everyone seemed beautiful and fascinating and it was fantastic to meet new friends. "Today it's on you, anyway!" I poked Luca and winked at Rick.

"If it's not a problem," he said a bit shyly, "Elisa is a vegan." He rolled his eyes as if he was apologising for what he thought was a hassle.

"No worries at all!" I reassured him, trying to convince myself I didn't mind missing my share of juicy proteins.

Neither of us could name a single plant-based restaurant in the neighbourhood, but Luca searched up something online and we decided to give it a try. We vanished into the hall and flowed down the dark staircase. I pushed the heavy gate so hard it wouldn't have swayed back until after the last one of us. My eyes had to adjust from the screen to the sunlight. Once I regained focus, I saw a girl on the other side of the street, or rather a long reddish curly mane covering her back. She turned around and beamed at Rick. She picked up a huge backpack and crossed the street. They hugged. Luca shook her hand.

Then her eyes met mine.

Elisa was stunning. She didn't need make up nor jewellery. She wasn't much taller than me, but carried herself with a mesmerising grace. She must have been a dancer or a Zen master, I thought as I straightened up, or maybe both. Her presence was striking. It numbed the usual clatter of cars and pedestrians and spoons stirring inside the coffee cups in each of the many cafeterias surrounding our office. Nobody stirred their espresso when Elisa was passing. Nobody dared to move. Except for Luca. Blind to her energy, he barely looked at her before glueing his eyes to the map on his phone to guide us all towards the vegan luncheonette. We followed. He was chatting uselessly, depriving me of her attention that I had only experienced for a few seconds, but wanted back as soon as possible for as long as possible.

We walked into the restaurant and took our seats. Luca asked Elisa the standard *What do you do* and I immediately guessed she loved that question as much as I did. Our eyes met again.

"Elisa is a true artist," her brother jumped in.

She stroked his shoulder in the sweetest way and I wished my body could melt and spill into a puddle at her feet under the table.

"She's absolutely amazing," he insisted.

"I just dance," she stated modestly, but with a gleam in her eye that revealed she must have been full of surprises. Of course she was a dancer. She moved like a dancer even when she was not dancing.

"You just dance under water," teased Rick with pride.

"What, are you a mermaid or something?!" interrupted Luca.

Elisa blushed. I was smitten.

"I free-dive," she confirmed. Luca finally livened up, only a quarter belated, I thought and shook my head, but only inside my mind.

"But with a mermaid tail, like they do in Las Vegas?"

Elisa smiled patiently and shared about her first time wearing a monofin. She talked about apnea championships and commercials shot in deep pools and descending into coral reefs all around the world. She talked about birthday parties for kids and workshops for refugees so they wouldn't dread the sea anymore. "I also teach yoga," she shrugged. "Everyone's got to make a living!"

"I wish my job was about telling girls what to do in their yoga pants," Luca blurted out to my horror. I was sure his joke would fall flat. But Elisa laughed out loud.

"You got me, I don't mind that at all. I'm gay actually!"

Luca turned towards me with an expression as if he had just heard a fire alarm. I was staring at Elisa. Elisa and Rick peeped at Luca, both utterly confused.

"Oh, it's just that I'm into women... too," I explained plainly, with a lowered gaze. I glanced at Elisa again. She was smiling with the sweetest smile.

"Gays everywhere," complained Rick jokingly.

"We straight cis guys are an endangered species," agreed Luca.

"The world's turning upside down," Rick opened his arms in theatrical resignation.

"Vegans and feminists are taking over, man."

"No women left for us, man."

"Soon they'll make us paint our nails and wax our chests, you'll see."

"What, don't you wax your chest yet?!"

Not minding the boys, Elisa and I simply watched each other in silence, savouring the powerful chemistry in the air between us. I was looking at her and she was looking at me.

"Wanna hold on to my *toxic masculinity* for as long as I can!"

"Shut up and chew your tofu!"

I rolled my eyes at our respectable professionals turned adult children, playing with their vegetables and teasing Elisa about her eggplant risotto.

“I’ve wanted to go vegan for years, actually,” I announced. “Been switching to vegetarianism since I was twenty or so.” Luca rubbed his eyes in disbelief. I didn’t give in. “Yeah, so I go veg on most days, except when I really don’t have a choice.” He was about to open his mouth, but I kicked his leg under the table.

“That’s wonderful,” Elisa smiled at me. “What’s your favourite dish?”

