

Properzia

Jean-Claude van Rijckeghem

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Translator Kristen Gehrman

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Bologna, 1505

During the reading of Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, I saw the saddler looking at me. At first, I thought there must be something odd about my appearance, so I glanced down at my gray dress, but it hung neatly over my body like a tent. I felt the edges of my cap, but no unruly hairs had escaped. As far as I could tell, there was nothing unusual about the way I looked, but still, the man kept staring at me. "Eyes forward, saddler! Listen to the letter to the Corinthians!" I wanted to shout, but I didn't, because a girl of good standing would never curse like a wench in the streets. And certainly not in a church.

The saddler's name was Asdrubale, but I called him Hairball because you couldn't tell where his beard ended and his eyebrows began. Not that I had ever seen him up close or exchanged a word with him. My sister and I only ever left our tower to go to Mass, and only when we were accompanied by Pa or our maid, Moderata. We weren't allowed to look a man in the eye. That would be inappropriate, rude, vulgar even. From our room on the second floor, we had a good view of the saddlery, where Asdrubale fastened saddles to horses and made small talk with his customers. Moderata had heard that he was in the market for a bride. And there he was, on Saint Lucia's name day—the coldest, windiest, darkest day of the year—staring at me, the hairy creep.

The thought of it gave me the chills. Had the time come? Was my life about to begin? I glanced sideways at Pa, but he was singing "The Lord is my Shepherd" at the top of his lungs as if nothing was amiss. But I knew my father. He was already aware that Asdrubale would be here this morning. Otherwise, he wouldn't have roused me and my sister for the early service and dragged us all the way here.

Pa was up before the crack of dawn. When I heard him whistling in the stairwell, it was still pitch-black outside. He noisily lit the fire in the salon. Then he stomped up the stairs and started banging on our bedroom door like a madman.

"Girls, get up! We're going to early Mass, and then we'll follow the procession of Saint Lucia," he said, bursting with impatience. Then he barrelled back down the stairs.

"Why is that man in such a good mood? It's not even Christmas Day yet," I groaned.

Beatrice was wide awake. She climbed out of our bed, pulled on her petticoat, and sat down on the pot. I didn't feel like getting up. I had barely slept a wink. The shutters on our windows had been creaking and groaning all night in the northerly wind. On top of that, my sister had tossed and turned all night, constantly pulling the sheets off of me so I kept waking up from the cold.

My fingers were still trembling as I tied the laces on the back of Beatrice's overdress. Tight, but not too tight. Then she tied mine. After that, we combed each other's hair. Beatrice had golden blonde locks down to her waist; I had dark curls. Her smooth, straight hair was easy to braid, but mine was another story. Untangling the nest on my head and taming it with a comb was no easy feat. Beatrice was also perfectly proportioned, as if a master sculptor had carved her from marble. She was slender and tall—a head taller than me—and had a voice so pure and high that I was sure she would one day shatter the stained-glass windows in the church. My voice was shrill and, to use Pa's word, deafening. He once compared my singing to a pot lid clattering on the floor. Beatrice always made sure we both looked impeccable—every morning, she checked that my braid was properly tucked into my cap and my collar was straight. At the end of the ritual, I always said, "Thank you, Mirror," because we didn't have a mirror at home. But I didn't need a mirror to know that Beatrice was abundantly beautiful, and I was not. My mouth was a speck between round cheeks, my chin a blunt triangle, and my nose had a bump on it. Visitors were often surprised to learn that we were twins, and then Pa would say that although the Lord had created us unequally, He surely had a purpose.

When we stepped out of the gate, it was still mostly dark outside. The wind whipped against our faces. The streets were full of mud puddles. We pulled the hoods of our long cloaks over our heads and crossed our arms over our chests against the cold.

By the time we reached the cathedral fifteen minutes later, I was practically frozen. A large crowd had gathered around the entrance. Everyone was pushing and shoving to get out of the rain, but a monk was standing at the door shooing away the beggars and plague victims. Once we got inside, we saw another monk trying to chase out a pack of stray dogs. The poor creatures barked themselves hoarse because they too wanted shelter from the rain. When the commotion finally subsided, the bells rang, and silence fell. The pews at the front were completely full, and we all stood for the service. A cloud of incense drifted toward us as if it were the breath of God himself.

Pa watched me like a hawk. If he noticed that I wasn't listening to the sermon, he gave me a nudge, and if I looked as if I were about to yawn—a mortal sin!—he would pinch me in the arm. That's how he made sure I stayed awake for the entire Mass and remained in God's good graces. He never had to pinch Beatrice. She was as pious as the Virgin Mary. When she coughed, she made the sign of the cross and offered her deepest apologies to her Creator. When she sang "Glory to God in the Highest", she almost rose out of her linen stockings. And whenever the priest told the story of the Last Supper or the Parable of the Prodigal Son, she burst into tears and Pa would place a hand on her head to comfort her. My sister was a perfect saint!

