

Maria Pia Oelker



*A woman
in the shadows*

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A Woman In The Shadows

«Tektime S.r.l.s.»

Oelker M.

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A historical novel set in Tuscany in the 18th century, during the enlightened government of Pietro Leopoldo of Hapsburg Lorraine. Autobiographical memories of the Grand Duchess Maria Luisa, his wife and confidante. “Vienna 1792. Maria Ludovica of Bourbon, the Spanish Infanta, for many years Grand Duchess of Tuscany and now Empress of the Holy Roman Empire, watches impotently the sudden death of her beloved consort, Pietro Leopoldo of Hapsburg, and from that moment begins almost frenetically to rekindle, one after the other, her innumerable memories of a life, still short, but intensely lived, beside the man who, since their first meeting had fascinated and conquered her, and to whom she had been a discrete and faithful companion. Public facts are weaved together with private feelings, with joys and suffering, in a sequence of urgent events. The Empress unconsciously knows, has always known, that she cannot survive for long (Editor’s note: she will in fact die just two months later) after the death of her husband and therefore must hurry to organise her memories, to finally manage to give an answer to the most important question for her: what did she really mean to him? Only a political and dynastic link, the mother of his children, friend and confidante or the woman he loved notwithstanding everything?”

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Chapter 1

He now seemed to be sleeping peacefully, after a night and a morning with a high temperature that had come on suddenly. In the half-dark large room, I was left alone with him, except for the presence of a nurse, and I had sat near the window to do my embroidery. My thoughts were like the clouds, almost completely covering the winter sun on the roofs of Vienna, melancholy and cold.

I watched him while his face, still red from the fever, was almost hidden among the puffed-up cushions on the bed: his hair had lost almost all the blond of his youth, his eyes for some time were permanently encircled by thick dark rings, left by the innumerable worries that every day, every hour, beset him incessantly.

I remembered again the first time I saw that face, still very young, depicted in a medallion decorated with pearls and precious stones. I had looked at it for several minutes with curiosity and a few goose pimples, studying the elongated oval face, the serious and deep-set eyes, the slim nose and the high and thoughtful forehead and I gave a sigh of relief: he was rather nice and I wondered if one day I would manage to even love him or at least feel a certain affection for him.

I knew no-one was expecting us to love each other, it was not a thought that at all disturbed the sleep of our august parents, the sovereign rulers of two powerful states; the main issue was the alliance between two one-time enemies, the sharing of power and dominance over Europe, sanctified by that marriage, as well as by international treaties.

Almost twenty-seven years had passed since our wedding and that time seemed to me to have flown by in a flash, in an intense life, lived to the maximum, day after day.

While my hands worked quickly and distractedly, that day I inexplicably felt my life was in the balance and I did not know if I was ahead or losing.

I smiled thinking of how many times over the years I had heard that word which was certainly not usual, neither at my father's Court nor in most of the other European courts and which was instead a source of continual and heated discussion at Pitti or Poggio Imperiale palaces. I felt shivers of cold

running down my spine and I pulled around my shoulders the wool and silk shawl that my husband liked so much for its aquamarine colour, which was his favourite

I heard him move slightly. I turned towards the bed and saw his face contract in a slight grimace of pain. He was still asleep, but I do not know why he did not seem to me to be as calm as he was a few minutes earlier. I got up and approached him. I put my hand on his forehead and felt it burning. In that precise moment, he opened his eyes, looking almost bewildered, he called me and tried to get up, shaken by dry heaving. I put my arms around him, I said: "Calm down, it will be all right", while the nurse ran to help me and hold him up. He gave a last glance at me, a gasp and then nothing.

I looked at him incredulous, appalled, incapable of truly realising what had happened.

He no longer responded, his heart had stopped beating. There was nothing more man could do for him.

"Now", I thought, "only God can take care of his generous spirit."

Everything had happened so suddenly, that I could not manage to even think. I left the others to deal with him, watching them, as if they were acting in a dream, sure that I would then wake up suddenly and find him and our children again, like every day, filling my life.

But I did not wake up and, a little bit at a time, I began to finally understand what had happened. My husband was dead, I had become the widow Empress, my son was the new Sovereign.

I understood, but I could not manage to accept it.

I suddenly had the impression that a part of me, perhaps the best and most alive part, had gone away for ever.

There was now not a moment during those terrible days, when I did not ask myself, with exasperating monotony, what I had really been for him. I mean to say that I, as a woman for him as a man.

He had been an energetic, untiring and intelligent sovereign; I had been his wife, the mother of his children, but what else? What had our marriage really been? A rhetorical question, perhaps, but essential for me: it was no longer enough for me to know that we had simply played the roles chosen for us by others, when we were still adolescents, ignorant of the world, which moved disturbingly, and often dramatically, around our palaces, parks and gardens, the sparkling salons, the parties, the villas, our easy and rich lives, I wanted the truth, even if nobody could have ever been able to easily give it to me. Me less than others.

I was 14 years old, when my father, Carlo, left Naples, where I was born and had spent my infancy and early adolescence, to go to Spain and take over the throne. My brother, some years younger than me, stayed in Italy: he would become King of Naples, even though he then thought only of toys, like a real baby, spoilt and very free. They told me, almost immediately, that I would marry an Austrian archduke, the son of Maria Teresa of Hapsburg. I had been educated to accept my father's decisions, without discussion or objections: that choice, anyway, left me astonished, at the very least: but were the Hapsburgs our enemies? We had been fighting them for a long time, I had been taught, my father had taken over from the Austrians in the reign over Naples and we had lost a lot of territories, even the Italian ones had gone to the Imperial dynasty; anyway, I also knew that political reasoning did not follow any apparent logic, nor even less so, the reasoning of the heart; for the rest, if it was normal for every woman to accept the husband chosen by her family, it was so much more so for whoever, like me or my sisters or cousins, was not mistress of her own life, which belonged entirely to the State. An instrument for perpetuating a dynasty, useful to make and unmake alliances.

