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Lucrezia enters the shower naked and thinks it is a joke: it can't be true, someone must have gone crazy.

She rubs under her armpits - her new body soap smells of algae, white foam, and sea pebbles. It's definitely a joke, there must have been a mistake, she tells herself again as she passes the sponge even down there where the sun doesn't shine.

Her new body soap makes her think of fish scales, their trembling and transparent bodies opening like glass flowers in the water: in the shower, Lucrezia is a mermaid and that studio apartment is her glittering ocean.

After 15 minutes, Lucrezia is walking in Via Paolo Sarpi with her wedges bought for twenty-five euros.

She goes for a walk and in this moment she no longer has the seizures, tremors, and fainting when she walks in a place far from the route she has mapped out mentally, the safe route that will not harm her. The Sarpi ravioleria, the store with lanterns shining like dragon tongues, the rotisserie that fries duck legs and necks, the restaurant that serves boiling soy spaghetti directly on the grill: Lucrezia's magic square, the one where she doesn't have the impression of collapsing on the ground with the air is breaking in her throat -- colorful streets that smell of ginger, spring onion, and soy sauce, where she hears lively accents resonating like fresh water.

Lucrezia walks and thinks: someone got it wrong, someone here went crazy. Lucrezia walks and anyone can see her thoughts, her sweat running like a trickle between her small breasts. Anyone can see the blackheads against the light, made evident by the humidity, the blackheads that still persist on the threshold of forty and that she tries hard to fight, buying soaps in the pharmacy that look like black mush and that won't do her any good -- after three days she will stand in front of a mirror to squeeze them. Because squeezing blackheads calms her down, even if she cries when she sees her face covered in holes and scars.

Anyone can see her frizzy hair, ruined by the hairband with which she sleeps at night because she only ties her hair when she goes to bed -- then they take on a bad shape and not even the comb can tame them, they look like weeds and tangles of vipers.

Everyone can see her caressing those streets colored like wrapping paper; she would eat those streets, as if they were slices of bread or spring rolls, she has sweated for two years to get to know them and to earn them. And then she walks, turns around, walks a block, she pushes herself forward a little bit more, then turns back and walks the block again, to colonize by feet also that part of via Paolo Sarpi, between Moscova and the Monumental Cemetery, to make it a safe area, an area where she can go alone without fear clouding her vision. Lucrezia looks at herself in a store window and likes what she sees, even if that day she is sweaty, a little dirty, has those asthmatic rattles of someone smoking too much; sometimes she enjoys hearing the whistles of her asthma and she likes listening the noise that her crumpled lungs make, the sound of a dying kitten. But Lucrezia looks at herself and thinks again: there must have been a mistake. A mistake as big as the whole Chinatown.

She carefully chooses the shop to enter, and chooses it because of the SALDI sign, enamelled in red. She comes in and what strikes her is a long dress that looks like a mermaid's tail: it is as colorful as a kaleidoscope, she looks at it and imagines her body wrapped in that dress, she imagines the hands that will take it off, she takes the dress in her hands and immediately feels an icy note in her thoughts, that sliver of sadness, to think that Alessandro answers her intermittently,

every six hours, or perhaps the next day, that Alessandro has become like a distant and cold star, which turns on and off -- she knows when it turns off, she can capture the moment, but she cannot predict the duration of its turning on.

Lucrezia enters the changing room with the dress in her hands, a good silk that will cost her 90 euros on sale, and she tries it on thinking of when that distant star will light up. In the mirror she does not see herself, but she sees the distant glow of that warm star, and fantasizes about the moment in which that light will illuminate the neckline of her dress within which the round peaches of her breasts can be seen, breasts not yet sagging despite her age, her belly flat but a little swollen only due to her period, her ass highlighted by the curve of her dress, a hill that then ends in the sweet and straight line of her slender legs with the black heels that the shop assistant gave her. She looks at herself in the mirror, she likes herself, she doesn't show her age.

In the store, an old man looks at her; that man is accompanying his wife who is trying on a little red dress for a wedding. Lucrezia observes the vortex of old age and decay, she looks inside it and thinks that it is not her turn to fall into it yet, she feels a cruel happiness, she looks at the old woman's wrinkles and feels excited because those wrinkles are not hers yet, and she whirls in an airy garden that smells of smooth apricots, straight legs, and Morgan the Fairy. She goes to pay for the dress and imagine that -- the shop assistant puts it in an envelope with "Angel" written on it.

