

*Dear object of defeated care!
Though now of Love and thee bereft,
To reconcile me with despair
Thine image and my tears are left.*

*'Tis said with Sorrow Time can cope;
But this I feel can ne'er be true:
For by the death-blow of my Hope
My Memory immortal grew.*

Lord Byron

The water lapped against the stone steps as Ulisse clambered from the water-taxi. Venice floated in virtual silence, the thinning thrum of the boat as it cut through the moon's reflected beam, and the slap of wash the only accompaniments to the scraping of key in lock. Ulisse leant against the door before crossing the entrance hall, his footsteps echoing on the marble. Gripping the wrought iron balustrade that twisted upwards he made his way to the top of the palazzo.

He pushed the shutters back. The warm summer air blew in on a gentle breeze rippling the shrouds. Ulisse lifted the one closest to him. Her face smiled back at him. The playfulness still danced in her eyes, he had captured it perfectly. But how could he not, she was inspiring in every way. He had not produced anything as remotely near to perfect before he had met her. Ulisse uncovered more canvases, in each one the same girl with raven hair and green eyes and sensual lips looked up at him, past him, right through him. He pulled a chair into the centre of the room, carried a bottle of grappa from the cupboard and took his seat. Surrounded by her beauty he took a gulp of the grappa and sank into the drunken oblivion of his memories.

Twenty years had passed since Ludovico Bondesan had called to say he had a commission; that he wanted a portrait painted of a young girl whose mother worked in his household. When Ulisse had opened the door to the sixteen year old Rebecca in her Nirvana t-shirt, her hair pulled back into a loose ponytail, he knew he had found her. Found the inspiration that had been missing from his work. She had said very little at the first sitting just watched him with her green, almond-shaped eyes as he sketched her outline his heart pounding with every kind of desire for her. At the second sitting she asked him about his work.

“So why did you become an artist? Is it so you have a parade of beautiful women before you? You must have seen some of Italy’s most famous beauties, wasn’t that Sophia Loren in the painting on the stairs?”

Ulisse stared at her from behind the canvas, “Stay still, please.”

She had pursed her lips in a teenage sulk.

She kept coming back long after the original portrait was finished. Ulisse had prolonged the sittings until one day *she* decided it must be finished and that, perhaps, they could start a new picture. Ulisse could not have been happier. Rebecca’s portrait had been his best work to date not even La Loren had been able to fully ignite his artistic flame. Rebecca’s beauty was pure and uncontaminated though he wanted her so much. It confounded all descriptions; no words were adequate enough to justify her allure. His passion was so intense, so all consuming that he could think of no-one, nothing, else. He wanted to possess her but he knew, deep down he knew, he could never have her. She was out of his reach but he wanted her nonetheless; so he painted.

Ulisse painted with a freedom he had not known until he had opened the door to this housekeeper's daughter from Mestre. She posed as his own Cleopatra. That day he took her on a gondola for hours around the canals of Venice telling her of the city's history, its romantic secrets, its sordid enigmas. She had listened with interest, asked questions that he thought belied her tender age, touched his hand and rested her forehead on his shoulder when she laughed. He had never been so in love. Love, the love of a forty year old man for a sixteen year old girl; but it wasn't a degenerate, dirty affair, it was pure and unsullied.

His only caresses were those of brush on canvas as he captured Rebecca's being in oil. Rebecca even showed interest in the techniques and colours he used. She learned the difference between hue, tone and chroma, watched as he mixed his colours to replicate her skin tone and the shades in her hair.

"Do you have a favourite colour? A special mix that is your own? I read somewhere that artists have their own signature colours."

"No. I mix the colours to suit the painting. There isn't a Bovér blue, for example, which I use in every picture."

"But a favourite colour, you must have a favourite colour, one you think that has a beauty above the others."

Ulisse shook his head. "All the colours have a beauty, even the darkest black."