We talked about it between ourselves, in our secret rooms, sometimes with melancholy, other times with bitterness and impatience, according to the characters, consoling ourselves with the hope of, anyway, experiencing one great love to fill us with its exciting exhilaration. Keep up appearances, this was essential, carrying out our official function was indispensable, then - Perhaps one could find some small opening for a private life. We found them all.

It was not a great victory, but it served to maintain some shred of a dream, some residue of sweetness, to support a life beside unloved men, chosen by others, often unpleasant and domineering, occupied in intrigue and incessant wars, taken with themselves and their ambitions. In a court full of traps, conspiratorial whispers, friends/enemies, cheats and imposters.

I did not manage in time to get used to the idea of this Austrian husband, with whom I would have to live and reign in Tuscany (but where was Tuscany? I barely knew), when the tragic news came: he had died of smallpox. The plans had to be substantially changed: I would marry the younger brother, Pietro Leopoldo, who, in turn, would have given up the wife always promised to him, Beatrice d'Este. He was a year and a half younger than me, but everyone said that he was exceptionally mature for his age.

The game of chess started up again, for the umpteenth time: the chancellors started again discussing, sending despatches, evaluating the pros and cons, proposals and counter-proposals, in a mad, absurd and very natural merry-go-round.

Territories and peoples, marriages and nuptial agreements, financial clauses and ceremonial arrangements, etiquette and government, all in the same cauldron. It has always been like that and there was no reason to change it, if the mechanism worked perfectly, tested over centuries of dynastic history.

Together with our nannies' milk, we had sucked in this simple concept: we are pawns in a game that is bigger than all of us, we have to subordinate our personal wishes to that which the family had decided in the supreme interest of power.

In reality, when I was sixteen or eighteen years old, I did not know anything about concepts like personal aspirations, free will or things of that kind. None of my teachers or tutors had taken the trouble to even mention it to us. To my brothers, one destined for the Naples throne and the other to that of Spain, perhaps (I say perhaps and not by chance) something had been said, but not to us women, no. Only many years later, did I hear talk of my husband and his friends and, even though I had to initially make a considerable effort to follow them in their discussions and reasoning, it was a source of pride for me to understand and I ended up becoming very impassioned by those discussions. In my adolescence, ignorant of big philosophical matters, the problems which hounded me were very different, in common with my noble female friends and cousins. Who will I marry? Will he be a pleasant or an absolutely odious life companion, kind or overpowering, intelligent or stupid, vacuous and ignorant?

Will he like me, notwithstanding that my looks are not among the most fascinating?

We spent hours taking care of our clothes and our manners. We knew how to dance and gracefully take part in conversation. I had been taught French and I had a very basic knowledge of German (notwithstanding it was my mother's native tongue); Italian, which was the language of culture and art, I had known since I was little, even though my teachers did not manage to take away my Neapolitan accent, which according to them did not go down at all well. When I then learned that I would be going to Florence, they redoubled their efforts to refine my diction, but in vain, I fear: I never managed to adopt that sweet elocution that they used in Tuscany.

From the alchemy of my father's advisers, there finally emerged the dates and names, which would define the course of my future life. I would therefore marry the third son of the Hapsburg Lorraine house, the Archduke Peter Leopold, first at Madrid by proxy, then at Innsbruck. The date fixed for the religious marriage was the 5th of August 1765.

I knew nothing about Peter Leopold, or almost nothing, at the moment I left for Genoa and from there for Austria.

Or better, about him as Archduke and future Grand Duke of Tuscany, I had been given all the information possible, from the detailed history of his imperial family, to his studies, his culture (always and only the official virtues, you understand, not his weaknesses or his personal inclinations). I had a portrait of him that had been sent from the Imperial Court and that I wore, set in a pearl

bracelet, on my wrist. But I knew that then, in person, he would necessarily have looked different. For the rest, when I had been able to see the portrait done for me by the court painter, ready to be sent to Vienna, I had to admit that, even he would be surprised: I was really not so angelic and, if my blond hair was not bad and my physique could be considered to be well shaped and elegant (I was also rather vain about my clothes, I admit), my face was not particularly seductive.

I was not good at making myself look more attractive through make-up, perhaps because, in reality, I hated plastering myself too much and preferred more natural-looking faces.

My girlfriends sometimes looked like grotesque masks and I did not understand how they could believe they looked more attractive with all that white and that red and lipstick. Among other things, my delicate skin itches for days and days, when I give in to their insistence and let myself be convinced to follow the fashion. In this way, if I could, I would willingly do without it, but the general effect, I must admit, was rather dull. The honest and cruel mirror gave me back the image of a face too long, with a significant nose and not very big eyes. Let's be frank: I did not like myself and I was convinced that I also would not have made a good impression on my husband, I certainly would not have enchanted him and this made me nervous. I would have wanted a wedding dress rich in precious decorations and hoped that at least that would have enhanced a little, if not the aesthetic look, at least my morale.

I knew that he would have been accommodating and we would have seen each other for the first time only some days after the wedding, just for a few hours, that is to say that I would not even have had the possibility to fascinate him at least with my spirit, which everyone said was lively and sparkling.

For the sake of argument, let's say that my education, just average for a noble-woman, according to the norms of the era and, in particular, those of Spain, could stand comparison with Leopold's. Everyone talked about him as a boy in love with knowledge and science, a student of law, economics and philosophy. They said that he was very serious and mature for his age, that, even before being installed on the Tuscan throne, he had already learned in detail about the situation of his realm.

I had recently given myself a lot of work, reading and studying, arousing ironical perplexity among my ladies-in-waiting and cousins, who suggested other more mischievous routes to conquer the heart of a husband, but I did not know if I could have been able to maintain a learned conversation with him.

And, moreover, since he was a baby, Leopold had been brought up and educated to be a sovereign, but not I; no-one expected me to be well-educated and informed like a man, rather some judged it to be useless, if not inconvenient, even my love of books.

