

CHRYS ROMEO



PERCEPTION EFFECTS



Perception Effects

by Chrys Romeo

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The Canvas



September

I'm still having this vision in front of me. It just wouldn't disappear.

The first time I ever saw her eyes I could not get them off my mind for three days.

No matter what I did, no matter where I was, I could always see those eyes in front of me: sharp blue like a winter sky, intensely staring, motionless yet so alive, transparent through whatever was there, covering everything else. It seemed I couldn't do anything anymore. I was only envisioning her eyes. It had been only a matter of an instant, as she had looked at me - a few seconds at most, and yet I could not forget it, as if the image had been imprinted in my mind, burning my soul eternally... icy freezing, impossibly distant, irrevocably close, forever...

I had met her on the tramway. I took the tramway to the painting studio every morning. That morning, I was just sitting there, glancing absently through the swaying vehicle, through the first rays of sunrise that were coloring the windows in pale shades of pink and orange. My eyes were wandering casually over the crowd of unknown people, when I saw her. She was seated somewhere in front of me, her arms folded, silently staring into space. And when I noticed her, for whatever reason, she looked directly at me and our eyes met.

I felt this intense burning, as if I was becoming transparent and she was glancing right through me. Suddenly, I could hardly breathe. I stared into those eyes, letting my mind go off like a blank page, while my heart started racing unexplainably. I looked at her, sustaining her glance like a daring contest. Who would have more

strength to keep looking? Who would be the first to look away? What was that sudden captivating link between us? A storm of sensations made me dizzy. I felt anxious while looking helplessly into those pieces of winter sky, sharp and clear, abysmal and steady. There was nowhere I could hide from that open glance. It felt like falling off the top of a mountain, from unimaginable heights. Everything else around had faded away completely, as if a switch had been turned on - or off - and the whole tramway had vanished into a blank space, just like my mind at that moment. It lasted a few seconds that seemed like infinity. She wouldn't avert her eyes. She was determined like a Sphinx. She was staring me away into surrendering my soul to her. Erasing my thoughts and affirming her absolute existence. The breathless intensity was escalating, it was too much. I gave up and blinked, lowering my eyes to the floor.

I was somehow amazed to find that I was still breathing. The tramway view appeared again around me. In a few moments, after I gathered my courage, I looked back at her. She was staring sideways, thinking deeply about something. I watched carefully her hands, as she kept them folded over the elegant bag that was matching the color of her scarf: soft pink and orange, like the colors of sunrise. The tramway stopped and she got up, and then got off. I watched her walk away and I felt as if she had taken the morning light with her. The tramway seemed empty and dull after she left.

So many questions were running through my mind. Who was she? What had just happened between us? Why had I felt that way? Where did she go?

I tried to forget her the next days, but her eyes were haunting me: that direct intensity was right in front of me, like a huge wave sweeping off my mind in a permanent blinding vision. If I looked at the road, they appeared in the distance, hovering in the horizon. If I stared at buildings, the buildings disappeared and her eyes took their place, like an open sky. If I tried to look at people, I thought I saw her everywhere in the crowd – only to find that it was not so.

To be able to get her out of my mind, I decided to paint her. I thought I would take that image out of my head and place it on canvas instead. I started painting the same week, because I couldn't do anything else otherwise. I tried to remember exactly the nuance of intensity and to render it in paint. I tried to recall the soft pink scarf and the refined moonlight hands that were haunting my visions. As soon as her image started to take shape on canvas, her eyes subtly began vanishing from my thoughts. I was picturing her as if she was in front of me. I wanted her to be in front of me. And she

seemed to somehow become alive in paint. I was happy about it: I could finally have some peace of mind and serenity.