She runs to the tram 14 stop.

There must be some mistake, she keeps repeating. She opens the emails on her cell phone and double-checks the hotel address. Apparently, they chose her. The phone lights up and vibrates, Lucrezia's eyes seem to violently take color. "Ale? Yes yes, behind the Duomo, you understood correctly. I'll see you there."

She gets on the tram, makes her way through the sweaty and spicy bodies, brandishing the bag with the dress like a weapon. "Ale, yes. I forwarded you the email, I'll go to the room, you show them the email I sent you, it's all there."

Alessandro has reappeared, and he always decides when to reappear. Alessandro neon light, Alessandro intermittent, Alessandro with the square jaw, Alessandro with his Calabrian

accent, Alessandro with his ocher backpack, Alessandro always with wet hair.

The hotel is hidden behind the Duomo, it looks like a large illuminated animal; the building seems to peek out, like a firefly, and smiles in the burning sunset. Near the hotel there is a church, with "St. Raphael" written on it.

Lucrezia enters in a hurry, she is already late, and she doesn't want anyone to see her, but in Milan she is just an ant. She doesn't have any suitcase with her, she is going to stay for one night only; this is what the advert on Instagram said, "Win a night in one of the most fascinating hotels in Milan".

Lucrezia had tried it at school, during a break: instead of uploading her grades to the electronic register, she had lost herself in her favorite activity, scrolling during downtime, scrolling to reduce anxiety, like a palliative, an artificial anti-stress made of colorful icons, shouted posts and stories to browse like rotten daisy petals.

"Win a night in one of the most fascinating hotels in Milan", and Lucrezia had signed up, just to avoid having to exchange few words with her colleagues in the teachers' lounge.

Lucrezia checks in and then observes everything, touches the walls of the hotel inspired by Arte Povera: they look like unfinished walls, very elegant skins of tired animals, essential cloaks that stand out in choreographies of glass from which natural waterfalls pour down.

"It seems like it was made on purpose for your arrival here, but it's not intentional, it's just that it started raining!" the girl at the reception tells her -- the drops divide and bifurcate in natural water dances, reminiscent of tears of old dolls.

"Second floor, I'll take you," the girl repeats as they enter the elevator, which is smooth and shiny like a lynx's eye.

"Room 207," and the girl entrusts into Lucrezia's hands the card that will allow her to enter that chest of brass and light that is her room.

She enters and she is welcomed by a note of color, blood, and ruby. It is the painting that dominates in the center of the room, made of rough brushstrokes, it looks like a beating and flayed heart, torn from the chest of some saint. All around is brass, polished and shimmering black, a black that rains light all around. The balcony overlooks the right side of the Duomo, with its gothic and phantasmagoric puffs.

Right next to the balcony, there is the bed: a French bed, white

and immaculate, and on the sheets there is a welcome card and a packet of lilac mints.

"Enjoy your stay, tomorrow breakfast is served from half past seven to ten," the girl tells her, and leaves Lucrezia alone with that vortex of minimal beauty. Lucrezia sits on the bed, puts her bag on the floor, and goes into the bathroom: the shower doors are shining, and the bathroom mirror gives her face a diaphanous and translucent color, like certain wax statues. There too, brass everywhere, a black dream that doesn't suffocate her, that lets her breathe peace and pitch.

The cell phone remains on the bed, resting on the screen side, an upside-down insect that shows no signs of life, a cockroach that doesn't vibrate. Lucrezia sits back down on the bed and grabs the phone, turns it over in her hands, opens the chat and Alessandro is online: he hasn't seen her message. She dials his number and feels something close to fear, a ridiculous fear. "Look, I'm waiting for you, Ale."

"Yes, I'm entering the subway, tell me the floor and room number." Then he sighs, with the voice of a sulky child that usually comes from his question time in front of Lucrezia, "please, make yourself beautiful".

Lucrezia caresses the bag and takes out the dress she just bought: the dress almost seems to free itself, and unfolds in Lucrezia's hands like the body of a butterfly. She slips it on, she looks in the mirror and feels younger; usually, in class, she always wears jeans, a turtleneck or a shirt, a jacket at most. In class she never wears make-up, instead that evening she applies foundation, concealer, as she saw on the Instagram reels of a girl more beautiful and younger than her -- she presses the pencil on the contour of her lips and it seems to create a mouth shaped as a heart. Finally, she fills everything in with a brick-red lipstick that she had in her beauty case for at least five years.