I blinked. She thought I was wonderful and she wanted to know what my favourite dish was. She was driving me potty.

We finished our meals and were waiting for the coffee. Rick asked Luca about something they had been working on this week. I was depressed at the mere thought of returning to the office to continue my thankless job.

“You should ask Marta”, Luca patted me and started talking me up in front of everyone. Listening to his sweet ode, I turned into a stream of gratitude. After all, he really was my dearest friend. He gushed about my last assignment for the company and how cool he felt pitching it to the client. “You always figure out a wow factor,” he concluded.

Elisa was watching me. She asked where I got ideas from. I opened up and talked about my least hated projects, which involved designing for musicians and other performers. Now that I was thinking of it, I told Elisa, I was inspired by many of our clients and what they were doing. After all, the only good thing about my infuriating job was the access to a certain network in a city where everyone knew one another. I liked the illusion of being an insider at art fairs and theatre festivals just because I had a free pass from someone from the organisation.

“If you’d like, later today we could go and visit the exhibition centre that hosted a few of the shows”, I proposed to Elisa.

“That’s a cool idea!”, Luca revived again. “I haven’t been there for ages. Let’s go after work!”



I stared at him in silence. Which part of my singular *you* gave him the idea it was supposed to be plural?

When he disappeared to cover the bill, I took one last chance to connect with Elisa, asking whether she'd been to Turin before. It was her first time. I pulled out my phone and showed her around all my favourite spots on a map full of hearts and stars. She was interested in the Museum of Egypt, but I made a case to start with the Eastern Arts. She was an excellent listener. My heart was broken from having to leave her, even just for a few hours, instead of personally showing her around all of the most spectacular spaces of that royal - communist pearl of a city. At least I gave her my Museums' Card so she could enter everywhere for free. "They never check IDs," I asserted, submitting my little blue plastic card into her sacred hands.

As soon as we parted our ways, Luca started teasing me about Elisa as much as work, asking for a draft I was supposed to finish in the morning. I rolled my eyes and got down to that petty graphic design project. The only good thing about my dull job was that I could do it while thinking about anything else. I could imagine myself as a world famous artist exhibiting at MoMA and Tate and hanging out with fellow celebrity artists. My mind recalled the layout of Tate I had visited in the summer and pictured a fancy crowd made up of critics and socialites, and also everyone I cared about, my parents and grandparents and cousins, and my friends and frenemies all sipping champagne in front of my masterpieces, fully convinced they are much more groundbreaking than Hirst and Koons and Jasper Johns combined.

And who would offer a hundred million dollars for my brilliant installation if not someone like Veronica? I could picture her dominating the fancy-chic crowd at a Sotheby's private sale, ready to sacrifice her entire fortune for that one piece of art that had simply stolen her heart and had to be hers, no matter how many Sheiks and Russian oligarchs were standing in her way. But she could have it for free, yes, if she only asked for it. My soul was hers and so was my mind, with all the ideas it could ever generate.

But then the fictional crowd of my imagination thinned out, revealing a figure at the end of the hall, with her back turned on me and covered with reddish curly hair. As soon as she turned in a show-stopping pirouette, my vision zoomed in and focused on her cheekbones, and she started to dance as if the air was dense like water, or as if there was no gravity for her. Now Tate was empty and Sotheby's was empty too, and she was the only entity in an empty world, a black hole full of light.

A terrible realisation descended on me. How could I find out which of them was the one? How was it possible that after many years of disastrous first dates and unending loneliness, not one but two perfect women showed up in my biography on a single day? The spectre of an impossible choice haunted my consciousness. Would I end up marrying and divorcing and remarrying each of them throughout the rest of my life, like Ridge Forrester in *The Bold And The Beautiful*? Succumbed to this anxiety, in the next hours I barely produced anything and towards the end of my workday I had a strange feeling I might have forgotten about something. But at six sharp I jumped from my seat and ran towards the sunlight to face Elisa again.

Luca and Rick had already been out, wooing my woman in a cafeteria next to our office. Rick was stirring his coffee.

“Marta, you were right! MAO was a bliss,” said Elisa as soon as she saw me.

“Definitely the most romantic one we have!” I nodded with satisfaction.