However, for some reason, I could not remember her lips. I had trouble deciding how to paint them. Soft, thin? Sensual, full? Half smiling?... Longer, shorter, pouting? What? I was confused about it. I realized I had to see her again and be more attentive to her lips, if I wanted the painting finished. For the moment, I tried to guess the shape of her mouth. It remained a timid line, a faint uncertain trace like a question. The painting was not finished, yet she was there: staring at me from canvas like a miracle. Yes, it was her. A bit incomplete, but it was her. I decided to finish the painting in the following days.

And in the following days, I met her again.

It was early morning - so early, that it was dark as night. I was waiting in the station. There were people around me, yet I was only looking at the tramway, as it was coming slowly from the pitch dark, swaying its windows, lighted inside and seemingly cozy. I got inside as soon as the vehicle stopped and the doors opened automatically. The moment I stepped inside the light, I was aware that someone known to me had climbed inside at the same time. I turned around and I saw her silhouette move through the dim light, to sit down by a window. I recognized her before I could remember to breathe. My heart dropped to the floor. I just stood there, wondering what to do. The seat in front of her was empty: there weren't too many people at that hour. I hesitated for a second, then I just gathered my courage and decided to act before I would think better of it. I went straight to her and I took the seat in front of her. It was going to be like that. No backing off now. It meant too much to me to even reconsider. I sat down, looking directly at her. I smiled.

For some reason, I believe she had noticed me too from the very first moment we got on the tram and had been afraid I would come and sit with her. Or she had been wondering if I would have the guts to do it. I did.

We looked at each other and for a few minutes, we couldn't help smiling. We knew it wasn't by chance that we were together again. It was a lucky day.

After a while of staring at each other and smiling, as if we had been caught doing something forbidden, I said:

“Good morning”.

I kept smiling. I felt as if we already knew each other well. After having painted her, she was mine somehow. She looked at me cautiously and replied:

“Good morning”...

I was surprised she actually talked. She smiled softly. She seemed a bit reserved, compared to the last – and first – time I had seen her. I was so happy I encountered her again, that I couldn't get enough of it. I leaned my head on the window, staring dreamingly at her, delighted we were finally together. She couldn't go anywhere now. She was mine to look at, for however long the ride would take. We were going in the same direction.

"This seat is not taken, right?" I said, still smiling.

She wasn't smiling anymore; she was trying to remain reserved, but there was a casual attitude about her, showing me she wasn't afraid or anything.

"It isn't", she said.

"May I ask your name?"

She shrugged and looked away through the window.

"You may."

But she did not tell me and she apparently became absent. I was somehow bewildered by this sudden change of attitude. I kept observing her. She was wearing glasses this time, maybe that was why her eyes hadn't struck me as hard as before. There was some indirect approach about her that early in the morning. The glasses had a certain something that made her mysterious and aloof. She had a different bag, matching the color of her creamy coat. Her hair was flowing over her shoulders like rebel ripples of a golden sea, with greenish shades of burned wild flowers. When she looked at me again, her eyes reminded me of a warm calm sea, clear and honestly bright. She seemed so close. She seemed so well known to me. Was it because I had spent so much time trying to reconstruct her in colors, to make her come alive on canvas, to find the true shape of her, to capture her soul in a picture?... Was it because I had spent so much time guessing, trying to imagine her, to get her out of my mind and on real paint? Was it because I felt I had actually spent that time with her as close as two souls could ever be?... I was aware my impression could have been only mine. And yet there was something more to it.

It was heavenly happiness to have her there, in front of me, as if entirely to myself. I remembered I needed to know how to paint her lips. So I dared and lowered my eyes from her glasses to the spot just above her chin... I followed the line of her lips... okay, soft and thin, not too long, not too short, as refined and determined as her hands... irresistibly captivating... one second, two, three... oh, she noticed what I'm looking at. I quickly glanced back up at her eyes. Her eyes sparkled for a while with amusement and her lips smiled slightly like a smirk. Was she wondering what I was thinking of?...

Suddenly, she got up and prepared to get off at the next station. I got up instantly and followed her without giving it a second thought. She saw it and smiled more deeply this time, even more amused.

