

*Brussels, 19 June 2015*

I was once again standing alone in the middle of my empty apartment, a prestigious Art Deco address in Brussels that my uncle LouLou had given me for my thirtieth birthday. I was his only niece, possibly the only girl he ever loved. “Dear Benedetta,” he told me back then, “I hope that you are terribly happy in this apartment, but if you aren’t, you can sell it and spend the rest of your life drinking champagne.” Very much his style. I truly missed him. This apartment was famous for its stunning original granites, the flower patterns of which would surprise an attentive observer. Over the past few months I had spent countless soothing hours staring at them and following the imaginary lines formed by the granular structure, as if a mysterious map would be disclosed to me. I imagined that this map would lead to a place to heal my heart, or to a bottle of whiskey. Average whiskey would do.

“A taxi should be here any minute now, ma’am,” said the night clerk when I picked up the phone. Lost in memories, I did not know what to answer. I hung up without a word.

I had met Tony in Monte-Carlo almost three years before, in November 2012. With his funny moustache, he looked anything but average to me. Appearances can be so deceiving at times. Tony is my ex-husband, a sophisticated upmarket gigolo turned into an unlikely shepherd. I have this kind of impact on people. No kidding.

I was in Monte-Carlo doing LouLou a favor, representing him in the selling of a Kandinsky, which had to go through a second-tier auction house in a second-tier venue because it was a fake. An extraordinarily good fake, as a matter of fact. LouLou was an art dealer. The auction house was run by czarist émigrés who, for a generous percentage of the auction price, were willing to take the blow should the truth be unveiled. Their clients were mostly second-generation Russian mafia transitioning to bourgeoisie. My role was strictly limited to interacting with the auction house, and I could not have cared less about who their clients were.

The Kandinsky was sold without a hitch and delivered the same night to a bling yacht that immediately sailed out of the marina – an operation of 7.5 million euros that was being paid from an archipelago of Caribbean tax havens into LouLou’s own archipelago of Portuguese, British, and Singaporean havens. I intended to use my commission from the sale to buy authentic period furniture for my apartment, which I dreamed of one day sharing with a husband. Monte-Carlo seemed to me a place as likely as any other to meet the man of my dreams. There was no children’s room in my apartment. Raising children was of little interest to me then. Too complicated.

Having successfully completed the sale of the Kandinsky, I decided to make a grand entrance at the Monte-Carlo Casino. I was ready to rock the house in my own peculiar way. I was not in good shape: my face and feet were swollen from antidepressants, and my hips wider than usual. But I knew how to camouflage these shortcomings. I slipped into a suggestive black dress and stilettos to die for and made the most of my hair. I have fantastic hair. I topped my dress with spectacular vintage diamond earrings, courtesy of my uncle. I had just lost fifty thousand euros at the English roulette – bollocks! – when Tony spotted me. We locked eyes.

Tony was handsome, soft, and feminine in an erotic way. He was keeping company with an elderly American woman who also had an unquestionable talent for losing large amounts of money at a fast pace. It was evident that he was a ladies’ man. The American woman was proud of him, as one is proud of a trophy. I perceived an instant connection. Tony and I were two outcasts trying to mingle in a rotten society that, in spite of being malodorous, lured us in for the lack of an alternative destination. *Be careful what you wish for.* I made a bold move and sent him a bottle of champagne. Krug 1988. Not that I had ever been a seducer, let alone a manizer, but that was my night.

The waiter approached Tony knowingly. He looked at his manicured fingernails while the waiter whispered a few words in his ear and then shifted his gaze to the bottle that was presented to

him. My beau took a few seconds to appraise the monetary value of my offer and smiled at the waiter. The message had been conveyed. Despite being an incurable romantic, I was, however, not so foolish as to think Tony was falling for me. Or maybe he was, but who cares now. The waiter disappeared with the bottle lest the American woman be offended. Tony chatted with her for some time. He looked at me with an immensely sad look, his melting hurt-child look, and sighed as he accompanied her to another gaming table. He then came to me with the determination of someone suicidal walking toward the cliff. We were meant for each other.