The boys finished their coffees and we all headed to the exhibition space a few steps away. In Turin everything was at a walking distance. On our way, I followed up on Elisa's impressions. I'd go to the Museo di Arte Orientale every once in a while to stroll around the mystic sculptures and Kama Sutra scrolls with my non-existent imaginary goddess. Now I was taking mental notes about the pieces Elisa liked the most to check them out the next time I'd be there. I hoped they'd give me an idea for a birthday gift.

“What's your sign?” I asked with a sting of anxiety. For some inexplicable reason, Zodiac was a big deal among gay girls, even though none of us really

believed in that bullshit. It turned out she was a Sagittarius, a perfect match for a Leo like me, both of us defined by passion and heat. The only downside was that I would need to wait nearly a year for her birthday. I thought whether I should get her something for the next day, which, after all, would be the Valentine's Day.

"I'm turning forty this year, but honest to God I have no clue when this whole time has flowed," Elisa confessed. "Especially now that I've just broken up. We'd been together for nearly a decade..."

Yes, I thought, I should definitely get her something for this Valentine's Day.

"Who would say a mermaid like you was born under a fire sign!" I said and started walking faster, trying to lose the boys behind, and also to speed up her heartbeat, in hope she would attribute it to hanging out together.

"Guess what!" she stopped. "In other shows I actually eat fire!"

The exhibition space turned out to be closed for a private event. I used my superior knowledge of Turin's centre and Facebook events to figure out a plan B. It involved a tour around all the marble men on horseback who ruled over their respective piazzas, and then a feast in a place known for an excellent price to quality ratio and agreeable live music. On our way, Elisa wanted to stop for a moment by every street performer that we've come across. Turin was full of them. I had always tried to avoid them, especially the ones who did their acrobatics exercises in the middle of the streets, right in front of cars blocked by red lights. I'd stay away from the musicians too. Bad ones drove me crazy, because they interfered with my playlists of choice delivered by my hard-earned quality earphones. Good ones made me feel guilty for never having spare change. In any case, they invaded my mind. They made me feel passive. Just like newsfeeds and notifications. Worse, actually: you couldn't put them on mute. You couldn't switch the screen off and throw it into the nearest river.

"God, I love street theatre" Elisa sighed, enchanted by a mime. "My ex left me because she's had enough of my nomadic lifestyle." She rolled her eyes, but I could tell she was still hurting. "Real art unfolds outdoors. It's organic. Look at

all these people forgetting they are in a rush. Pure magic. Nothing like the snobs coming to blackboxes to later tell their friends how sophisticated they are. They never show a tinge of emotion, but excel in writing venomous reviews for school magazines.” She rolled her eyes again. “I’ll have a gig like that on Sunday at a festival in Venice.”

My heart pounded. I looked at her in awe. I’d design posters and leaflets for bands and theatre productions, but had never talked to a person who would bare her soul in front of unsuspecting passerby, at least not that I was aware of. It must have taken courage and confidence beyond my imagination. I wanted to know everything about her projects, about how she weaved music and poetry to create show-stopping moments. While she was speaking at length, I could discreetly indulge in just watching her closely. Her eyes had the colour of an ocean, matching a little tattoo on her wrist. It was an anchor. I craved to be her harbour.

“Ah, that.” She let me touch it. “I got it after getting my diving certification!”



I collapsed on my seat in the audience of Teatro Piccolo and started wondering how in the world I had got there. It was noon, but I still haven’t really woken up. I started wondering whether the previous night happened for real or was it one long dream. We stayed together until three ay am. Sadly, together included the gentlemen. Not that I didn’t love Luca. Of course I did. I loved feeling listened to and even more I loved listening to him when he’d open up to share what was really on his mind, what was going on in his life. I loved being treated like an equal conversation partner. I just didn’t love having him around while desperately trying to understand whether *the* love of my life could ever be requited. To his credit, it was him who arranged the exchange of numbers just before we cheek-kissed Elisa and Rick goodbye under Rick’s place. The custom

was to kiss air, but, encouraged by a quarter of three litres of red house wine, my lips actually touched Elisa's skin. From then on, my brain went into a coma.

I recalled the shock of awakening, leaving my bed and rushing to the train station, and then dozing on the slow and cramped regional train that snailed its way between Turin and Milan for well over two hours, dragging behind Frecciarossa and Italo that would have covered the same route in fifty minutes. But the worst thing wasn't the length of the journey nor even the flimsiness of the waggons. It was the company. I respectfully detested impolite people who shouted into their phones and stretched their legs on seats in front of them. I switched the train for the metro that wasn't much better, but then emerged from the abyss of the dirty underground straight into this temple of elegance where I finally felt I belonged.