“You don’t mind, do you?” I asked her, as we were standing by the door, waiting for it to open.

“What?” she said casually, not certain where I was going with the question.

“That I’m coming with you.”

“I don’t mind”, she said, not looking at me, as if she didn’t care either way.

We got off the tram. I was so happy she had let me accompany her that I wasn’t thinking of anything. It was enough that we were there together.

“Where are you going?” I asked her.

“I’m taking the next tram”, she said, looking at the vehicle that was approaching.

I followed her. The tram was full of people. She found a seat and I remained standing by her side.

“So how come I often see you on the tram?” I asked her after a while, trying to get her out of her absent silence.

“Is it because we probably have the same way?” she answered me with a question, glancing directly in my eyes, with a smile.

That intimidating look again. But I smiled back.

“True. So now where to?”

I was waiting for her to decide. I was no longer on my usual route, but I didn’t mind. I was also aware that I could not follow her for too long, considering we weren’t that close, since we hardly knew each other - even if I felt she was completely mine, ever since I had painted her. It was as if I had invented her. Created her. Learned her every shape and line, color and inch. Yet she was so unpredictable to me.

“I get off after two more stations”, she answered, looking out the window.

I understood that she didn’t want me to go to the end of it with her.

“I don’t know this area too well”, I said.

“There’s a shortcut behind the blocks. And there’s good bread around here”.

She smiled again. I smiled too, looking in her eyes. What did bread have anything to do with anything?...

“I must check that shortcut sometime”, I said and she smiled to herself, looking away, as if she knew that I meant I wanted to go with her someday.

I was glad that she liked the idea of us going there together - maybe soon... And I was happy it meant I would meet her again.

I watched her get off the tramway in the waterfall of the morning light. I watched her disappear along the alley and I wondered where she was going.

October

I painted her lips, after I had glanced at them for those few seconds, in the tramway. The painting seemed finished, yet there was still something missing about it. I couldn't figure out what exactly. I painted the morning sky around her, the horizon and yet it still needed more.

For a while, I didn't see her in the tramway and I started missing her a lot.

Then, one day, I got lucky again. It was early morning, as usual, and the tramway had already started advancing slowly. Suddenly, I saw someone knock on the window, to stop it just as it was about to leave. The vehicle went on brakes and the door opened. And there she was.

My eyes lighted with happiness. She had been in a hurry. She passed me by, smiling casually at me. I was glad she acknowledged my presence. She sat in the opposite row, by the window.

"I don't know why I left so early this morning, it's as if I couldn't sleep and didn't know the time anymore", she told me from the other side of the seats, and I was happy she was talking to me. "And then I almost missed this tram".

I was watching her, smiling silently. The fact that she hadn't sat next to me bewildered me somehow, but she was talking to me nevertheless.

"So you're going the same way this morning?" she asked me.

"Yes, I am", I replied.

I found it difficult to pick the words to tell her anything. I was aware that I was very much in love with her at that moment and I couldn't say anything. Whatever I might have said, would not have been enough. I just sat there, watching her. I had a hard time deciding not to get up and go to her. It seemed she wanted it that way. She needed space between us. As if she had guessed I was closer than possible, because I had her on canvas, at home.

"I must find a better time to wake up", she said as if to herself, a bit amused.

I still didn't say anything. Her presence was enough to me. I was fighting the need to get closer, reach out and touch her. I wanted so absolutely terribly much to do what I had done with the canvas: retrace every line of her face, her hands, her neck, everything... even better. Even more. I pictured myself take off her glasses and maybe, just maybe for a second of freezing forever, kiss her ears and run my fingers

through the burning sea of her hair... And then go up and down from head to toes... She was mine on canvas. Yet in reality I could not touch her. Not so easily.

I turned my eyes to look out the window.

“Can I come with you today?” I asked her after a while.

“Where?” she inquired, not smiling.

“Wherever you are going. Would you like me to go with you?”