There were only a few days left before our departure. Everything was ready by now and I did nothing but cry at the thought of leaving my palace: for the second time in my life, I had to abandon familiar places, friends, life-long habits and, this time, to go to marry a man that I did not know, from a country and a culture different from mine. Having grown up in a Nordic country where snow fell in winter and the sun showed itself only a little for many months of the year, where there was no sea (had he ever seen the sea?) and the bright and splendid colours of the Mediterranean natural environment. Who knows if he was like his country, which I imagined cold and melancholy, full of rainy darkness.

Someone said that Leopold was sensitive and good, even if a bit too withdrawn, but they were rumours, not official reports.

What did they say about me?

That I would be a perfect wife, docile, kind, loving, that I was strong and healthy and I certainly would give him many children. That I would not cause trouble for him and would obviously put up with his private life without making any scenes, whatever it was, remaining always and in every circumstance, faithful and beyond reproach. That I have never loved any men and therefore came to him, not only a virgin (this was implied and moreover the nuptial contract testified to it solemnly and clearly), but pure and innocent also in my soul.

This latter thing was not completely true, but only I and my close girlfriend, Amalia, knew it, as I had confided to her my first and only adolescent love for a gentleman in my brother's entourage.

A platonic love perhaps, but overwhelming and passionate; that did not let me close my eyes for entire nights and even brought me to become delirious about impossible elopement, rebellions infeasible under the court etiquette; which made me get agitated and cry ever more bitter and resigned tears, when I realised that, even if he had loved me, there could never be any bond between us and that I could never belong to any other man than the husband predestined for me, without contemplating a suicide consequent to a prohibited act of love.

In the moments of greatest tension of the frenetic preparations, I compared that far-away and unknown archduke, not particularly handsome, to my dark-haired lover with his large bright eyes, smiling mouth and musical voice and I believed I would explode with resentment towards everyone who had always decided on my life. Then I regretted it and tried to reason objectively and be resigned to it. I did not manage it very well, but I tried.

It was then that I swore to myself that, however things went, I would never pretend again in my life.

Now I can say with absolute certainty that I have maintained that vow.

One morning, in the month of June, while I was in the garden enjoying the coolness of the trees and the gushing fountain, a letter arrived for me.

It was from my future husband.

I opened it a bit annoyed, expecting rhetorical and formal words, that would have irritated me with their empty and dull sweetness.

The butler who brought it to me said that the prince had sent the message strictly in private by means of a trusted ambassador, who had implored him to only deliver it to me by hand.

I smiled condescendingly: it figures! A scene good enough to convince only fools. I was in a bad mood that morning and I was bound to judge anyone in a manner more than severe, almost acid and perhaps a bit cruel.

Anyway, I continued with the game and, graciously, sent away also my personal-ladies-in-waiting. They were bursting with curiosity about what was written, I knew, and I was maliciously pleased to delude them. I had no intention of telling them anything, not even later. In fact, after having read the message, I would not want to have shared the contents with anyone, but not for spite this time, for a sense of modesty. For the joy of keeping it only for myself, as a precious memory and token. Peter Leopold's letter was kind, full of concern for me, of feelings so delicate that one could have said they had been written by a woman and not by a haughty Imperial prince. It was clear that he was as curious and anxious as me to have the decisive meeting, but also in anguish, nervous and insecure. Behind the courteous, but not formal, words, there was a sense of a desperate need to understand, realise and imagine the future. To justify what in reality did not need to be justified, because even he had had to accept, without any say in the matter, decisions which came down from on high.

Two closely-written pages with small handwriting, slanting and not too flowery. Well-balanced enough except for some individual letters that, here and there, seemed to have got out of control.

At the end, a little before the closing, there were some phrases that froze my heart for a moment, which already seemed to be a little calmed and cheered up at the evident discovery of a character so unusually sensitive.

Short but significant phrases: - "Do not give credit, I beg you, to what they say about my amorous adventures and above all about my love affair with Miss Erdody. By now the past, and what it meant for me, both in joy and the deepest and bitterest pain, no longer counts and I swear to you that I believe I will be your sincere servant." -

Who was that lady? I had never heard her name, but evidently Leopold took for granted that some bad-mouthed person had told me about her. And why ever would I have had to be told about her. I did not have time to reply to him, because any letter of mine would have arrived about the same

time as me and therefore it was better to keep back my questions for a more intimate and personal meeting, even though I doubted that I would have been able to overcome my shyness to ask him certain questions. On the other hand, I did not want to ask anyone else for particulars of that episode which he had mentioned, I did not like malicious gossip and Leopold had put so much shame and pain in that statement that I did not feel like expressing any kind of criticism.

Should I have rather confessed to him also “my” adolescent love for Don Felipe?

I finished reading that long letter, refolded it carefully and put it away in a pocket of my dress. I would not have shown it to anyone, not even my usual affectionate confidants.

It was for me only, I considered it almost a token of love. Although I knew that there really was not even one word of love in it, I wanted to delude myself that he who had written it had wanted to implicitly declare to me at least the full willingness to open his heart to me.

I was nineteen and a half years old and not a naive little girl by that time, although life at court, so easy and alien to any awareness of the real world, had not prepared me at all for future married life. Some wound not yet completely healed in my heart, by nature borne to give too much space to fantasies and feelings, anyway put me on the defensive.

In the evening, while in the suffocating heat of the bedroom I tried in vain to go to sleep, I looked out of the open window, through the light screen of the curtains, at the piece of starry sky above the patio and asked myself if the same stars shone in Austria and, with a smile: - Who knows if Leopold, not being able to sleep through agitation, is looking at them like me? -

I felt like a fool, but I also thought that that would have been the first thing that I would have told him.

I got up and went to the window to breathe in the strong and heady aromas of the garden in full summer flowering. I thought that it was one of the last nights that I would spend there and started to cry without knowing why. I called one of my personal maids and begged her to light the lamp on the small table.

- “Couldn’t you get to sleep, your Highness?” - she asked - “Do you want me to bring you something?”

- “No, thank you, I don’t need anything.” I’m just a little nervous, that’s all.”