“Madame, follow me please,” he said to me, expressing the anguish of lovers meeting for the very last time. He went into the gentlemen’s toilet. I followed him with equally strong determination. I was instantly aroused by the smell of fresh flowers and male cologne mixed with a subtle pinch of urine. Tony gave a crisp one-hundred-euro note to the uniformed young toilet attendant. “Five minutes,” he commanded. The attendant obediently stood at the door, diverting clients to other toilets.

Tony grabbed me by the wrist and shoved me into a cubicle. I was ready to surrender; it was a rite of passage. He curled his lips as if to say something. His eyes filled with tears, and he came to his knees as if he were about to propose, only to find his way inside my gown. He sighed deeply and buried his face in my pudenda. I screamed with divine delight. I wanted more. “One minute,” announced the nervous toilet attendant. My high pitch was compromising him. Tony emerged transfixed. He rubbed his face with toilet paper and handed me his cellphone. Not his phone number, but the actual device. “I will call you,” he said, and left urgently without a kiss. I figured he had only given me a sample of his oral prowess because he had sexual duties to fulfill with his American sponsor immediately afterward.

Tony proposed to me shortly thereafter. We were married a few days later, before Christmas. LouLou disapproved of this impromptu

union, though he never met my husband. My uncle was found dead in his Marbella villa four days after the wedding. Homicidal strangulation by ligature disguised as a suicidal hanging. A dramatic change of pulse. The case was never solved, but my guess is that the murderer loved tarot. LouLou was wearing a blue shirt, red pants, and yellow slippers when he was found. *Fake it until you make it* was written on his forehead. The time of death was believed to be around midnight. The Hanged Man in full glory, so to speak. Rider-Waite deck. An unhappy client, maybe, and a macabre reconstruction.

My watch read 4:45 a.m. Two years to the day since I checked out of the madhouse, and I could still see Tony making love to me on top of the dining room table. I could still feel his hands too. Perhaps because there never was any secret map in the flower granites. Perhaps because I had had too much whiskey. Tony used to make love to me in odd places – on top of a table, under the kitchen sink, on the balcony, in the car, and in public toilets, including those on airplanes. Never in our bedroom. Remembering our good days made me nostalgic. I collected my bags, turned off the lights, and locked the doors. A taxi was waiting for me in the street to drive me to Brussels Airport. I was on my way to Pisa to meet Omar, an Argentine former hotshot lawyer converted into a Vipassana coach, who had become a friend. He had a knack for Ayurvedic potions and loved cats too. God bless him. It was 19 June 2015.

Omar and I had met nine months before at Il Casolare del Belsedere, a hidden stone house on the edge of Tuscany, home to a community that knew how to celebrate life in a simple manner. Omar was arriving from a meditation retreat. This was, anyway, what he told us. He gently greeted those of us chatting on the terrace with a smile. I immediately liked him. Comfortably installed in the back of the taxi, I stopped thinking about Tony and started to recall the series of events that had made me commit myself to the madhouse.

I was at work lying on the floor, the cold hard floor leading to the fish bowl. Ugliest meeting room in the world: Big Brother is

watching you! Four years I had been working as a human resources consultant for a company named Damocles. I have a master's degree in philosophy, which I carry with much pride, although I find it useless at the same time. Anyway, when I met Tony I was leading the schizophrenic life of a successful yet unhappy human resources professional. My heart never was in this career, and my salary was ridiculously low. LouLou was supporting me financially, and everybody at work thought that I was rich, which stirred up jealousy. He wanted me to join his art business on a permanent basis, but I had consistently refused. I only carried out a few operations for him when there was no other option. Juicy Monte-Carlo was one of them. I loved my uncle to bits. Professionally speaking, I had always wanted to build an honest career on my own. I was, however, lost as to the possibilities available to me after college, and it just so happened that the first job I was offered belonged to the field of human resources – it could have been anything. I took it on without much thinking or enthusiasm. Damocles came a couple of years later.

As I was lying on the floor, I heard my colleagues moving nervously around me, whispering words the meaning of which I failed to understand. I could feel their breath on my face. I hated them for making me feel miserable and worthless. I hated them for the four endlessly boring years spent by their sides. A self-imposed lobotomy. For what imaginary faults was I trying to atone? I opened my eyes. I have amazing blue eyes. I was swimming half-unconscious in a pond of cold coffee and broken cups under the stupefied gaze of my colleagues. Could I get a bonus if I pretended this was part of a groundbreaking commercial strategy? My manager George reached down to me.