She shrugged, thinking to herself, as if considering possible consequences.

I was afraid she would guess how much I wanted to be with her and she'd say no.

“Yes, I would”, she said after a few moments, seriously and in a confident tone.

Yes!! That one word seemed like magic. I was happy again. The day had brightened up so suddenly... I could see the sun rays coming through the windows, flooding the tramway seats. I smiled. She smiled too.

She got up fast and passed me by.

“So, are you coming?...”

I followed her. She looked stunning and her earrings sparkled in the sunlight, matching her necklace. I couldn't decide what was more hypnotizing: her presence or the morning light itself. We started walking along the path. When we got to a building by the end of it, she stood in front of the glass doors and looked at me.

“I have something to sort out in here”, she told me and I understood that was where we were separating.

“Okay. So I'll see you next time?”

“Yes. See you next time”, she said and smiled.

Yes! Again. How I loved that word!...

She went inside and I turned around. Yes, I was so happy: I returned to the canvas and added earrings and a necklace to the girl in the painting...

November

In the following weeks I met her again a few times... on the tramway, of course.

I was anticipating the tramway arrival, hoping to see her. When she wasn't there, I was disappointed. When she was there, I couldn't get enough of it. When she ran off each time, I wondered where she went and why she didn't let me spend time with her apart from the tramway moments. I wanted to be a part of her life, yet she kept me away from it. She kept running off and disappearing. Each time I met her I added something more to the painting. I kept adding to it and I felt there was still more I wanted to add. The canvas seemed so alive, sometimes I expected her to come out

of it. Sometimes I felt as if she knew, she sensed the way I loved her in the painting. Most of the time it was so hard to not touch her in real life, as I had learned her features so well and I returned to the canvas to find her again... and again. Sometimes I felt as if she was spending half her time in my home, on the canvas itself, staring at me...

One day, as I was sitting in the tramway, she came and sat right next to me. Her presence was so close: her hair was slightly touching my shoulder. I was so surprised by it and absolutely thrilled - I couldn't even dare to move or breathe, so that I wouldn't change anything about that closeness. I was afraid I would break the spell, had I attempted to do anything.

"I want to show you something", she said breathing fast, very enthusiastic.

She reached in her bag and took out a map. It was drawn in grey lines.

"What is it?" I asked her as she unfolded the paper.

"It's a map of this area. You said you don't know it well".

I stared at her, in amazement. I still didn't dare move; I was overwhelmed, irresistibly enjoying the warmth of her presence. Her elbow was touching mine. She was moving fast and I wondered if she would fly away in an instant, just take off, as fast as she had appeared. Her presence seemed a dream come true. She explained, placing the map in front of me:

"I made it myself. Look, this here is a river."

"Where?" I asked, still surprised by the whole thing.

It was as if we were alone in the tramway. We didn't look around us anymore. She seemed as captivated by the moment as I was. Unfolding the map a little more, her hand brushed mine for a second. It was warm and electrifying. We looked at each other. I wondered where she got that energy from.

"The river is somewhere behind the hills."

She was staring in my eyes, taking it so lightly and accepting my presence as if it was what she wanted most at that moment.

"Would you like to go there?" I asked her.

"I've been there."

"Yes, but would you like to go there – with me?"

I waited. She smiled.

"Yes. I would".

"It's settled then. We'll go there".

She kept looking at me and smiling. Then, she got up as fast as she had approached me.

“I’ll see you then”.

“Okay”, I said. “I’ll see you when I’ll see you.”

“I’m glad you think the same way”, she said, smiling, and went away.

I wished she could have stayed longer, but it seemed things were changing very fast whenever she was around. I wished she could have stayed forever.

I watched her leave.

When I returned to the canvas, I painted a river too.

December

I decided to give her the painting.

I thought she would like it. I thought she would certainly see how I envisioned her and how much I loved her. It seemed like the right thing to do, to finally give the painting to her. I had to let her see it.