She carried out graciously the task that I had requested and, before going away, asked me again if I really did not need anything to drink.

She was a woman of a certain age who had always been with me since I was a little baby who played thoughtlessly in the palaces and the Neapolitan villas, looking at the sea through the windows and enjoying the music which at times seemed to come out of nothing through the streets of Portici. I would have liked to take her with me, but she was not in the list of people of my entourage, who, in truth, would then have abandoned me at Genoa after the entry into the port and would not have followed me to Florence.

I decided that the next day, for the first time in my life, I would have an amazing tantrum to get what I wanted: a ladies’ personal companion to take to Italy. I was certain that my father would have satisfied me, I do not know why, but I was sure to succeed.

- “Would you be happy to come with me to Italy?”

- “Oh, your highness, certainly, but they have said that no Spanish lady will follow you.”

- “Right - I noticed a certain bitterness - nevertheless - anyway not to Naples, to Tuscany.”

- “I don’t know where it is, but if your Highness will be there, I would want to be there also.”

I knew that she sincerely liked me and I also, notwithstanding she was only an old governess, liked her. She was the only one with whom I could speak Italian with that Neapolitan accent of mine, so terrible for my teachers and thus dear to my heart.

- “I’ll try to have you placed on the list of my entourage, but I don’t know if I will succeed.”

She smiled.

- “you’ll be a delightful wife and Archduke Leopold will be a happy man.”

I thought: - "Not necessarily". On the contrary, he probably won't think so at all. Who knows if, when he sees me, he will compare me with his lost lover? Perhaps he will dislike me for having occupied a position that he would have wanted for another woman.

I sat down at the small table and reread the disturbing message from him that arrived that morning. I asked myself again what the story was, or had been, which had brought him to say to me those words so thick with repressed tears.

What should I not believe? Had there therefore been a scandal at the court of Vienna? What had happened between my future husband and that woman - I do not know how noble?

Evidently it was not a simple love affair between adolescents, without consequences, because otherwise he would not have even mentioned it. And yet, my God, he was only eighteen years old! When did all that (and what was this "all that"?) happen?

I racked my brains for a little while, without obviously drawing anything out, until I had a bad headache and decided to give up trying to resolve that enigma. I did not know if I would manage to stand the burning curiosity for two more months (that much time remained before the wedding), for the sake of argument, it was the case to speak about "that" thing from the first meeting with Leopold.

I closed the letter in a minuscule case of precious wood and inserted it in a secret drawer. I did not want to risk it being found, even by mistake, by some indiscreet sister or by my most curious ladies-in-waiting.

I stayed for a while looking at the night sky until it began to become slightly brighter in the East. I went to bed and fell asleep almost immediately, continuing to dream of a very beautiful young woman who cancelled with just her presence every effort of mine to appear gracious, confident, cultured and refined. In the dream, Peter Leopold appeared as in his portrait, but his eyes did not so much as look at me and, even though he was courteous, he did nothing but smile at her.

I woke up in even more of a bad mood than the day before and my tantrum to get the old Neapolitan governess to follow me, and not only as far as Genoa, became spontaneous and perfect. My father agreed, although objecting that I could not begin my new life with those whims. He knew only too well that in reality I was submissive and obedient like none other of his children and this must have convinced him that he could not deny me such a modest request.

The bad mood however continued still for some days, until it was replaced by the commotion of the goodbyes, mixed with the excitement and nervousness about the unknown future that awaited me in the land of Italy.

Chapter 2

After interminable days of sailing we disembarked at Genoa, where I met my cousin Luisa, who came from Parma and had, in turn, to embark to go to Madrid, as the wife of my brother Carlo. She was only 15 years old. We were two princesses, but we were alone and a little fearful thinking about what awaited us, exactly like any other two girls.

I talked to her about my brother and told her about life in the royal palace of Madrid. I gave her a very detailed description of the people, the places, the climate and the marvellous art galleries, in which she seemed particularly interested. I talked about my family and girlfriends I had left and finally Luisa seemed to calm down.

She did not know anything more about my future husband than had been told to me, even though her sister had some years earlier married Joseph, the older brother of Peter Leopold and the future Emperor.

I could not do so without betraying the oath that I had made and asked her if she had ever heard tell of some romantic scandal that had recently happened in Vienna.

- After all - I thought - she is about to leave and will not be able to gossip with anyone.

She replied no and I drew a breath of relief: perhaps all things considered, Leopold had got caught up by an exaggerated and useless scruple.

We stayed together for five days, then we said goodbye at the port. She took the sea route, I the mountain one in a North-East direction.

I crossed, with my entourage, the Apennines and the whole Padua plain, immersed in a muggy and oppressive heat. We went up towards Modena and then towards the Alps.

Every evening I asked how much further it was to Bolzano, where I had to meet Leopold, and when they told me that we should arrive the day after, I almost felt suffocated.

- "How do I look?"

- "Very beautiful, your highness".

- "Don't talk nonsense, I'm not very beautiful. Tomorrow morning, I want the dress with the green flowers and you must come in time to comb my hair and do my make-up".

- "Don't worry, Highness, your future husband will find you lovely".

- It's not true - I thought - he will compare me with the other woman and immediately hate me.

I was more tense than ever at that horrid thought, I would have wanted to escape, turn back, die that same night, just to not have to suffer his, in my opinion, inevitable, disdainful look, his tolerance.

I did my best to calm myself, but, in the morning, I had evident rings under my eyes, that the skilful make-up by my maids hardly managed to cover.

I got into the carriage for the last few miles that separated me from the meeting. I felt my heart choking my breath with its thundering beat. If I had had a girlfriend around, I would have cried, but there were only strangers with me, come to escort me and I felt very embarrassed.

It was pouring with rain when we stopped and then I saw him for the first time: he was standing under that deluge, head uncovered, waiting for me.

He was tall and slim, a very young face that looked even younger than his eighteen years, a proud bearing, but not arrogant. His dark eyes stared at me for a moment, while I tried to bring out my best smile. He took my hand to help me get down from the carriage and I sensed that he was as nervous as me. He greeted me ceremoniously and accompanied me into the palace where I was lodging.