She walks around the room and it seems she is swimming. Lucrezia is a mermaid, Lucrezia far from her studio apartment, from the broken boiler, from the washing machine that doesn't work, from the biscuits on sale, from the teacher's lounge, Lucrezia is a mermaid, and swims in a black sea made of brass, of dark waves that swallow her into their belly.

Alessandro arrives, wearing the same clothes he wore at school in the morning. He always has a slightly red face, with cheeks she wants to bite, and a full adolescent lip: his dark blond hair looks wet, the hair of someone who has just

emerged from a bath. Alessandro looks at the small miniature installations that embellish the room.

"It looks nice," he murmurs as he touches the walls with a light fist.

"What, Ale?"

"All this, where you brought me, seems like a good thing."

In the room, he looks at her and talks to her and then goes back to ignoring her: that's their alphabet at school and always, when he walks away she walks away even more, and when he comes back she pretends to ignore him, then in the end she gives in and he walks away again, and she feels like they are dancing a limping dance, a flayed dance step, those dances that are not natural, a sterile and harmful dance, which makes the big toes bleed and makes the feet crooked.

"Aren't you saying anything, Ale?"

"About what?" and Alessandro throws the bag on the bed, takes off his shoes and throws his socks in the air badly.

"But about this," and Lucrezia touches the hems of her dress, "you said I had to make myself beautiful". She takes on that flirtatious expression that she can't afford in the classroom.

"Yes, it's nice". Alessandro throws himself onto the bed dead weight, like a thud.

Lucrezia does not sit next to him, she walks around the room, touches the curtains and looks at the Duomo; she walks around the room like a wounded moth, with that new and colorful dress, which seems to leave behind a golden dust that spreads among the resin black, iron and slate.

Alessandro touches an installation that resembles a horse.

"Tonight it will come to life", he shouts in falsetto and then laughs loudly, as he does in the classroom when he and his classmates throw the paper airplanes behind the girls in the front row.

He brought the soccer bag, opens it and empties the contents onto the bed, with a magician's move.

Cascades of cards and brochures for summer holidays begin to snow on the pillow, depicting temples, beaches, statues of bearded emperors. Lucrezia grabs the cards full of classical busts, hollow eyes of emperors, drapery, and thick folds of clothes carved in marble. She takes a deep breath, as if of happiness. She sits next to Alessandro and strokes his hair.

"Do you remember what a Nike is? A doryphoros, an author's copy?"

Alessandro responds with a raspberry and makes a gesture as if to chase away flies.

"What? We are not in school right now"

"Aren't you planning to go to Greece? When I was your age I went there to see the Parthenon and the statues!"

Alessandro seems like a pestiferous child now.

"Yes, I go in July, but not to the places that teachers like, I go like to Mykonos, Corfu, where the clubs and the nightlife, and the chicks are".

Humiliation lurks in the folds of Lucrezia's dress, in the brown lipstick, in the foundation that has hardened and cracked on her face. The burnished brass, all around them, recalls the stripes on the body of an animal that is ready to bite her.

It's already 9pm and in the hotel's prize program is included an aperitif for Lucrezia and her companion.

"Let's move, it's late." Lucrezia grabs the room card, pushing back something that is about to sting her eyes, and also the hunger for air that makes her breathe heavily. She has the same feeling as when she panics in the middle of empty squares and wide streets, in the open sea, when she would like to call her mother and ask her to come pick her up and bring her home.

Lucrezia is in line to get two Aperol Spritz; she grabbed the free ticket for two; she queues alone. Alessandro is further back and is enchanted by the water games, the rain dripping on the windows of the hotel, the armchairs with tapered shapes. The hotel seems like his playground and he takes photos and stories to put on social media. Every now and then he goes to Lucrezia but doesn't talk to her much; every now and then he addresses her with casual phrases and she and Alessandro seem like two acquaintances, or even worse, they seem like a teacher and her student on a school trip.

"Here's the spritz". Lucrezia and Alessandro sit on one of the slim red armchairs; each floor of the hotel follows its own combination of colors, a chromatic play that recalls walls, works of art, agile and minimal inlays. She hands him a glass full of orange, scented liquid; he doesn't even look at her and takes the perfect photo to upload to IG - the orange glass against the background of the purple and blue carpet.

