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FOUR TEXTS FOR *PAINTED*

LADIES BY VALÉRIE BELIN

PAINTED LADIES

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She had a deep, grave voice, a rasping voice almost like a man's. Her physique reminded me of Goya's Maja, but enriched with imaginings from the same painter's more violent, doomy pictures. She had the same corporeal density, the same shimmering gaze as Maja reclining indolently on her couch of pleasure, with thick brown hair, fairly short, and skin that was dark and glossy. Around her you could hear a Spanish clamour, tragic and excessive: cruel. Like echoes of festivity. Her taut gaze was fraught with the desire to throw herself bodily into life, to burn up the days and run every possible risk, including that of death itself – after all, she had nothing left to lose and she already was – dead, that is; for that is what the opaque and glistening darkness of her gaze seemed to tell me, like a wolf's coat or night at sea. She was seductive, especially because of her intense expression, an almost conquering face, like the prow of a proud ship cleaving at speed through the high waves, splashed by the surrounding reality, her skin and eyes moistened by the spray of the present. She seemed almost drunk on it all – it made her *glow*. It really was her speed, her intrinsic speed, even when her features were no longer mobile, that defined the impression her face made, which seemed to thrust out to meet those facing her in a perpetual surge towards life and others – sometimes, in fact, it was tempting to stand back, for fear of being literally knocked over. Often, her eyes were set on some invisible presence to my right, lingering pensively on whatever it was before coming back to my face, almost embarrassed at this absence. At other moments, she had the eyes of a woman who has just committed an appalling murder, and who starts thinking hard, trying to register what killing really means, and what the consequences might be.

Her face was that of a woman aged forty-two with lots of responsibilities. She could be seen as a woman of great seriousness, somewhat austere. When I saw her from a distance, sitting at the bar in her hotel, I sometimes found it hard to accept that this was the woman I was supposed to be meeting. There was always a gap between the memory of our last embraces and the rigour of that constructed, respectable, almost technical figure: you could sense from her expression that she had spent the day struggling with some complicated legal issue. But when we went up to the room and I kissed her, when I penetrated her, during those long hours of love, the face I saw was different, it was a teenager's face. In the intimacy of that acute physical proximity but above all, illuminated by this almost total baring of her inner self, her features, her skin, her expressions, and the light of her face were those of a sixteen-year-old girl. She always sweated profusely and the drops I saw beading on the surface of those radiant expressions she gifted me were like pearls of dew on the petals of a flower. Her skin was velvety like a rose, she was soft and pristine, virginal, renewed: in my eyes she seemed to be marvelling at the discovery of love and of men. There was something inexplicably primordial in the presence of this freshly blossoming face: deep down, I felt I was making love with whatever memory she might have of herself; in her eyes there was something like the awareness of a perilous abandon – and the trust that at sixteen you make sure to impress on the man who is deflowering you. I have never loved any other face as much as this one, the one that at moments I was able to help her regain, a face that seemed to have been washed clean by the rain, radiant and strangely pure: like the momentary and illusory birth of a new age. This was the face which said goodbye to me, and that watched me make my way down the corridor of her hotel when we parted. I believe I have never met a woman capable of such disparate appearances, depending on the angle you saw her from, or the distance, or the moment, or the context. She literally did have several faces, faces that had nothing in common with each other, that spanned all ages and functions, all imaginaries and territories, and for me this faculty was supernatural – supernatural and captivating.

Hussard is the first word that would have come to mind, with the adjective from Stendhal, if I had been called upon to describe her when I met her, or to explain what it was about her

that most melted my heart. Not that her body was particularly masculine, but like those Marivaux heroines who find themselves having to dress up as men, and whose gentleness is only amplified by their efforts to coarsen their voices and puff out their chests like preening birds, she let herself be discovered amid a cunning imitation of male posturing. I felt this sensation even when she was putting on women's clothes, although she liked nothing better than items from the male wardrobe, even ones with military overtones. Her impishness, those eyes sparkling with stratagems, the falsely serious expressions that collapsed into helpless laughter, this habit she had of saying, as if inadvertently, the only words that couldn't be said, her crimes against good taste when she struck up attitudes that she knew might upset people, but that she pretended she couldn't help — in a word, that reckless side of her played no small part in this impression I had of multiple genres, of constant disguise. As it happens, this effect was heightened by her face, which could be read as a fruitless and, you could say, natural attempt to make up a charming woman's face as a man's. Thick, short black hair, lots of it, increased the volume of her head, and a lock straggling down to her eyebrows hid the prominent forehead. Her eyes were a little bit too close together, which added intensity to her face, giving her the absorbed look of someone who is about to brave danger. Her narrow nose seemed to retract at the end with the expression of some feeling of offence that you might fear would end up with her challenging you to a duel. Her upper lip, its outline like a seagull spreading its wings, produced the same ornamental effect as a slender moustache. There was no denying the singular impact of her presence, and there were times when it was mysteriously disturbing. For my part, I understood two years later that it was her illness which I found so magnetic, even before I registered its reality — I mean, the solitude and darkness of her gaze, a troubling imagination, something like the roar of a battle raging in the distance at night (forgive the cliché, but it is eloquent), as the backdrop to a suspicious and irritating euphoria. I could now see a certain number of things that I had found so mysterious in her, offsetting a certain kind of banality, for what they really were: the symptoms of her madness.

Her face is steeped in the words she has just spoken. Something steep and abrupt, alien to our language. Her face is the sky, the earth, rocks, oceans, the softness of early morning. Her skin, insults, supplications. Scratches. She softens and wants to hurt me. She wants, *tenderly, violently*, to hurt me. Voluptuous pain. It was graceful and it is becoming plaintive. Absolute woman whose absolute love can switch into absolute menace. I have always

known there could be no bargaining with her. I have always known that the reverse of her regal side might crush me. Excess, lightning, wildness, selflessness. No bargaining with her: there is no negotiating an imperious principle. Most of the young women I knew were constantly splintering into disgust, desire, irritation, and moodiness, bifurcating from themselves in the most scattergun way. They were fluctuating, unstable, random, unfinished. The slightest event might get them going, blazing on the petrol of their mood swings. These young women were full of fugacity and vagaries. She was exact. She was definitive. I have never met a woman less proud than she was: her stature makes pride quite unnecessary for her. She is never in bad faith: she stands well beyond all approval. The young women I had known before her all unfolded, unrolled, demonstrated, and insinuated themselves. To me it was as if they were extending the flatness of reality, like ribbons of motorway. Their minds worked like an equation reacting to the parameters you feed into it, producing an inflation of results. Seek reassurance. Find a justification. Drive yourself mad. She was a low relief. What is a queen? A queen is a woman whose absolute absence paradoxically induces an absolute presence. She is to herself what the night, what the rain, what a planet are to themselves: absolute presence and absolute absence. She does not think of herself; her presence *is* thought. With her there are no beads to tell, no layers to peel. She does not fluctuate. She is fragile, abyssal, painful, frightened. She is the most fragile, the most tragic, the most intelligent, the most terrorised woman I have ever met. She is herself her own dread: she turns to face the light. This dread does not divide her; it is the reason why she never divides. She is never indulgent. Ordinary narcissism would expose her existence to the worst dangers: a fatal cruise in the shadows. She takes refuge in her gaze, a mineral gaze, with a power that has always intimidated me. She is fragile and radiant the way a crystal object can be: either it is whole, or it shatters – there are no half-measures.

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