The conference had kicked off in the morning, but I arrived just in time for the panel with Veronica. I was in the back row of the first section, in the very middle of the magnificent auditorium. Too far from the stage to feel a connection with the speakers, but also too close to stay on my phone. It didn't matter, because on Friday morning I'd already skimmed everything about Veronica and her companies that was available on the internet. I watched a video of her talk at TEDx Lake Como, and now I was about to finally see her in person. Lights dimmed.

A moderator trotted towards the podium and introduced the first panellist who appeared from behind the stage, welcomed by a wave of polite applause. He settled in an armchair next to the podium and nodded at the audience. Two others followed suit, a man and a woman. Finally, after a dramatic pause, the last but not least guest was to be summoned. Her name appeared on the screen in captions and sounded in the moderator's deep vibrating bass. She emerged from behind the curtains and made her way to her armchair in red-soled platform stilettos that must have been at least sixteen centimetres. My vision and hearing got clouded, as if I were under water and heard applause and cheers coming from above the surface.

They started with a round robin in the order of appearance. I couldn't force myself to listen to the first three speakers, but once she took up the mike, I drank every word coming out of her lips and tried my best to follow her thoughts. I was quite sure I would get totally lost after a few sentences, but she spoke with an incredible clarity. I did get lost eventually, but it was the others' fault, sometime halfway through the hour, or maybe just a little bit before the halfway.

Towards the end of the session, the presenter would open the floor for questions. A few hands waved in the air, each one belonging to a guy. Women were barely present in the room. Everyone was much older and seemed pretty serious. Each panellist took notes and said a few words on each point taken from the audience. I knew it was my unique chance and borrowed one from Reddit. I extended my arm towards the chandelier, trying not to tremble. A hostess walking around with a mike noticed me and rushed towards me. I stood up.

"Do you see a private permissioned blockchain in the enterprise space like Quorum and Hyperledger converging with public permissionless chains like Bitcoin and Ethereum? How would it play out?" I sat back on my seat in expectation. The auditorium succumbed to a gloomy silence.

"What a brilliant question!" Veronica exclaimed and turned to the moderator. "I could talk about it for hours, so please do stop me when we run out of time. Signora, thank you infinitely for raising this. Yes people, let's address the key elephant in the room".

She'd called me signora. I was staring into her shining hazel eyes while she passionately explained how, according to her vision, permissioned blockchains would converge with permissionless ones. She really cared.

"Veronica, indeed you could talk about it for hours!" the moderator interrupted at some point. "What a shame we have to move on. But let's keep up the conversation at the lunch break kindly sponsored by..."

She kept looking at me. I kept smiling. The audience was applauding. She raised from her seat and I raised from mine, and for a moment we were just

standing and looking at each other. Then she got distracted by one of the other panellists. He dragged her into a conversation and they disappeared together behind the stage. But then she emerged in the lobby without him, approaching the buffet to pick up a few quarters of the little sandwiches and a glass of wine. It was now or never. I landed next to her and grabbed a glass too.

“Thank you so much for such a thoughtful answer”, I said.

“Thank you for the question. You were so daring. Are you a journalist?”

I thought I would disappoint her, but she didn't seem disappointed at all. Actually, she seemed relieved. She asked my name and engaged in a small talk. My main challenge was how to signal that I was the girl of her dreams, because we were both what they called lipstick lesbians. It wasn't really about lipstick or clothes or hair, but the way we moved, gliding above the earth as if we were walking on a rope, with our feet rocking our hips one step at a time. And so I glided through my life, constantly noticing fellow gliders and wondering whether they could fall in love with a woman. I was curious whether Veronica hoped I could turn out gay and whether she too looked for a way to reveal herself in a subtle and natural way. Between gay girls there was allegedly a code in which *I like your flannel shirt* meant *I'm gay too*, *I'm gay too* went for *Let's have a date*, *Let's have a date* stood for *Let's hook up* and *Let's hook up* for *Will you marry me*. But neither of us was sporting a flannel shirt. We both were wearing black jackets. Mine was from an outlet, but not a fake. I never wore counterfeits, because I believed that people who I was trying to impress could tell the difference from a kilometre away.

“I love your blazer,” I said earnestly.

“Thank you, it's tailor-made,” she patted the lapels and flipped her ponytail. Everything about her was crazy and surreal.