So I began carrying the painting with me. I wrapped it in paper and took it with me on the tramway. Because I didn’t know exactly when I would meet her again, I carried the painting with me each time I was on the tramway.

It took a while, but then, one day, I met her again.

She noticed me, but she was a bit reserved – again. I wondered what caused these changes of attitude. She was so unpredictable. She was standing by the door. I went to her, with the painting under my arm.

“Hello”, I said.

“Hi”.

“Are we going to the river?”

“Now?”

“Are we?”

She shrugged. And she didn’t answer. I didn’t understand her. I couldn’t figure out what she was thinking. What were her reasons. What she wanted. She remained an unsolved question to me.

I decided to take a chance and go on with my plan of giving her the painting.

“I have something for you”, I said.

She shook her head.

“No, don’t give me any presents”.

I felt hurt, like a sudden pain in my lungs. Yet I went on.

“Listen, I didn’t buy anything. I made it myself. No strings attached.”

She was still reluctant, as I uncovered the painting before her eyes.

“Look”.

She glanced at it quickly.

“No,” she said immediately, very alarmed. “I don’t want it.”

Had she struck me on the head with something, it wouldn’t have been so bad.

I stood there, completely bewildered and not understanding anything. She seemed afraid someone on the tramway might see it. She seemed afraid to even look at it. Something that looked so beautiful to me, seemed so wrong to her and I couldn’t understand why.

I looked at the painting myself, trying to figure out what was wrong with it.

“It looks like...”

“It doesn’t look like anything”, she interrupted, very determined. “What would you do with it anyway?”

“I don’t know”, I said. “Hang it somewhere?...”

“No”, she said.

And then she turned away, not wanting to look at it anymore.

“It’s no big deal”, I said, but I was feeling very hurt and awkward.

I wrapped the painting back in paper, hiding it. Not in a million years would I have anticipated such an outcome. I didn’t even understand why. It was a nice painting. I had spent so much time and dedication on it. I liked it a lot. She was looking good on canvas. And she wasn’t even naked...

But she was what she was: unpredictable to me.

We remained silent the rest of the way. I felt as if the earth had swallowed me and it was getting dark. I saw my dreams of walking with her by the river go down the drain. “I guess we’ll never go there ...”, I thought to myself. “I guess there never was a chance for us anyway...” It seemed we were destined to meet only on the tramway. She was not capable of more. She could not allow me anything else.

I didn’t watch her leave this time. Instead, I left before her and I didn’t look back. It was no use hoping for anything anymore.

I was upset. I went home, I placed the now useless canvas by the wall and I watched it in silence. Why? Why hadn’t she liked it? What was wrong with it?... It still looked beautiful to me. But it hurt me to glance at it now.

I realized I couldn’t keep it. So I burned it. I took it to the stove and set it on fire.

I watched the flames engulf it, consume it, turn it to lava. The fire seemed so warm. And yet I felt so strange watching it disappear, as if I was burning a part of my mind and soul with it. I hoped I could burn away my feelings for her too.

Yet they were not completely gone.

Somehow, I had the feeling I would never see her again. The tramways would be empty forever.

After many days of not finding her anymore, I decided to look for her at the building with glass doors, where we had gone together one day. I remembered the path and I went up to the building where I had seen her enter. The doors were open. I stepped inside the hall: it was a gallery. An exhibition. I started walking down the hall, glancing at the paintings on the walls. I felt as if something well known to me was waiting for me there. And it was. I stopped in front of the canvas: no use trying to deny it. There it was: my painting – or one identical to it. I recognized her. She was staring at me, with those eyes I had seen the first time. The only difference was that in the painting glowing on the wall in front of me, I was present too. I was painting it. I was painting her... infinitely. Like a frame within a frame.

I'm not going to tell you who made that exhibition or who made the painting where I saw myself painting her. I'm not even going to tell you if I saw her again on the tramway or if I met her by the river, following the map she had left me.