It was pouring with rain everywhere and I, notwithstanding the moment of extreme tension, smiled to myself.

- "What do you have to smile about, Highness? He asked, curious.

- We are leaving a stream of water behind us.

- Does it seem so funny to you?"

- "Yes, decidedly", a response at least unusual, not really according to protocol; "our passage certainly will not pass unnoticed".

Even he smiled for the first time since we had met and that smile completely transformed his face, giving him a pleasant air and lighting up his too serious eyes.

- "You're right" - he agreed - "we really look like two ducks in a pond".

I laughed at that that curious expression I had never heard before and he echoed me.

We had to dine together in my apartment that evening.

When he arrived, he was most handsome in his red and gold suit, I had chosen a blue dress embroidered with silver and pearls.

- "What happened to that gracious dress that you had on today?" - he asked me.

- "Why"?

- "I liked it very much".

- "But it was certainly not suitable for this so special evening."

- "You say so? Aquamarine is my favourite colour."

I looked at him and asked myself if he could be serious.

- "Would you have the patience to wait for me fifteen minutes more?"

- "Certainly".

I disappeared into my rooms and changed in haste and fury, putting on a dress in the colour that he had declared was his favourite.

When I returned to the dining room, he met me with a delicious smile and whispered to me:
- “You have been kind to indulge me, but I don’t want you to believe that it’s your duty to do it in every case.”

- “No” - I said - “but I will always be happy to see you smile like now.”

- “Have they perhaps said that I am not a cheerful type? That I’m too serious and sometimes even sad?”

- “Yes”.

- “And what else have they said about me?”

- Oh God - I thought - here we are.

- “I know many things about you as an Archduke and Prince, about your brilliant studies, your culture, but, sincerely, I don’t know anything about you as a man; I imagine that also you don’t know much more about me.”

He insisted as if he had not heard:

- “What else?”

Then I gave a start - “Do you want to refer to what you mentioned in your letter?”

He stared into my eyes so intensely that I found it hard to bear that look. He made me stay calm whatever thing he revealed to me.

- “No” - I murmured - “they haven’t told me anything about that story and I, notwithstanding I was burning with curiosity, haven’t asked anyone anything. It seemed to me indelicate towards each other and I have decided that I would have learnt it only from you. If you don’t want to talk to me about it, don’t worry, I will respect your discretion and your wishes. Talk to me about it only when and if you wish. It’s your right to not say anything if it’s so painful for you. Because it is, isn’t it? I understood it as soon as I read those words.”

Peter Leopold did not reply, he only grasped my hand and brought it to his lips. I saw that his eyes were moved to tears.

- “I thank you for your sensitivity. I swear to you that I will tell you everything, one day. It’s not easy for me, but perhaps with you I will do it. I hope that we will be friends.”

- “Friends?” - I murmured and from my voice there must have leaked out the delusion that, notwithstanding everything, had invaded me at those words.

- “Is that not enough for you? Do you want” - he hesitated a moment - “love?”

I remained silent and thought of the only love that had lightened my life and, comparing it at this moment, felt a cold chill in my heart.

We sat down facing each other and not one of us had much desire to eat. We looked at each other, scrutinising each other in silence and chasing each other’s thoughts, while the waiters bustled around us.

I found him quite pleasant and interesting, in his manners and looks. Sensitive and sweet, which moreover confirmed the impressions his letter had made on me, but also direct and frank when it was necessary.

I felt a little embarrassed before his gaze, which was examining me with scrupulous attention, even though not arrogantly.

I hoped that I did not seem too insignificant to him nor too foolish. The extended silence at a certain point seemed intolerable to me and, I do not know why, I began to tell him about my childhood in Naples and the games in the park at the royal palace at Caserta, the marvellous climate and the sea.

- “Have you ever seen the sea?”

- “No, never.”

- “Oh, - I smiled - “in Naples it’s marvellous. Blue and green, transparent and warm. At sunset, the sun leaves golden stripes on the water that appear to contain all its light, almost to console us for the night that is coming and, in the evenings with a full moon, it’s a dream. Also in Vienna does the starlit sky appear to be a golden quilted blanket?”

He smiled, resting his chin on his hand, “Are you always so poetical?”

I do not know if he said it ironically, but by now the memories of my past, which was around the corner and yet it seemed to me centuries ago, crowded my soul so much that I could not stop. In the end, I had told him more than I would have wanted, but I did not regret it. I felt lighter and calmer now.

- “Have you ever been in love?” - He then asked me.

- “No” - I lied.

He blushed and closed his eyes - This however was a lie. I did not believe I deserved it.

- “Why do you want to know about me what you do not want to tell me about yourself?”

- “You are right, I apologise.”

- “And yet I want to be sincere with you. I was sixteen years old when I fell in love with a young gentleman in my brother’s entourage.”

- “Do you still love him?”

- “No; it was, I think, an adolescent thing, a little too much daydreaming. Or perhaps it was only a way of saying to myself that my soul and my heart were mine only and no-one could have them if I did not allow it - well, life is not like that, I know, but at times you need to just delude yourself in order to not die.”

- “Die? Did you die when they told you that you would have to marry me and not your lover? Certainly, you would have preferred it to have been him to give you your first loving kiss and make you dream and not an Austrian archduke, surly and cold, a little sad and certainly not handsome like your Spanish gentleman.

I thought of the resentment smouldering for days inside me at the idea of not being able to realise a dream and end up in the arms of a stranger and I kept quiet to not hurt him.

I now felt suddenly tired and I no longer had the desire to open up my heart to someone who did not intend to open himself up at all.

Peter Leopold noticed and apologised.

- “I have been indiscreet, excuse me”. “You have been sincere and I instead cannot manage to tell you anything about myself.”

- “My love was a dream, almost a fine game, I knew it from the start; even though I suffered enough, it did not leave too painful wounds in my heart. I did not add “Like yours”, but he understood.