When she asked what was my stake with the chains, I knew I wouldn't be able to keep it up for much longer. “The little I know about crypto is what I've learned volunteering for TEDx Torino,” I confessed. It was almost true, because I did attend one of their events.

“How wonderful! So you know Gigi?” she asked enthusiastically.

I recalled the name and surname of a guy called Gigi who was a part of that circle and whom I’d seen on LinkedIn.

“How I adore him! Please send him my kisses,” she said, touching my shoulder. She was trying to hide a prick of pride under an adorable smile. “I met Gigi at TEDx Lake Como. You won’t believe, but I was a speaker!”

“No way!” I exclaimed. “What did you talk about?”

She summoned her colleagues and introduced me as Marta from TEDx Torino, a dear friend of Gigi. And she invited me to sit with them for the rest of the conference, and then we stayed together during the networking aperitivo, and then they wanted to grab a dinner, and then move on to a bar and then another one and another one. And so I’ve spent an entire afternoon and evening hanging out with a bunch of guys in suits and with Veronica, all of them at least a decade my senior. Each person in her crew was specialised in a really narrow area of expertise and all these experts seemed to appreciate learning about just anything that anyone could introduce them to. They made me feel as if my insights were of their interest. I could finally share all the internet knowledge that was usually useless or even alienating. We laughed at memes and conspiracy theories. It felt like heaven. But at the same time, each round meant that I was spending in a single evening more than I would normally spend in a fortnight. Pretending to be rich was incredibly expensive.

We stayed together well beyond the departure of the last train I could have taken at 10.15 pm. After half an hour of goodbye kisses and restarting animated conversations, Veronica asked what way I was going.

“Well, actually I only got a one way ticket and was going to head back to Turin straight from Piccolo. But no worries, I’ll just sleep in some hotel,” I said casually, as if I could afford a last minute check-in at a nearby Hyatt. “Actually it’s even better, because tomorrow I gotta go to Venice and now I’m already halfway there!”



“No way!” she exclaimed. “I’m going to Venice too, for the Carnival!” Her eyes shined again. “I could drive you there.”



I ended up sleeping in the cheapest hostel in town, but on Sunday morning sure as hell crossed the street and walked into the lobby of a lodge where I could have stayed if only I were a prominent multimillionaire public intellectual that I wished to become when I’d grow up. Veronica pulled up in her legendary Tesla sharp on time. She opened the passenger’s door from the inside and I slipped in, just like I had slipped into love with her.

We greeted each other by kissing the air above each other’s cheeks.

“Marta, I’m so sorry.” She started off, getting me all worried. “I’ll have to pick up a Teams call in a moment. I told them I’d be driving, so it’s audio only. It should be really quick, maybe twenty minutes.” My body relaxed. I’d thought she’d changed her mind about the entire trip. “It’s a tad delicate issue at the company and in theory kind of confidential,” she looked at me with a sorry look, as if there was anything to be sorry about. “So I have to ask you, you know, not to reveal yourself...” She smiled sweetly, putting her finger on her lips. I laughed out loud and did the same.

“It’s our secret! And thanks a million for the ride.”

“My pleasure! So why Venice?”

Right then her phone rang. She facepalmed jokingly, turned the radio off and gave me a quick look that communicated the utmost trust. She picked up the call. There were six people on the line. I understood that half of them were from her company and others from a contractor. They needed more than five minutes to just gather all together among *Can you hear me?* and *Can you hear me now?* Then came polite updates about families and remarks about the weather. Veronica rolled her eyes and looked at me every once in a while, but spoke a lot and didn’t dare to mute her mike even when she wasn’t talking. At last they all

got down to business: there was something wrong with an invoice, with fifty thousand euros at stake. Veronica seemed really tense. Twenty minutes into the convo, I started to grasp that she might have messed up and that it might take quite a moment longer to straighten things up.

I sat back and relaxed for real, trying to radiate my serenity and peace of mind so it could be passed on to my woman. I was having the time of my life watching her at work. It was incredibly exciting to listen to that confidential negotiation about serious business. I could hardly believe she was revealing her professional secrets in front of me as if we were a good old couple. And truth be told, I didn't mind staying silent. Conversations are awkward. I was always scared of saying something wrong, of being misunderstood. I often felt I lacked words with too many languages mixed up inside my mind. Veronica has graciously relieved me from all that pressure. I could simply stay in her presence. It took nearly ninety minutes, but the mix-up was resolved with a happy ending.