I'm not going to tell you anything. You figure it out yourself.

The only thing I will tell you though, is that life sometimes becomes a canvas and you have to choose between watching a painting on a wall or painting it infinitely yourself. A frame within a frame... If you get in the action and do something, or just keep watching it against a wall. It's your choice. Your canvas is waiting.



Black Feathers

“What are we visiting?”

“A labyrinth.”

The tourists were anxiously waiting at the gates. The antique labyrinth had been closed for a long time, but recently it had been reopened for visitors. The site was surrounded by high walls, white and dusty with marble little towers and columns. There was an absolute silence floating over the restored walls and the afternoon light was making mysterious shadows.

“What’s inside?”

Some of the tourists were wondering what was waiting beyond the gates. The guide explained to them, before opening the gates and gathering the tickets:

“Please stay with the group. Anyone can get lost easily within this labyrinth. It hasn’t been visited for decades and even though it’s been restored, there’s no one who can show you the way out in case you get lost.”

The group advanced through the gates. The pathway was paved at first and the stones seemed ancient, yet they were soon covered by dust and something that seemed like white chalk. The guide was talking loudly, hoping to keep the visitors attentive and alert. Most of them were taking photos of the statues and little columns displayed along the way. Here and there, niches within the walls seemed to be hiding ancient vaults and secret passages.

“Please don’t touch the statues, they have just been restored. And please do not attempt to go through any of those passages, you will get lost for sure. Besides, you never know what’s in there”, the guide laughed. “Enjoy your photos, people.”

The group paused now and then to allow tourists to take photos. One of them stopped in front of a statue representing a guardian angel or something similar. It was made of marble and it had wings. It also had a long flute, announcing something.

He glanced up at the top of the statue and tried to take a picture of it, but it seemed against the sun and the focus was blurred into a bright spot. He walked around the guardian angel. It was taller than an average person. He found a better angle and tried to take a picture again. This time, the shadow made it somehow too dark and it still didn't come out right. He circled the statue again, thinking that it was taking too long and maybe it would have been better to give up and follow the group. He had already broken off from the rest of the tourists. He could still hear their voices and the guide speaking loudly. "Maybe it would be wise to get back to them", he thought. And then he noticed something down on the marble pedestal. He leaned forward and picked it up: it was a soft black feather, glowing in the afternoon light, soft and fresh, as if it had been polished. Its dark waters were making colorful nuances, reflecting light so fascinatingly and mysteriously. He stared at it, lost in thought. What was it? Where did it come from? Perhaps a bird that had flown over the labyrinth? It was an exquisite feather, from an exotic bird, most probably: lustrous and unusual.

The voices of the others were getting dim in the distance. He decided to keep the feather and glanced once more at the guardian angel, while he was stashing the fluffy thing in his jeans pocket.

"Maybe I really can't take a good picture of you today. I'll try to get it again on my way back", he talked to the statue.

Then he turned and walked away quickly, trying to get back to the rest of the group. He turned the corner. The path was empty ahead. He could hear them in an alley somewhere close, yet they were nowhere in sight. Their voices mumbling like a choir underwater seemed to rise somewhere from a parallel lane. He listened carefully. Maybe they were on a parallel path. They couldn't have gotten too far. He ran along the wall, stirring the white chalk dust in the afternoon sun. After a while, the voices just seemed to disappear completely.

"I must be off track", he thought. "Maybe they took a turn and crossed through a secret passage in the wall". He ran back, trying to find again the place where the group murmur had disappeared. He stuck his ear to the wall and listened: nothing. He ran back again, yet the statue was no longer there. It didn't seem like the same path he had come along. The view had changed. "It can't be. I only ran ahead and back. This must be the same lane". He looked around. The statue of the guardian angel was tall enough, it should have been somewhere in sight. He glanced at the silent walls. Nothing.