“Benedetta, can you hear me?”

“What?”

“Are you all right?”

“I think I passed out... I hope I haven't ruined the meeting.”

“As a matter of fact you have, but it's you we're worried about.”

“Me?”

“You’ve fainted again. The third time in one month. Not even mentioning the coffee cups you’re destroying during your fits. You should take a break.”

“A break?” I was puzzled.

“A break, indeed.” I remained silent. “Are you with me, Benedetta?”

“Yes. Break. How long?”

“As long as will be needed,” answered George. The conversation was over. The truth is that I was burned-out and depressed, but I could not accept that reality. Nor could I anticipate the disastrous events that would follow in the next days.

As George was helping me to stand up, I realized that any resistance would be pointless. I would have to take a break. *Atonement process*, I thought. *So be it*. I tried to walk toward my office in an effort to regain composure. I noticed how my dress had turned from bright white to some sort of disillusioned latte macchiato. Exactly how I would also describe my marriage with Tony. Easy, cheesy synchronicity. I was exhausted and sat on the floor. “I have always been a compulsive coffee drinker,” I heard myself saying in an extraordinarily high-pitched voice to the paramedics who had just arrived, seeking comfort in the sympathetic smiles of those strangers dressed in red for the special occasion.

Two days after my blackout, I landed in the office of my therapist of the time, Penelope Eagle-Eye, with a bruised face.

“Benedetta, what shall we do for you today?” Penelope Eagle-Eye asked cheerfully. I answered by imitating a young Tom Waits singing “Virginia Avenue.” I had too many troubles and nobody to tell them to. What was a poor girl to do?

“I’m sorry. I can’t quite follow you,” said Penelope Eagle-Eye upon completion of my little show, handing a few coins over to me. Some say that yesterday’s great poets have become today’s singers. Or they became therapists and psychiatrists. Who knows.

“I’m definitively channeling David Copperfield’s spirit in the twilight. I’m being instructed to become an illusionist,” I eventually added.

“When is the last time that you had a proper night’s sleep?”

“Who needs sleep when the world is so abundant and providing with so many little miracles? Sleep is overrated. Seriously.”

“I see...”

“What do you see?”

“Unnecessary to ask you whether you have been taking your medication properly, I suppose. So, what I see,” stated Penelope Eagle-Eye with emphasis, “is that you should consider additional psychological support in these challenging times. As your therapist, I recommend that before reaching Columbus Avenue, Las Vegas, or any other destination, you make a stop at Hôpital des Acacias on our own Churchill Avenue. I was told they have an old jukebox in the cafeteria, and I’m sure we can find you some David Copperfield cups and bed sheets.”

The madhouse. Really? A bloody good return on investment on the 1,612 hours of therapy and four therapists I had consumed over the past fourteen years. Maybe the psychiatric option should have been considered right from the beginning instead of making me believe that I would be just fine. “I’m sorry, but I won’t go to the madhouse. Never. No way.” This was the last time I saw Penelope Eagle-Eye. I liked songs better. The next day I showed up triumphantly at work. Attempting to cheer myself up and to convince myself that I could just do it – I had a reputation of being a super-achiever in my own right – I dressed in a short canary-yellow dress, the striking effect of which I enhanced with black stilettos and a thick layer of scarlet lipstick. I was ready to get back into the game, stronger than ever.

“What are you doing here?” George asked coldly as I stepped into his office.

“We have a meeting with our new clients,” I answered, full of exaggerated self-assurance.

“We indeed have an important meeting, but it doesn’t include you.”

“I need to be in this meeting.”

“Damocles can manage this meeting without you, Benedetta. You were asked to take a break, weren’t you?”

“I took the bloody break. Sixty-five hours, thirty-six minutes, and eleven seconds.”

“You still have bruises on your face. Don’t make things more complicated than they already are. Just go home.”

“I don’t want to go home. George, I want to be in this meeting.”