Contravening every rule of etiquette, he took my hand again and kissed it. I felt his lips slightly trembling. I looked at him and saw that he was pale and his eyes seemed lightly circled with dark and misty, like from a fever.

- “Do you feel well?” - I asked.

- “Yes, why?”

- “Excuse me, you are so pale.”

- “I am well, I am just very tired. - If you give me permission, I will withdraw.

- “Certainly, your Highness. I also, indeed, am tired and over the next few days many commitments await us.”

- “Right” - he said, bowing his head respectfully.

I saw him furtively pass a hand over his forehead and, when he got up to leave, he seemed to me to stagger slightly.

- “Your highness” - I called him back

He turned round again to me and, in that moment, I thought – “He’s really not well.”

- “Tell me.”

- “Sleep well”.

- “Thank you, I wish you also a good rest. Do not dream too much of the beautiful gardens of Madrid. Here we are in Austria and the weather is really very bad. The Spanish sun is by now far away.

I also got up and took two steps towards him and he shook my hand, this time not in a formal way, but almost comradely: “Anyway, thank you for everything. You have been a pleasant discovery.”

Then he went off quickly, before I could add anything more.

The next day, someone said to me that, in fact, Leopold had not been very well in the last few days before our meeting, but that now he was much better. I thought, I do not know why, that it was not at all true and that his indisposition was still present and that it belonged more to his soul than to his body.

Going from Bolzano towards Innsbruck, it seemed to me that the mountains hung threateningly over me; the dark colours, only rarely and for short moments illuminated by some ray of sun, that managed to escape from the low blanket of cloud that hid the mountain peaks, gave me a sense of oppression and melancholy. Inside myself I compared that severe and dark world with the sun which had shone on my days, sometimes burning, but so bright and vital. And it seemed to me that my most pessimistic expectations were coming true. Even he had seemed to me cordial, not so reserved and grey as they had described him to me; perhaps not extrovert and effusive like a Neapolitan prince, but certainly anxious to establish a good relationship with me. He had said: “You have been a pleasant discovery” - and I wanted to delude myself that I had made a small breach in his heart. I had to do it in order to not feel myself alone and abandoned. Because this was the feeling that dominated me, while I travelled up the roads that, little by little, left the Adige Valley to climb up towards the mountains. Leopold was in another carriage and we met each other only during the brief stops.

Chapter 3

On the morning of the wedding day, the sky seemed for a short time to take away the usual dullness and the sun appeared, warm and bright, even though continually threatened by grey clouds which raced over the sky and promised more torrential downpours.

- “My life will always be like this sky” - I said to my Neapolitan lady- in-waiting when I looked out of the window - “I could do with a fine sun to warm my soul, but it does not come out very often, I fear.”

- “What are you saying, your Highness? I do not understand and today should not be a day of melancholy. You told me your future husband is nice and kind, don’t you think you’re lucky?”

- “Yes, don’t worry” - I forced myself to smile, but I thought – “Only that he will not love me and he will always have his heart elsewhere.”

At six o’clock in the afternoon, I made my official and solemn entrance to Innsbruck.

Leopold was waiting for me in front of the church of San Giacomo and, when I saw him, I could not do other than feel my heart constrict: he was white and suffering, so much so that at a certain point he had to be supported by his valets: he looked like a man condemned to death being led to the scaffold, rather than a husband on the most beautiful day of his life. He only glanced at me and I felt tears welling up in my eyes: it was not like this that I had imagined the day of my wedding. In reaction, I rejected that thought almost with hatred and concentrated my thoughts on the face of my beloved Felipe, sunny, smiling, bright and extrovert. I did not make much use of that absurd rebellious attitude, but at least I seemed to manage to keep a minimum of my identity.

Suddenly, while were kneeling, he stretched out a hand to squeeze mine. I heard a just perceptible whisper and turned my head slightly, he was again very ill and I feared that he was about to faint.

I waited a moment, but he did not add anything more and I convinced myself that I had imagined it all. Our nerves were evidently at the point of snapping.

The long ceremony finished and Leopold, immediately after the lunch, excusing himself in a cold and formal way with me, returned to his rooms, feverish in mind and body.

I found myself in the middle of a whirl of parties and receptions without him. Luckily my father-in-law, sparkling and cordial, was a delicious companion and helped me to feel less alone.

There were never-ending dances, theatrical performances and receptions, but I did not manage to enjoy anything and those celebrations seemed long and tiring to me, without a bit of joy.

During those days, Leopold was so ill as to be at risk of even his life and to receive the last rights; the weather was changeable and unpleasant; but the worst still had to come: My father-in-law suddenly died two weeks after our wedding, one evening after the theatre, and that was really the greatest distress for us; my mother-in-law seemed to have suddenly lost her sense of living, my brothers- and sisters-in-law, especially the youngest, felt almost lost without their cheerful and affectionate father, so good and dear also with me, who was after all a complete stranger.

The people loved him, his family loved him and everyone wept with sincere sadness.

The day after his death, I saw Leopold again, who had just been declared out of danger and had had himself taken to console his mother.

He greeted me with a pale drawn smile, but he did not say a word to me.

I looked him in the eyes and he, when he read my disappointment and resentment, diverted his eyes from mine.

Returning to his rooms, he brushed me with his hand and whispered: "I'm sorry to have disappointed you like that, but I can't do anything about it"

If I could have, I would have given him a stinging reply, such as I often reserved for annoying people when I was at my father's court, but it was not the time and place and I bit my tongue, limiting myself to say goodbye to him with a nod of my head.

The situation was paradoxical: on the one hand, the mourning and the preparations for the solemn funeral, on the other, the wedding feast having gone down in flames and equally frenetic preparations for our departure for Italy.

I saw with anxiety the time approaching for me to find myself side by side with Leopold in the narrow carriage ride for days and days.

Every so often we met, but we still had never yet slept together, him being very weak (and I suppose very weak also in spirit from that succession of unpleasant or painful events).