But then came the reading of Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. The Holy Apostle had made it clear to the Corinthians that a woman should know her place, that she should dress modestly, that she mustn't stand out, and that she should think at least ten times before opening her mouth. Pa nodded approvingly during the sermon, because naturally he agreed with every word the apostle said. Those poor Corinthian women, I thought. And that's when I caught the eye of that insolent saddler shopping for a bride.

I didn't want him. Though I had no doubt that Pa thought Asdrubale would make an excellent match, because Hairball wasn't just any saddler, he was also the bastard son of the Signor of Bologna and

sold his saddles to squires and nobles. By marrying me off to Asdrubale, Pa would become tied to the most prominent family in the city. Two years ago, when I first bled, I told Pa that I didn't want to marry some boring notary's son with fingers black from ink and broken goose quills in his breast pocket, his nose red and flaky from the cold or sun, always lugging with a bulging portfolio of papers under his arm.

"In other words, what you don't want is someone like me," Pa had said.

"Precisely," I had replied as sweetly as I could.

Should I have said that I didn't want a saddler either? How could a man who cut and stitched leather for a living possibly converse about anything other than saddles, stirrups, and horses' behinds? Did he read books? Did he go to the theater? Did he like music? I had spotted him peeking at me when I opened our bedroom shutters one morning, but I had always pretended not to see him. I didn't want to give him any reason whatsoever to consider me bride material.

When Mass was over and Pa had tossed a few coins at the feet of the beggars outside the cathedral, my sister and I lingered among the other unmarried daughters from upstanding families. It had stopped raining. The fathers formed a hedge around us, discussing everything from business to inkwells to hemorrhoids. They kept their hands on the hilts of their swords to keep the beggars, vagrants, and rattling plague victims at bay.

"The signore's son was staring at me," I said to Beatrice.

My sister looked stunned. Of course, she hadn't noticed a thing. She was too busy praying, singing, and feeling the touch of the Holy Spirit.

"The signore? The lord of Bologna? Which son? He has a dozen of them."

"Hairball," I said, and her cheeks turned red.

Then the bells rang to start the procession of Saint Lucia. The monks carried her statue through the streets. The entire city was out to celebrate the saint of light, the one who makes sure that the dark winter doesn't last too long.

Asdrubale was walking a few feet ahead of us, and sure enough, he turned around to look at me again. I avoided his gaze and fixed my eyes on the statue of Lucia towering above the heads of the crowd. The long strips of cloth hanging to the left and right of the statue fluttered in the wind. Saint Lucia was made of baked clay and carried a bowl with her own eyes in it, which always frightened the children. Still, the mothers lifted up their sick little ones and let them touch the statue with their small, feverish hands. Pale women with yellow veils and rouge on their lips kissed their fingertips before touching the statue, and half-blind men groped wildly in front of them to feel the dress hanging over the statue. They were all hoping for a miracle. Just like me. Couldn't a stone fall from the sky on Asdrubale's head? I didn't want to marry some burly saddle maker I hardly knew. But of course, choosing a man myself was out of the question. Love only existed in books and on stage. My father had probably already negotiated the marriage contract with Hairball's father, the signore. They had undoubtedly already discussed the party, the cake, the musicians, and the ox that would be roasted on a spit. Mama had always said to Beatrice and me, "Your father will make sure you marry well and don't end up in the gutter." Beatrice trusted Pa's judgment and wisdom blindly. I, however, did not. I guess the Lord had created us unequal.

I pulled my cloak tight to protect myself from the wind, cold and fear. All I could think about was Asdrubale. His hairy face pounded through my thoughts, and I couldn't even enjoy the winter sun breaking through the clouds and caressing my face. I should have, because I only had one more hour left to live.

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When we got home, we sat down to a bowl of carp and pepper soup. Pa was ravenous and slurped the fish meat off the bones. Beatrice, calm as ever, carefully spooned the soup into her mouth without spilling a drop or making a sound. Moderata poured us a little wine diluted with water. We lived in one of Bologna's many towers. It was a dark, eighty-foot column with very few windows that was always boiling in summer and freezing in winter. It was also slightly crooked, and on windy days, a brick would sometimes fall off the south side. Pa bought the tower because he thought it looked magnificent and gave him prestige as a notary. The noble family that had built the monstrosity had long since died out—they probably popped off one by one from a heart attack while climbing all the stairs, I thought.

