

The Artist's Prerogative

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His name was Pietro Ludivicci, and he was in love with symmetry.

Those statues of his were carved with a delicate accuracy, angels and saints poised to bless or condemn, their pale faces set in expressions of aloof piety. That marble virgin of his was housed inside the chapel, the object of awe among the townspeople. For the sculptor had rendered the stone folds of her clothing as soft-looking as fabric.

The flawless beauty of Ludivicci's creations was rivaled only by the appearance of the sculptor himself. With his tight dark curls, regal nose, cherubic lips, and mahogany eyes, it was as if he were the personification of the suppleness of youth. Such perfection seemed celestial, inhuman. How lovely, this Pietro!

Of course, the young women of the town were hopelessly taken with him. Why, even the mayor's wife fondly referred to him as her first love! A cacophony of tokens, flowers, letters, and gifts took up permanent residence outside his door. In the marketplace, women would tarry and stare, and those bold enough to proposition him always received the same answer: a curl of the lip, and a flat "I'd rather not." You see, Ludivicci was a paramour of human beauty—and perfection his muse. How could he settle for anything less in a lover?

These harsh rejections were hard on the ladies of the town. Many would weep, some would pull at their hair. Young Viola, who cleaned the sculptor's apartment, witnessed countless of these spurnings. In the smoky bars, her father, the innkeeper, and the older

townsmen would snidely remark that Ludivicci may as well wed one of his statues.

There came a day, as the harvest-season came round, that the sculptor unexpectedly stopped accepting commissions. For seventeen days on end, he vanished from the eyes of the community. Circulating whispers suggested illness, or even his death. Viola of course knew that the artist was not dead at all. He had thrown himself into his newest project.

Ludivicci the recluse remained shut up in his apartment, his door opening only to receive the bread and wine he paid Viola to purchase for him. During these visits, the girl caught glimpses of a form standing in the center of his room—a new statue, perhaps? Alas, she could never get a good enough look, as the sculptor would pay her what was owed and then slam the door with a force that made its frame creak.

The longer Pietro Ludivicci was in isolation, the more fanciful the rumors about him became. He had certainly lost his sanity, most agreed. Signora Columbo swore she had spotted him at the temple, worshipping the pagan gods! How could he have fallen so far? Poor Pietro! A red-cheeked and mortified Viola confessed to her sister as they lay in bed one night that she had caught the sculptor cradling what seemed to be the face of his passion project and kissing its lips!

Months passed before Ludivicci was spotted in public again. He looked certainly worse for wear, with dark shadows underneath his eyes, an unkempt beard, his shoulder-length hair hanging in an unruly tangle.

His sculpting seemed to be abandoned as a thing of the past, as he had emerged from his isolation with nothing to show for it. If one would catch him walking about in town or marketplace and inquire about his work, he would stare back with haunted, glassy eyes and mutter something about having more important matters to pursue.

No one quite knew where the woman had come from. The way the innkeeper told it, she had knocked upon the inn's door late one night (the night before Ludivicci returned to society) and requested residence. Said her name was Giana Aldi. She had paid him handsomely for room and board from a fine leather coin purse that hung from her waist. She was a painter, this woman, who wished to work undisturbed within the rooms. *Why is it that this town is the place of so many fussy artists?* The innkeeper bemoaned to his wife and daughters as they, dazed and recently roused from sleep, stumbled to prepare a room.

Soon enough, the town forgot their fascination with Ludivicci in favor of the mysterious Giana Aldi. It was as if she had been carved from marble, as such flawlessness seemed unnatural. Smooth dark locks flowed down her back to her waist and large black eyes were framed by heavy lashes. They seemed to see into one's heart, and one couldn't help but feel naked and exposed under her gaze.

She was stern and dedicated to her art with a borderline religious fervour. Her neighbors took notice, with news of her traveling within hours. Who was she? Perhaps she and Ludivicci would be the perfect match for one another. Two kindred spirits, parallel in looks and practice.

Evidently, Ludivicci was enthralled by her as well. Every evening, he would stand at her balcony, wildly waving bouquets of flowers, imploring her to come down and speak to him. No one ever saw Giana Aldi do so much as open her window. Late into the night, the sculptor would cry, shout, and even sing love poetry! *Per favore! Bella ragazza! Per favore!* Poor Ludivicci

was in such a state of ruin by the seventh night, yet he persisted. Having enough of this, the innkeeper accosted him on the street, ordering him to give it up at once! Ludivicci, likely emboldened by the wine running through his body, declared that he would never stop his pursuit until he heard word from the lady herself.

It is said, and there have been several witnesses to this, that Giana Aldi had appeared on the balcony then. Leaning over its edge, raven hair spilling over her shoulders, her disdainful shout could be heard by all:

"I'd rather not!"