The evening before our departure, we went to say goodbye to the Empress and she, notwithstanding her grief, had kind words for me and gave her son her instructions and recommendations. My husband was tense and silent and I, once more, felt cast aside without any consideration.

I retired soon to my apartments with my heart full of contradicting feelings.

Firstly, sadness and melancholy, secondly, resentment for the evident indifference that my husband seemed to harbour for me, thirdly, curiosity about the places that I was getting ready to see during the long journey, which would take us towards that land in Tuscany that they said was so beautiful and rich in art, finally, a good dose of anxiety about the start of my new married life, with all that that would entail.

I was naturally not sleepy and, when my maid and my ladies-in-waiting had withdrawn, I started to read a book.

Reading was my passion and, even though my culture was not the highest, I tried to always find some new work to improve it.

That evening, however, it was a book of poetry which I had brought with me from Madrid and which I had never opened since then.

I had been told that in Florence I would find a rich and lively cultural life and that I would be able to indulge myself at my leisure among works of art and libraries. It was a thing which consoled me a little, but only a little.

At a certain point, I heard light knocking at the door and, without looking up, said: "Come in" - expecting one of the maids had come to ask, as always, if I needed anything.

The door opened silently - "I don't need anything, thank you" - I said - "you can go to bed".

Not hearing a reply, I finally lifted up my eyes from the book and gasped: in front of me was Leopold.

I leapt up from the armchair, making the book fall to the ground with a dull thud.

He signalled me to keep quiet and knelt down to pick up the book. He handed it to me with a smile.

- "You don't mind, do you, that I have come to find you?" - he then asked, almost timidly - "I couldn't sleep. You neither, I see".

I didn't know what to say, I felt my heart beating furiously.

- "Who told you that I was still up?"

I blushed –

- "No-one, but" -

- "And if I had been already in bed?"

- "You're my wife after all" - he objected – "don't I have the right to enter my wife's bedroom?"

- "I'm not your wife yet" - I responded, embittered - "And you, it seems, don't care about it very much."

His eyes became dark and narrow, like two cracks - "Do you want to provoke me? Do you perhaps believe that I am not capable, if I wanted, of asserting my rights over you in every way? But I did not want our life together -"

- "That you abhor just thinking about it" - I interrupted him - "because all you do is compare me in your heart with the one you lost and you find that I am ugly and insignificant in comparison with her. Thus you feel you have the right to reject me, to keep me away from you and your heart and accuse me of wanting to take the place not asked for. But you know, like me, that neither of us has been free to choose and I certainly am not to blame if they separated you from her. Will you reproach me for this lost love for all your life? Why then haven't you fought for her? Like a tiger you should have pulled out your claws and instead you are closed in yourself, stewing until you put your own life in danger. I well know that you don't love me and perhaps you never will and if you ever come into my bed, it will be because the sovereign rights and loyalty to the Imperial family call you there. But do you perhaps believe that it's different for me? You have kept me away from you since the first moment and now - now you come and tell me" -

The tears choked the words in my throat, I tried to swallow them to take control of my emotions again - "Please, go away, I want to be alone.

Leopold remained in silence listening to my bitter outburst.

- "Calm down" - he murmured - "and forgive me. I repeat that I don't want to force you against your will. You accuse me of not being able to forget, but not even your heart is really as free as you want to make it look. I don't want us to start our life together so badly. It has been a terrible month, this last one, and I must still take back the reins of myself. I only wanted to talk with you for a bit."

He took one of my hands and with the other dried the tears which were running down my face. He made me sit down again in the armchair in which I had sunk on his arrival. He sat at my feet and indicated the book he had in his hand.

- "What were you reading, may I know?"

- "Poetry".

- "Yes, if I remember well you are very poetical, especially when you talk of the sea and the starry skies. We haven't had much sun lately, have we? But I believe we will find it soon, when we are far from here, in Italy, you and I alone."

- "Do you think so?"

- "Certainly, trust me and be my friend. I need it."

I looked at him and saw that he was sincere.

- "Would you like to read me one of those poems?"

- "They are in Spanish; do you understand it?"

- "Just a little, but it's not too different from Italian, if I remember well, and I understand that perfectly. At the Florence court, we will speak Italian obviously and I am fully committed to learn it properly. You naturally have an advantage, seeing that you were born in Italy."

- "But I have a Neapolitan accent you could cut with a knife and, according to my teachers, this was not good. They despaired about it."

- "You will learn also Florentine. We will learn it together, if you wish" - he added.

I smiled at the idea of the two of us, like little schoolchildren, applying ourselves in the evenings to studying the Tuscan dialect.

- "What are you smiling about?" - he asked

- "The two of us doing our homework in the evenings to show off our good Italian in the morning!"

- "Ah, certainly, we'll talk about it. How about that poem then?"

I chose the poem that I loved most and which talked of the perfume of orange and jasmine flowers which, on the starry nights of the Alhambra, rose up to the open windows of the beloved. And she sighed from her pain at not being able to join her cavalier and run away with him. A prisoner in a palace that was gilded, but for her darker than a prison.

Leopold listened in silence, then asked me for explanations about the words that he had not understood and, finally, he wanted me to read it again.

- "It's very beautiful even though sad. It's a bit like you".

- "No, your Highness, I would say that that it's more like you."

- "And you, do you feel like a prisoner?"

- "A little, I was rather spoilt at my father's court and I felt like the mistress of the world. Now - I'm afraid."

- "Of what?"

- "Of facing up to the real world and not having any friend to help me do it."

- "I'll be there."

- "You?"

- "You insist on not trusting my words. It's my fault, I know, and I ask your forgiveness. But I'm sincere when I tell you that we will be friends. Give me time, I beg you, for all the rest."

- "Time heals, time destroys. Time does not give love that the heart does not feel."

- "Who said that?"

- "My Neapolitan governess said it. It must be an Italian saying."

- "Perhaps it's wrong, don't you think?"

- "It could be" - I admitted.

- "Do you hope so?"

- "Yes" - I confessed - "I believe in" - I shook my head and did not finish.