"Holy fuck!" exclaimed Veronica as soon as the call was over. "Too bad we're driving, I could use a drink. Marta, I'm genuinely sorry."

She debriefed the entire call for me, walking me step by step through a series of hilarious errors she'd made a few months before, in the context of even more hilarious petty political games at the company. Clearly she's understood I could have been her partner in crime. I was dying from pride of making her feel so comfortable.

"Enough about me!" She wrapped up her cool story and asked me again about my business in Venice. The best explanation that had come to my mind involved Elisa's theatre show. I gushed about that fascinating mysterious performer who was a sister of my coworker and whom I'd just met. I had never seen a show like hers, and anyway I'd been looking for an excuse to come to Venice during the Carnival. It was kind of a true story, and it captivated Veronica more than I had expected.

"Do you know if there are any tickets left?" she asked intrigued.

“Let me check” I hesitated for a second, but browsed Elisa’s event on Facebook on my phone. “Lucky you! It’s the last one.”

She asked me to book it for her, and whether I preferred Gaga or Ariana Grande. I looked from above my screen. I was seated in a white Tesla with a woman of my dreams, about to sing along *Born This Way* while booking her a ticket to join me for a poetic musical show of a mesmerising fire-eating mermaid in Venice. In the absence of alcohol, Veronica felt like blowing off steam by putting Ariana’s new album on full volume, so we crossed the Liberty Bridge between Mestre and Tronchetto chanting *I see it, I like it, I want it, I got it*. Indeed, it looked like all those evening prayers had truly paid off.

By the time we found a parking spot, it was too late for lunch, so we headed straight for spritzes. Veronica was supposed to join some friends for dinner, but she called and told them she’d arrive later than planned. I couldn’t believe she chose me over her friends that she surely hadn’t seen in a long time. We stuffed ourselves with pieces of pizza and sweet pastry fritters and talked about what we’d already seen in Venice. I’d come for the Biennale every year since I moved to Italy and was shocked when Veronica told me she had never checked it out. I couldn’t wait to bring her there in the spring.

“Seems fair!” she agreed, raising her glass. “You’ve never been to Venice during the Carnival and now here you are!”

We moved on to the venue, a small multipurpose space close to the Ca’ Foscari. Outside stood a few groups of smokers, each one with a ticket in his or her free hand. We joined a queue of young people to pick up ours. The tiny lobby felt a little claustrophobic with its low ceiling and white floor and white empty walls. Apart from the main entrance, there were no doors. We were led to a hole between thick curtains and entered the blackbox where the show would take place. It felt like passing through a spaceship’s airlock to step from an artificial modern world into a universe beyond it. Some three dozens of wooden chairs were placed in three rows bent into a semicircle, almost all of them taken within a few minutes. We claimed two spots in the very middle of the first row.

The girl who had sold us tickets walked into the middle of the semicircle. She was wearing black. She said a few words about the venue and took time to look into everyone's eyes. We were invited to participate in a Psychomagic ritual. She distributed little cards and pens and asked us to write down something that we'd like to burn without grief or anger, something that should disappear from our lives. What would follow was going to have meaning and consequence only if we'd decided to embrace the intentionality. I thought for a moment and took to my little card. I wrote down *Uncertainty*. I checked in with Veronica, not sure whether she felt comfortable. But she seemed okay. She had folded her little card and passed it to the lady in black collecting all of them into a copper dish. Veronica crossed her legs, placed her hands on her knees, and gave me one of her disarming vampire smiles.

The sound of gongs ringed out through our bodies. The lights went off. Elisa emerged from behind the curtains. She was completely nude. She carried two torches that would have served as the sole source of light, only she was light herself. She took off with the show. She lost herself in whirls and leaps, warbling like a bird of paradise. She vocalised ancient odes and poetry that must have been contemporary. She teased her skin with a single torch and then reached for more torches to juggle. After some time, she was truly eating fire. I was thrilled. Her body was the most beautiful matter I have seen in my life. Around her there were several dishes filled with water and at some point she drowned her hands in one of the vases and splashed it around like a divine sorcerer of four elements. I felt a single droplet landing on my cheek and nearly fainted from electricity bolting through my spine. I wished she poured the entire vase on me.