“Okay. Now I must think.” If he went back, there was a good chance the way would not be the same and he wouldn’t find the gates. If he went ahead, there was an even bigger chance of not finding the group again. The evening was close. Light was getting dim and the sunset was minutes away. “Okay, I’ll just wait here”, he thought. “They have to come back sometime. They’ll come back this way, for sure”. He sat down, trying not to worry about it. He took his camera and started zooming through the pictures. He hadn’t taken too many. There were a few with the gates, the walls and then the statue. The first was too bright, the sun blinding the image. The second was too obscure, the figure of the statue appearing shady and unclear. And then he noticed something in the picture: behind the statue there was a silhouette. There was someone there. No doubt about it. He stared at it, zooming in the angle. Yes, that was a person. It was certainly not someone from the group of tourists. He would have noticed her. A girl with long hair? There were a few girls in the group, but they didn’t look like that. None of them looked like that: dark long hair, dark clothes, like an ancient robe or something. Most of the tourists were wearing plain t-shirts and jeans. Nobody unusual like that girl in the photo. Besides, why hadn’t he seen her standing by the statue?

He got up and started to walk back. He had to find the statue. Maybe the girl knew her way around the labyrinth and would help. Maybe she was one of the people who had restored the site. Maybe she was something else...

He noticed a few feathers on the ground. They were the same type as the one he had found a while ago: glowing black, reflecting watery lights. He followed the trail of the feathers and found a niche in the wall. It was a vault, leading somewhere.

“Don’t worry about it”, he heard a voice.

Looking up, he saw the girl from the picture sitting on the wall. She was watching him. He realized she had been there for a longer while, watching him walk around the path like a lost puppy. She must have found it amusing to see him trying to get it right.

“Hi there”, he said. “What shouldn’t I worry about?”

“Anything... everything”, she replied, seeming amused and relaxed. “Just don’t worry too much”.

“Okay, he said. But what about the way out of this labyrinth?”

“What about it?”

“Do you know the way out?”

“Do you want to get out?”

She grinned. Her eyes were the same color as the feathers, deep and mysteriously glowing. Yet something sweet and calm about her attitude made him reconsider worrying too much indeed.

"I think I would need to get out at some point, he replied. It will be evening soon... then the night will come and I'll be stuck here by myself."

"Didn't you want to be here in the first place?" she asked, half curious, half enjoying the conversation and her position on the wall.

"I guess I did, but not for eternity", he tried to joke.

She grinned again. He was beginning to like her casual attitude. It seemed like nothing in the world, past or present, nothing in ancient history or in a distant apocalypse would be so bad as to make her worry about it. He thought centuries might pass by and it wouldn't be much trouble, as long as she was there on the wall, talking to him.

"Well, she said, I guess you're not by yourself, are you. I'm here too."

And she jumped down from the wall. However, she jumped on the other side; he couldn't see her anymore.

"Hey! Are you there?" he asked, knocking on the wall.

For a moment, there was complete silence. The sunset was spreading its last colors, bathing the walls in orange and red. The shadows were getting longer.

"Yes, I am still here." he heard her voice on the other side of the wall.

"Why did you jump over there?"

"Why not?"

"Do you always talk like this, in riddles?"

"Isn't it interesting? It's more interesting, right?"

She laughed to herself. Her voice had something deep and soft, like velvet. Something reassuring.

"Okay, he said, now what?"

"There's a passage in front of you", she answered.

He hesitated, looking at the passage. The vault was shaded by the evening obscurity. He took a step forward. If he walked through it, he might not get to the group again. But on the other hand, if he stayed there, nothing would come of it either. And besides, the girl seemed to know more about that place than the guide. He decided to trust her and he walked through the vault. There was a short tunnel, cold and silent. Then, he got to the parallel lane. It was covered in grass and many flowers were hanging over the walls in vases and a bunch of colorful branches. It seemed as if the labyrinth had come alive on the other side. It seemed as if

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