Leopold hid his face in my hands, kissing them tenderly:

- "What? Tell me, please."

- "That you're in love with me. For that reason, I've hated you so much for your coldness these last few days, when I would have wanted warmth and affection."

Leopold whispered: "For me you're like the sun after the winter. I can't promise you that I will forget, but I swear to you that I will always respect you and always be near you. You can count on me every minute of your life."

He held me tight and kissed me. I returned his kiss and, for the first time since my departure from Spain, I felt at home.

We remained chatting about a piece of poetry, Tuscany, the sea of Naples and the Alhambra gardens, the snow-covered Alps and the parks of Vienna.

Leopold laughed at my Neapolitan witty remarks and I was spellbound to hear his political projects, remaining amazed by his maturity and soundly judgement, unusual for such a young boy. He wanted my opinion about things of which I was totally ignorant.

When I apologised he observed: "Don't worry, I will teach you myself. Do you know that in my family they call me "The Professor", because of my obsession with explaining everything that they do not know?"

He was ironic and sometimes really nice.

It was getting late and Leopold said that it was time for him to go.

- "I have disturbed you too much and you must be very tired."

- "You haven't disturbed me, I am pleased that you came."

- "All right. See you in the morning."

- "Yes".

He bent down and kissed my hand with his usual formal composure. He went towards the door, then thought again and turned towards me. He embraced me almost convulsively and murmured: - "Don't you want to let me stay with you tonight?"

I felt an explosion of joy in my heart - "I want it more than anything else in the world."

He loosened my hair and I undid his shirt. Our hands joined and our mouths searched for each other greedily.

He took me in his arms, notwithstanding that I protested that he should not make that effort, and placed me on the big bed that saw us finally become husband and wife.

Shortly after dawn, he woke me up and he said to me that he had to return to his apartments to get ready for our departure.

I, still half asleep, could not immediately comprehend the situation and I had to look at him with the rather dazed air of someone seeing a ghost, because he kissed me and said: "Don't you remember any more that I'm now your husband?"

I smiled: "Yes, I remember."

- "And did you not like it?"

- "I did, and -" I blushed, interrupting myself, I did not yet have enough confidence to ask him what he had felt in making love with me, much less did I dare to venture onto that slippery ground which was an investigation of his fantasies. If he had been thinking about her while he was with me or, instead, I had finally become in his eyes a real person with the feelings, fears, joys and expectations of every being and not of an ideal woman, for something else unreachable, who shone with their own light like a sun, without blemishes or weaknesses.

- "Yes" - he said simply - "It was very pleasant also for me. And - I didn't think about her, if that's what you wanted to know. I was really with you, only with you. Now I must go."

- "Stay a little longer, it's not yet morning, that was the song of the nightingale, not the skylark."

- "Don't tell me that you know about Elizabethan theatre."

- "Yes, enough, there are works that I adore, even though some of my teachers considered it inappropriate for modern times, too full of passion and dark tragedies."

- "I like it too, even though I had to read it almost hidden from my mother. Well now, my beloved, it's time to go, even though I have more desire to stay. We'll meet again later."

Suddenly a flash of pain crossed my soul and I held his arm tight with force, he looked at me surprised:

- "What is it?"

- "Don't go, I don't want to end up like Juliet."

- "Romeo, if I'm not wrong, loved her up until death. What are you referring to?"

- "Nothing, it's just that, suddenly, I don't know how I've seen clearly that I could not in any case survive you and that my life will end with you."

- "What dark thoughts! They don't go well in such a young girl. And just after the first night with your husband. Aren't you calm?"

- "I am, but it's difficult to explain what happens to me every so often. Irrational feelings, inexplicable intuitions, which however then happen always exactly how I have suddenly seen them, in a flash which brightens the darkness of the future."

- "I fear that your teachers were right, Shakespeare's theatre is not suitable for you."

- "Don't split hairs with me, I can't bear it."

- "Oh, oh, are you so decisive notwithstanding your sweet and submissive look?"

- "It's for you to discover, my lord."

He laughed and went away without adding anything else.

I lied down again with a sigh of happiness waiting to call the maids who should dress me and prepare me for the journey that awaited me that day.

I brushed my hand over the pillow on which until a little while ago his head was resting and swore to myself that I would have won him over to such a point that I would have made him forget for ever his adolescent love affairs.

I didn't yet know that I would have had instead to fight all my life against the ghosts of other, many other, women, whilst remaining for him the woman to whom he would always return, as to a safe haven, the friend who supported and encouraged him in his incessant work, consoled him in his sorrows and looked after him in his moments of physical and psychological weakness.

Chapter 4

Travelling again towards the south over the Padova plain, I found a completely different climate from the one I had encountered going towards Austria. The suffocating heat and the cloak of stagnant humidity had broken with the August rains and now the sky was clearer, the temperature pleasant.

The days of travel were long and exhausting, but Leopold seemed to be fully recovered and did not give any signs of particular tiredness, unlike me who often felt awful.

Travelling with Leopold was a unique experience. He usually did not talk much, but he had his way of explaining things, observing the countryside that we were crossing through, which was fascinating for its acuteness, concreteness and at the same time for his capacity to give to his knowledge a logical and amazingly rational substrate. I listened to him interested and fascinated, but I realised more every day my cultural inadequacy compared with him. He seemed happy to have me next to him and our nights together were proving to be ever more pleasant and exciting. He had not returned to that distressing argument addressed in his letter; I expected it to be him to talk to me about it spontaneously, he was perhaps hoping that I had forgotten and was content with what life now offered me.

Furthermore, could a woman desire more than what I had?

Honestly, no.

And yet my heart, insatiable and perhaps deep down rather jealous, wanted, or would have wanted, something different from that albeit beautiful friendship, which was really growing between us, from those marital relations in which there was a lot of passion, but perhaps little love.

One day, we had just left and we were heading towards Bologna on a road made rather difficult by some recent storms, when suddenly, for no good reason, my husband whispered in my ear:- "I can't wait to arrive tonight to come into your bed -"

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