If I were loved by a woman like Elisa, I wouldn't need anything else. She and only she was more than enough. I craved nothing more and nothing less. We could run away together and live a Bohemian fairy tale of modern nomads, feeling at home anywhere we'd go, not caring about the taxes and social media and whatever people said. I could leave the company and start freelancing, with a little laptop more than enough for my mobile office. I would work enough to earn my living, but give up all the ridiculous fantasies about proving my worth.

Because Elisa, I thought, could embrace me as I was. She truly saw dignity and worth in a human being stripped from all the constraints of the bourgeois gossip society fuelled by hyper-consumerism and by false mutual adoration. We could live a life of meaning and real purpose, fighting pollution and calling out on violence and chasing joy with like-minded souls sensitive to the vibrations of the good and beautiful force that connected all sentient beings into the great tapestry of life. I would happily follow her into the fire, but I was sure she'd never put me to the test, for she was pure and gracious. So I'd simply follow her around the world, wherever she wanted to free dive or perform in the streets, and I would watch her every day and every night, having left behind the flashy office lights for sunlight, having switched its concrete walls for trees and the sea. My parents would be aghast, granted, but I had to move beyond the love of parents to taste one of a spouse.

But what if one of us got sick, I thought? I shivered. What if we grew bitter and started to bicker? Was I really ready to renounce all of my possessions and give up eating cheese? I suddenly worried how Veronica was doing, overwhelmed with an apprehension that she probably felt rather out of place. I looked at her and froze. She was transfixed in the same elegant position in which she had taken her seat three quarters earlier, only her hands were now folded right under her trembling chin. She was not less enchanted than I had been.

And then Elisa burned the cards. The fire glowed in the copper dish, turning our insecurities into ashes. And then it gradually ceased, and the blackbox turned into a real black hole, as dark as all these exhibitions that simulate the experience of living without the sense of sight. I turned around to check whether emergency exits remained lit and wondered how it was possible that they didn't cast any light on the stage. In the darkness, we could barely hear Elisa disappearing behind the curtains opposite of our blessed semicircle.

Lights turned on and everyone started to clap. Elisa showed up again, covered by a long white flowing robe. She bowed a few times, breathing the applause. She trotted backstage and then again to the centre. She bowed one

more time and pointed her open hands at the technicians hidden in the control booth. She applauded them and thanked everyone for coming. The lights dimmed and soft jazz music started to play in the background. People were getting up and stretching their legs. A chatter filled the space and a tiny crowd has gathered around Elisa, hiding her from my sight. I turned to Veronica. Her eyes were red and her cheekbones black from mascara flowing into the dimples. She fanned herself with her right palm while tucking a lock of hair behind her ear with another one, discarding her own tears with a smile of surprise more than embarrassment.

“Quite an experience,” she summed up, shaking her head with her brows raised all the way to her forehead. “Sorry for getting emotional. Those spritzes were strong, you know, or maybe it’s because of that call and everything. Anyway, what did you burn?”

Before I had time to answer, Elisa emerged from behind a group of people who were now talking to one another. I raised from my seat as she was approaching me with a huge smile.

“Marta, I can’t believe you came! What a gift.” She hugged me fondly.

Veronica stood up too, between us rather than beside me, forming a little triangle. Elisa panned her gaze towards the stranger. Unexpectedly, the corners of her lips twitched, as if her unfaltering composure was somehow challenged. None of them dared to break the silence.

“Elisa, meet Veronica. Veronica, Elisa...” I heard my own voice uttering the two names that had been on my mind all the time throughout the last two days - constantly, but separately. Now I was voicing them aloud for the first time ever and for the first time I also heard how they sounded together. Elisa and Veronica, Veronica and Elisa. My two muses born in the same year and in the same country, who otherwise couldn’t have been more different from one another. The opposites, antagonists, absolute queens of divergent utopias on the very poles of a lipstick lesbian spectrum. An impossible choice in a million years,

and especially within seconds... that seemed to be hours with none of us whispering a word.

“You are breathtaking,” Veronica said finally. To Elisa.

Jazz music stopped. Attendees had moved to the airlock and outside. My girls stayed silent, staring at each other.

“That’s what I told you!” I clasped my hands. “Thank you again for coming here with me!”

“Well, so are you,” Elisa spilled. “I mean, thank you both for coming!” Her eyes remained locked on Veronica and Veronica alone. They tilted for a split of a second from Veronica’s face to a sea anchor necklace above her cleavage. “What are you up to? Have time for a drink?”