Rebecca had huffed at what she thought was a feeble answer and turned to look at the uneven Venetian roofline that filled the studio window. She had lifted her chin slightly to show her annoyance. Ulisse had smiled at her youthful petulance.

That was how the summer had passed. It had been a summer of shared confidences and laughter, where they both learned about life and love. Ulisse fell more deeply in love with Rebecca whilst she flirted with boys of her own age back in Mestre and took pleasure in teasing him with tales of their failed flirtations. It was not all sweetness and light, Rebecca's youthfulness led to arguments, to her storming out of the palazzo, ponytail swinging in an angry arc. Ulisse hated the arguments but he knew she'd be back, for the time being at least. What was it that Anouilh's Haemon had said about arguments: 'Happiness is full of them?' And Rebecca did return, though sometimes she would torture him by staying away for two or three days before turning up at his door with a coquettish smile and a kiss on the cheek. On those days he would take her for coffee and they would walk the quiet backstreets, crossing over narrow bridges, winding their way through the Venice that tourists barely saw. They would dip into churches, examine Tintoretos and after a few hours would return to the studio and their latest work.

The summer broke with a thunderstorm. The shutters on the crumbling palazzos remained tightly shut against the rain and the sky was lit with violent shards. Ulisse watched the savagery of nature from his top floor as drop of rain chased drop of rain down the windowpane. He liked to watch the mists descend across the lagoon obscuring the islands creating the illusion that Venice sat on a cloud of dreams. He doubted that Rebecca would make her way from the station to the studio today. She hated when her hair was wet and started to curl into ringlets around her ears. The rain would delay her arrival. They had argued the last time she was here; this was the third day since and he was sure she would have come ordinarily. He could work on their latest piece without her, her image was indelibly inked in his mind's eye. He

concentrated on her mouth. The full bottom lip that she would gently bite down on when deep in thought and the almost perfect cupid's bow of her upper lip. How he wanted to kiss that beautiful mouth. The knock on the door startled him and he bounded down.

The Polizia did not wait for an invitation before pushing past Ulisse and out of the rain.

"Good afternoon gentlemen and how may I be of assistance?"

"You are Ulisse Bovér, artist?"

Ulisse nodded his affirmation.

"You knew a Signorina Rebecca Ballerin?"

Ulisse stared; his body started to lose feeling. Knew? "I know her, yes. Is something, has something happened?"

"She is dead, murdered. You need to come with us Bovér." The Polizia opened the door and ushered Ulisse out; two remained in his entrance hall.

The Polizia treated him as a chief suspect, questioned him repeatedly over the months and years that followed. They showed him pictures of her dead body lying empty on the beach. The only response they got was the sagging of his shoulders as he felt his core deflate. Ulisse stopped short of telling them that he had loved her, could never have harmed her, such an admission he was sure would have sealed his fate. So he denied his love, claimed she was nothing more than a pretty girl who was happy to model for him. Finally they admitted defeat and left her case as unsolved, gathering dust in a storage room somewhere. Ulisse died a little inside but his painting got better and better. Even in death she influenced him, she had

penetrated his mind and was the conduit for his on-going creativity. Rebecca's death had removed all possibility of romantic involvement, removed the object of his obsession that would most certainly have destroyed him in the end.

The empty grappa bottle lay under the chair. Ulisse caressed the painting of Venice's Cleopatra progressing on her purple gondola along the Grand Canal towards the Rialto, the dome of Santa Maria behind her pointing to the heavens; silver oars flashing in the sunlight as flautists accompanied their every stroke, as his passion had conducted every stroke of his brush. She was gone, long gone, but her beauty lived on in his work. She was in every single canvas, she had freed his imagination. He painted unencumbered by physical desire, inspired by his crystal memories of the beautiful young girl that had been stolen from him. He picked up the cotton shrouds and covered her face. His head whirred with quotes that could all have been written for her - Webster, Shakespeare, Byron - they knew this girl whose eyes dazzled, whom age could not wither, whose image lingered; but not as he had known her.