Pa was devoted to his tower and to the wide stone staircase that led from the gate directly to the salon on the first floor, the room where we spent most of our time. Our dining table, as Pa always pointed out when we had visitors, was made of walnut. On it was a bronze candelabra that could hold five candles. I had to polish the thing every week as if it were made of precious silver. On the wall were two paintings that did their best to make an impression: a small panel depicting Mary overflowing with love for a chubby baby Jesus and a large, rectangular canvas of John the Baptist with a staff in his hand and an equally chubby lamb at his feet. Mother told us that Pa had bought them for way more money than they were worth.

When Pa had finished his soup, he rubbed his mustache and ran his greasy fingers through his hair as if he were the most handsome man in all of Italy, Michelangelo's *David*, but with a potbelly and clothes on.

"Daughters, I have news," he said.

Here it comes, I thought, and I felt myself sweating like a rabbit at the poulterer's. Beatrice gazed up at him with a brainless look on her face—she had no idea what was going on, the silly sheep!—and our maid, Moderata, who had just walked into the salon with a basket of bread and a jug of water, looked a little surprised as well.

"I've come to a decision," my father announced. "You will marry Asdrubale, the signore's son."

Beatrice laid down her spoon and looked at me with wide eyes. Her whole face seemed to double in size.

"What a surprise, Father," I said.

Moderata burst into tears as if I were her own daughter.

"I know what you're thinking, daughters, Asdrubale is not the signore's legitimate son. But he has had the same upbringing as his half-brothers. He is a Bentivoglio, even if he doesn't bear the family name."

"Goodness, a son of the signore," Beatrice blurted out and punched me in the shoulder. Then she burst into giggles. She shook in her chair with laughter, which soon turned into a coughing fit. Only after I passed her something to drink did she come to her senses. Yeah, marriage is a real thigh-slapper, I thought. It's a gift you get from your father on the darkest day of the year, after eating slimy carp soup with peppercorns.

"Thank you, Father," I said. "But first I would like to meet Asdrubale and get to know him, because marriage is a big step and I don't intend to..."

Pa looked up, slightly disturbed. "No, no, no, not you, of course. Beatrice will marry Asdrubale."

"Thank you, Father," said Beatrice. She didn't even sound surprised.

"What? But... I'm the eldest," I blurted out.

"You'll be the most beautiful couple in the city," Pa said, as if I weren't even at the table at all.

No, I didn't want to marry Asdrubale. He could turn into a cauliflower for all I cared. But this was just unfair.

"I'm the firstborn, and when a father marries off his daughters, he starts with the eldest. Even when they're twins," I said.

"What? And where is that written?" Pa demanded with his you-don't-know-anything smile, because in his eyes, nothing was true until it had been penned in ink.

"Mother said" — and I made the sign of the cross because Mama was no longer with us — "that I would marry first. Right, Beatrice?"

Beatrice said nothing.

"Properzia, if your mother were here right now and not in Paradise, she wouldn't have interfered with your future," Pa retorted. "These past few weeks, I've been discussing Beatrice's marriage with Signor Bentivoglio. The man is as noble as a silver mine. His family has ruled Bologna for almost a hundred years."

"But Asdrubale was looking at *me*," I said, and at that moment I realized that that wasn't true. The hairball had looked in my direction, but that was only because Beatrice was standing next to me. He had been sizing her up to make sure she still had all her limbs.

"Pa wants me to marry Asdrubale," Beatrice said.

At that moment, I also realized that my sister already knew. Pa must have whispered the wedding news to her days ago. That was another difference between Beatrice and me. She could keep her lips sealed, lock secrets away in her heart, and pretend nothing was going on.

I could not.

Beatrice squeezed my hand. "I'm sorry, Sis."

Then she got up, the traitor, and walked over to Pa. She knelt and kissed his hand. Pa drew a cross on her forehead with his thumb, which was shiny with carp fat.

"May the Lord bless you," he said.

And then, for Christ's sake, Beatrice burst into tears!

"Properzia," I heard someone say behind me.

Moderata pointed at my plate, and only then did I notice that I'd been crushing my carp to pulp out of sheer annoyance.

"Why don't you wish your sister well?" Moderata asked. It sounded like an admonition, but everything she said to me sounded like an admonition. Moderata took care of the meals, did the laundry, and welcomed the old monks who came over to teach us to write, count, and study the Bible. We also followed Moderata to the market, where she kept an eye out for swindlers and lurking men. She was smaller than I was, but her eyes were as gray as steel. She was afraid of no one. One time, she told us that in her youth she had killed a lion with her bare hands, and we believed her.