She has regained her power of speech in its full glory, musing about a wine bar run by a friend of hers around the corner. Her ocean eyes sparkled and she moved her hands like a geisha who’s had an extra cup of strong black tea. Veronica raised her wrist to the collarbone and whispered an audio message into her Apple Watch, depending on Siri to let her Venetian friends know she’d text them in the morning. She hasn’t broken eye contact with the diva even for a second. And yet Elisa’s expression has changed markedly, revealing a sudden disappointment.

“So you don’t live in Venice?” she wanted to know.

“Near enough,” Veronica reassured her.

The most beautiful thing about each of them was their capacity to extend exclusive attention to a person or issue in front of them. They certainly didn’t lack focus nor passion. I believed I had it too, but struggled so much to find it in my peers, who were always so easily distracted by vibrations in their pockets. Going to bed in the tiny studio I’d been renting temporarily since forever and into infinity, I often prayed I could skip a decade and wake up in my ultimate design penthouse, independent and established, a few years wiser and happier, well beyond and over the drama of faking it until you make it. I couldn’t wait to

be the person I so much wished to become to deserve the recognition of those who really mattered.

Elisa has finally taken her eyes off Veronica to include me in the conversation. "Are you guys staying together?" she asked with a subtle hint of angst.

That made Veronica remember I was still there. "Marta!" she exclaimed cheerfully. "Where was it that you were staying?"



My eyes were puffy. I slept too little on Friday night, too little on Saturday night and now I was going to spend Sunday night on the train back home. I thought about Madonna who scheduled a tour of back to back concerts, but after the first night allegedly said *I'm too old for this shit* and cancelled half of the remaining dates. She had to listen to her body and I probably needed to listen to mine. I was too old for random road trips and for not sleeping on the weekends to look for love in more romantic cities than the one where I went to work. It was time to adult up, and yet I rather felt like turning into a crying baby just because I was tired and brokenhearted. I looked at people around me, overgrown kids wearing black or grey or brown, with smartphones' screens and earphones serving as their pacifiers.

As on cue, my phone announced a message with a chime. It was my supervisor writing *Hi Marta how are you*. I gulped down a sob. I believed in human rights and in liberal laws, but there was one particular crime that, I thought, should have been proclaimed illegal and subject to death penalty: asking *How are you* without expecting an honest answer. I loathed and despised that ungodly question even more than *Where are you from* and *What do you do*. How are you. How am I? What am I supposed to tell you? After all, I never lie.

"Still alive," I texted back with tears forming in my eyes. "You?"

"Fine thanks! Look we rly need the brochure by tomorrow morning". The brochure I had forgotten. The fifty-pages-long booklet I had barely started.



Right then, the doors of the cabin slid open and a controller stepped in. His entry invoked a muffled noise of passengers unfolding their tickets. The doors closed behind him and he started to move through the aisle. He scanned each ticket swiftly, but with affectionate attention, like a tailor measuring his favourite clients. My anxiety rose with every upbeat *thank you* that he granted to each one of them, inevitably approaching my end of the cabin. I fished my purse for the useless wallet buried in the mess of candy papers and my own dirty nails, just in time to raise my eyes up to the mountain in the blue uniform casting a shadow over my pathetic figure.

“I don’t have a ticket,” I confessed softly.

“You should have reported it immediately to get one on board, but let me make an exception. Where is it that you’re going?”

“Turin. I don’t have enough cash.” I wiped a tear before it would flow down my cheek and offered him the ID that I had been clutching in my hands.

“Signorina, no need to make a scene. I’m just doing my job.” He squinted to examine the little plastic card. “Ah, you’re Polish! *Gien dobry!* You should know that I used to have a Polish girlfriend before meeting my wife. Yes, Karolina. We went to Krakow. A beautiful city. It must have been in the 80s, maybe late 70s. I bet a lot has changed there, hasn’t it? We also went to Auschwitz. Wait, let me read your name! Marta W R Z O S O W S K A,” he spelled out letter by letter and looked into my eyes with hope. I corrected his pronunciation.

“Of course! R and z make up j like in *bonjour*, I knew it.” His face lit up with pride of impressing me with such a linguistic prowess, or maybe he was revisiting a foggy memory related to his youth’s romance in that mysterious communist country that didn’t exist anymore. “Wrzosowska. What a name!” He sighed, handed me his little block and pointed his pen at the sign field. “May I have your autograph, please?”

■