There is nothing left of the two of them who slept naked, pressed against each other for three months straight; nothing left of Alessandro who bit her, during the night, like a puppy

dog; nothing left of her who questioned him in class while she wanted to kiss his mouth, eat those treasures of flesh that are his lips.

While they drink the Spritz Alessandro gets up and heads towards a group of kids who are lined up and swaying a little, as if they were dancing to the rhythm of the hotel's lounge music.

They are all beautiful kids - the boys are tall and strong like giants, with very white teeth, lush, dark tufts and broad swimmers' chests, while the girls are tender and warm nymphs, with straight, very blonde hair that reaches down to their bottoms, straight noses, and antelope legs.

Alessandro joins them to drink, he also dances a little, talks to a girl, and raises his voice a lot to be heard, amidst the shouting of the hotel guests and the music.

From her armchair Lucrezia only understands the words "Campari" and "Aperol" then she hears "second floor" and "holiday".

The girl Alessandro talks to laughs in an awkward and sensual way. She looks like a little doe, and she and Alessandro never stop talking.

The girl takes her cocktail and then they both go and sit on another armchair on the other side of the room, near a panel of brushed glass - the glass contains torn gauze, they look like organs torn apart and then reassembled by an elegant hand.

Lucrezia remains in her armchair and watches them laugh heartily; she observes them for a long time, then stops and becomes a statue. They're just talking, and yet she feels sick. They're just talking, they're the same age, it's right for them to talk to each other, but Lucrezia feels like throwing up the little Spritz she's drinking which tastes like pain and gastric juices. Not even the decency to do it away from her. As if she were made of air, as if she didn't exist, as if she hadn't seen him naked, hadn't seen his bulging hips, his broad shoulders in the darkness. At that moment Alessandro has forgotten that Lucrezia has seen him naked; Alessandro takes the luxury of talking in front of her with beautiful, young and unknown girls; Alessandro does not see Lucrezia who has seen him naked. Lucrezia looks at the lights of the hotel, the slate, the dark brass that now reminds her of a tombstone. Finally she looks at her mermaid dress, her 90 euro dress on sale that drags on

the floor, the hem of the dress falls on the carpet and looks like the dead skin of an amphibian.

Lucrezia looks at the boy she undressed with her own hands just a few days before, the boy she questioned that same morning about Renaissance art, this boy who avoids her and smiles with another, who hurts her by showing her his simple spirit child, village child, child who speaks with open vowels, child who plays with everything. Alessandro plays with unknown girls, plays with his age, plays with his teacher - Alessandro it's all a big carousel of rides and cotton candy. "Let's go back to the room, I'm sleepy".

The group of young and handsome kids and also the unknown girl leave; they go out and get lost in the belly of Milan which swallows them.

Alessandro crosses the room and returns to Lucrezia, but he is sleepy with her, he wants to go back upstairs in the room, he has lost all the sparkle of a pestiferous child. Alessandro has finished playing with those of his age, as it should be, he seems eager to sink into the armchair and sleep like a sated cat.

Lucrezia feels something going crazy inside her like the sky going crazy in the eyes of the birds.

In the room they try to have sex, but they can't this time again. The walls of the hotel seem to drip black liquid, like squid ink that is released from the walls.

Lucrezia and Alessandro look at the Duomo from the balcony of the room then they kiss. Lucrezia would like to bite off his lower lip, it has been her obsession since she saw it for the first time in class, and then they drink white wine from the minibar of the room, they finish the bottle of white and move on to re. Then they find themselves on the bed in the dim light and Alessandro says "I'm confused" like he does when he is called to the blackboard and doesn't know what to say and then returns to his place with his head bowed. And then they kisses again, like many red ants running and dispersing everywhere, insects on the earth of the neck, lips, belly, and thighs. Lucrezia tries, she breathes deeply and puts her hands in Alessandro's underwear and he gets scared, as if she had stuck her hands in a basket of hot coals, but she is hungry, she has wanted him since she saw him again that morning in class, she wants him every morning in class. She wanted to participate in the hotel lottery just to sleep with Alessandro in a place like this, to make him fall asleep with her in a place

far from the studio apartment, to watch him sleep in a room as placid and beautiful as a black aquarium, just to caress his hair wet with sea water.

They try again. Nothing happens, nothing happens anymore lately.