"Properzia," Moderata repeated. Of course, I wanted to congratulate my sister. I knew Beatrice better than anyone else in the world. We slept in the same four-poster bed, crocheted our bedspreads together, embroidered floral patterns on silk, and tied the laces on each other's overdresses. But there she was, lying with her head in my father's lap, sobbing with happiness.

Pa stretched out his left arm toward me. He expected me to kneel beside him and kiss his hand so he could bless me on the forehead with his greasy thumb. But jealousy raged in my head like a tiger.

"When can I get married, Pa?" I asked.

"You must be patient, child. I can't afford two weddings right now. Beatrice's dowry is costing me a small fortune."

A small fortune? What did that mean? Just the other day, he had declared that a pound of salt cost a small fortune these days.

"Why does it have to be a son of the signore, Father? We're not even of noble blood! If you were to marry us off to the sons of merchants or doctors, you could surely afford a dowry for both of us."

"Don't you understand, my child? Signor Bentivoglio's prestige will most certainly rub off on me. No longer will I be limited to the petty contracts and wills of the merchant class, I'll be writing for the nobles of Bologna. I built up my position as a notary from nothing, you know. And our tower..."

"Oh, don't start about your stupid tower!" I snapped.

"Properzia, enough!" Father bellowed. "You're going to congratulate your dear sister. Don't you get it? Beatrice is going to be married. Her life is about to start."

For a moment, there was silence in the salon. I looked at Mary and John the Baptist on the wall, but they made no move to take off their halos and climb out of their frames to lend me a hand.

The tiger in my head refused to lie down. It paced around, taking up all the space in my mind.

"How long will I have to wait?"

"Don't be so rude, girl!" hissed Moderata.

Pa had had enough of my whining but didn't want to hit me. Not today. This was supposed to be a triumphant day, a day when a father is praised by his daughters. A day without blows.

"You won't have to wait long," he said. "If all goes well, I'll be able to afford a dowry again in three years."

Three years to wait. I would be eighteen by then. There might not be any men left. On the other hand, it would offer me a respite, three years to read, draw, and if I pleaded long and hard enough, to go to the theater in Piazza Maggiore, albeit under the strict supervision of Pa or Moderata. All in all, this wasn't terrible news.

"Thank you, Father," I said.

"That's what I like to hear," said Pa.

"Three years will fly by, you'll see. Especially in a convent."

My jaw dropped. I was as speechless as the carp in my soup and stared at Father in total confusion. He responded with the grimace he always made when I didn't understand something that was so blatantly obvious.

"Surely, you're not surprised?" he asked, almost incredulous.

But I was.

"I have no doubt that some time with the sisters will do you good. They will teach you what silence is. Modesty. And above all, self-control."

"But my self-control is excellent."

Moderata let out a snort.

"In a convent, I'll turn to stone. I'll cease to exist," I said, the panic pulsing through my body.

"Nonsense, the Poor Clares will welcome you with open arms," Pa said.

"Father! The Poor Clares! But they're so incredibly strict!"

"Exactly what you need."

"Mother would never agree to this. If you ask me, she's furious with you in Heaven right now," I shouted.

Pa slammed his hand on the table.

"Don't you see, Properzia? You're not ready for marriage. You talk too loud, you think too much, and you don't know your place in the world. If I were to marry you off now, it would end in calamity. Your husband would send you back home in no time. Imagine how ridiculous that would make me look. A disaster like that would ruin my reputation too."

"You...you don't know what you're talking about. My marriage... I'll be a good wife," I stammered.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Moderata shaking her head, and even Beatrice, that little cross kisser, avoided my gaze.

"Eat your soup," said Moderata. There was nothing to do but pick up my spoon. My eyes watered, but only from the pepper.

Pa signaled to Moderata to clear the table. The conversation was over; the battle had been won. Pa blessed Beatrice once again, and she kissed his hand at least five times. And there I was, the superfluous twin. A duplicate, like one of the backup copies of the wills that Pa kept in his office that were never needed.

"Properzia, I'm sure the convent will do you good," said Moderata, as if she had been a mother superior of the Poor Clares herself and spent her days praying the paint off the walls.

"I'm not going."

"Properzia..." Father began.

"No, I'd rather jump into the canal than put on a stinking habit."

"Don't say such things!" Beatrice wailed.

"You don't have to go to the nuns," I snapped.

"Stop it, now!" Pa yelled. He was practically purple with rage, but I wanted to see him turn dark purple, then darker and darker until his head exploded.

"I'll do it," I said, "I'll throw myself into the canal!"

"Well, what are you waiting for, little witch! Go on!" Pa shouted.

My blood ran cold.

Even Moderata looked shocked. But I couldn't back down. The die was cast.

I pushed back my chair, stood up and walked to the doorway. Then, I turned around and screamed, "Pa, you asked for this!"