“Are you calling me George?”

“George, yes. So what?”

“My name is Jack.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Really.”

“Are you sure?”

“Benedetta...”

“Always thought you were a George.”

“Stop this!” He was turning red.

“George suits you, frankly speaking, better than Jack, and it’s the royal connection, you see. Would you consider changing your name?”

“You’re fucking mad.”

“Are you talking to me?”

“And insane...”

“And you’re boring and incompetent.”

“Benedetta, the board of directors decided yesterday that you must leave. On a permanent basis. How boring is that?” This information took a few seconds to enter my consciousness.

“What?”

“You’re fired. You’ve pushed your luck way too far.”

“I thought that Damocles wanted creative collaborators.”

“Indeed. But you’re a freak.”

“You cannot do this. You cannot fire me.”

“Of course we can! And you have given us all the reasons we needed to fire you! Your results can’t save you any more. Game over.” I was unable to articulate any sensible response. “*Au revoir! Bye! Auf Wiedersehen!* Any chance your twisted brain gets it better like that?” Jack was almost shouting.

“But—”

“Please, leave now. Security will escort you.”

This was harsh, and I was stunned. Was an ugly person playing a bad joke on me? I had given Damocles four years of my life, growing the sacrosanct *chiffre d'affaires* and obligingly smiling at clients for the sake of business, and I was being sacked? Brutally chucked out like a useless thing by this motherfucker Jack, as a matter of fact. On the verge of implosion in Jack’s office, my eyes were absently staring at the cheap rug that he had brought back from his last vacation in “an exquisite all-inclusive resort on the Turkish Riviera.” Unpardonable lack of taste. Unpardonable lack of everything.

No matter how pathetic and incompetent he often was, Jack knew how to make his way up the corporate ladder. Unlike me. I was an idealist who never hesitated to bypass instructions. I openly took sides with our clients against my management when I thought it was the right thing to do according to my values. I wanted to change the world and make the business more human and ethical. This was exactly why my supporters loved me, even at Damocles, and why my detractors disliked me so much: I cared about how we actually made money. But I was often impatient, uncompromising, and frustrating. My results were nonetheless good – really good, I mean – which protected me. Until I started to lose my grip.

From the moment Tony entered my life, I had only wished to be with him. One night at the casino, and he had become my entire world. Besides, I was finally considering joining LouLou’s art venture after all those years. Come on, one successful sale in Monte-Carlo had earned me more than years of hard work at Damocles, which were in my view meaningless and annoying anyway. Damocles’

activities, if plainly legal, were far away from the idea of an honest career that I had once cherished. When I came back from Monte-Carlo, my interest in consultancy work disintegrated. I started to make mistakes and lost one important contract. Unfortunately, when the board decided to fire me, LouLou was dead and my husband was being unfaithful to me. Jack took his long-awaited revenge on the too-many times I had exposed him; he pulled the rug from under my feet in every possible meaning.

Staff had gathered close to his office, the door of which had remained open. I do not blame them. It was live cinema, and the movie title was *The Spectacular Fall of Benedetta*. I was the star of the day, and my name was bankable. My emotions were running high. Rage was invading my heart and my mind was being unleashed as the darkest devil. Looking like a Greek goddess perched on stilettos, I wanted Jack to bite the dust too. I perceived anguish on the faces of some colleagues. I then saw an angel in a halo of fluorescent green light. He introduced himself as David, coming to save me. Archangel David? Oh no, too elementary, my dear Watson. God was in a joking mood and sending me the one and only David Copperfield for my own pleasure. That was when things really started to go wrong.

An essential part of the training of an illusionist consists of learning to fly. One is expected to develop the ability to create this type of illusion as an art form. LouLou hated illusionists. "Average con artists sold to the shallow business of entertainment," he used to say. Inspired by David's presence and my canary dress, I decided to test my magic skills. To everyone's surprise, including mine, I walked toward the closest window and jumped off with outstretched arms. A street lamp stopped my ascent, the only miscalculation in my flight plan. That and the fact that it was a second floor window, which undermined the credibility of my audacious exit. I was trying to escape from my miserable life, and jumping out a window was an option worth considering.