Alessandro asks to be kissed. He asks to be hugged. Alessandro is a child from fairy tales. Alessandro has frightened eyes, which pour out a strange fear on the pillow, but suddenly Alessandro no longer has his age, because he begins to modulate that voice of an adult man that all adult men have when they have to say certain things and Lucrezia understands what she is about to say from the tone of his voice.

Who knows why men all take on the same voice when they have to say certain things whether their names are Nino, Raffaele, Gennaro, Francesco, Elio; whether they are seventeen, twenty-eight, forty or fifty-six years old.

Lucrezia already knows what he wants to say but she doesn't even listen to him; she closes the listening channel and thinks only about the hotel - the smell of jasmine and oriental spices, the delicate floor that in the dim light takes on the mother-of-pearl color of certain shells.

Alessandro speaks and Lucrezia hears Alessandro's voice so far away; Lucrezia thinks of the shells she collected as a child on the shore of Gaeta. "Dad, can you save the shells for me? So we can make necklaces", Lucrezia said to her dad. At the time her dad had a mustache and he was putting Monica's shells in his pockets, still full of sand.

Alessandro speaks. You are special. You're perfect. I'm not ready. I'm interested, but I need to be alone. I'm crazy. My head doesn't work. I want you but. You are beautiful but. It intrigues me that I see you during the day and we can't do anything in class, but.

Professor Lucrezia Spalice is in a wonderful hotel in the center of Milan in front of a boy who is rejecting her and who she will see again tomorrow. Professor Spalice. The graduate with honor. The PhD in Art History, the academic promise. The inhabitant renting a studio apartment with the bed near the stove.

Lucrezia takes his rejection, yet another, and every time she knows how to recognize the dull sound of the door slamming

in her face, in fact she even foresees it and to not hurt herself too much she stands a little to the side and not in front of the door, so as not to see it close violently right in front of her nose. By now she has also learned to feel a strange sense of relief and ironic excitement, a tremor that arises from her belly every time she is rejected; then falls back into a dark quagmire, a puddle on which the heavy rain beats.

Professor Spalice bought a new dress to have a child tell her that he is crazy and needs to be alone. Professor Spalice opens her mouth wide, opens it wide, and feels on her palate that same taste of waste that has been recurring for years - a cyclical and circular taste that tastes like apple cider vinegar, unseasoned salad, boiling herbal tea mixed with mucus, pasta overcooked, and seasoned.

She knows that taste well, she opens her mouth and is administered again - a syrup that perhaps one day she will need in order to heal.

To heal herself, to wake up, and rediscover the beauties and loves of her childhood - her marbles, her smoking chimneys, her books, her Italian essays, her paintings and her brushes, her diaries with perfumed paper. Lucrezia looks at Alessandro's black eyes in that dream hotel and that evening thinks - perhaps for the first time instinctively and automatically - that he is really nice. Professor Spalice's mind is an ugly labyrinth of thorn bushes and of brambles, a mind that sees the things that hurt and stab her as beautiful; she sees poison as appetizing who kneels and humbles herself to beg for a crust of bread. A bitch who wanted a caress, and instead receives a kick.

Professor Spalice takes her rejection like she takes a prayer or a bad grade, she wants to put it in her pocket, she wants to put it in her mermaid dress, but that dress has no pockets. So she tries to put it in the handbag upside down on the bed or in the pack of cigarettes; she wants to smoke one cigarette but you can't smoke in the room and it's raining outside. She's taken the rejection and now she just wants to smoke on it, to enjoy it better like when you choose to smoke even if you have a decayed tooth in your mouth, knowing that it will get worse. And then Lucrezia the mermaid, Lucrezia the wounded butterfly, Lucrezia with the long and sparkling and brilliant and new and silk dress and paid 90 euros on sale; she slips under the covers, prepares to sleep for the last time with the boy she will have to question tomorrow to calculate the end-of-year averages.

She will fall asleep turned on her side, with her back to Alessandro, lulled by the sound of him obsessively scrolling Instagram, opening videos and reels, scrolling through stories, and listening to audio from his classmates.

Lucrezia will sleep and dream of a man climbing from the hotel balcony and wanting to harm her. Then she will suddenly wake up and see that there is no man; she will only see her mermaid dress lying on a chair.

The next day she will get up and Alessandro will no longer be there; she will see him again in the classroom and then she will go home, throwing the dress in the washing machine like a dead chrysalis, a dirty piece of paper like so many others.

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