

Gianfranco Pereno

The devil's canvas

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DOCUMENTATION



Caravaggio
(Michelangelo Merisi)
Beheading of Holofernes
National Gallery of Ancient Art,
Rome



Jacques-Louis David
The Death of Marat.
Tempera on canvas, 1793
Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts,
Brussels.



Gustave Courbet

The Origin of the World. 1866.

This painting ignited fierce controversy: outlawed, forced to be viewed hidden behind a drape, for the pleasure and tranquility of the most vicious respecters.



Gustave Courbet

Sleep. 1866

Oil on canvas.

Petit Palais, Musée de Beaux-Arts de la ville de Paris.



Pyke Koch

Extase. 1967

Oil on canvas, Private collection, Holland.

Part One

In the Dragon's Mouth

Prologue

The man hesitantly stretched out his hand toward a strange brass handle that glinted faintly on the door at the end of the corridor.

The door seemed to open by itself and he had the distinct impression that he was floating in nothingness.

White, light, discomfort, anguish.

He realized he had automatically closed his eyes even before he felt the wind on his skin.

The warm breath that entered his soul unexpectedly swept away all his fears and he felt his eyelids relax, while his pupils began to focus more and more sharply on the peaceful panorama of the lagoon.

In the distance, almost floating in the warm afternoon air, the reassuring profile of the island of Murano.

He was out!

The sun that warmed his skin had the power to melt even the chill he felt inside and, as someone who wakes up after a nightmare and with relief finds familiar objects around him, so for him, that expanse of calm blue water, cut by rows of large 'briccole' placed to define the navigable channels, helped to push back into a hidden corner of his memory, the anguish and fear of the last few hours.

He felt that he was gradually regaining the consciousness of his own body, but that sensation unexpectedly caused a gurgling in his

stomach and his most impelling desire incredibly was focused on a sandwich with shrimp, accompanied by a cool glass of Prosecco.

Suddenly a two or three year old child turned from a nearby call, laughing and darting past his legs, immediately joined by the imperious call of a young woman panting after him, pushing a light stroller loaded with heavy shopping bags.

He mentally accompanied this mother's hurried steps and only when he calculated that they had arrived near the bridge that separated them from the landing stage of Fondamenta Nuove, did he turn his head in their direction.

The little one was climbing the steps one step at a time, always raising his right foot first, very concentrated. The woman instead, to allow the wheels of her improvised trolley to climb the wide steps more easily, had turned her back to the bridge.

He could clearly see that she was in difficulty, but the instinctive impulse to help her was nipped in the bud when he saw her turn her head toward a figure sitting at the foot of the bridge that he had not yet noticed.

He watched her plump face break into a slight smile and, after a quick nod, calmly return his attention to the stroller.

Some years before he had been fascinated by a commercial where the characters suddenly froze.

Leaves, clothes, hair, scarves, were crystallized in a perfect still image, while on the contrary, the point of view of the camera continued to rotate slowly, allowing in that surreal three-dimensional pause to calmly observe all the details of the scene from different angles.

Now, also that woman had become absurdly immobilized in an unreal silence, her back bent in the effort of getting the stroller over a step and the blue scarf, which before had fluttered lightly around her neck, now seemed to have turned into a splinter of Venetian glass placed against the light.

Then the point of view of the imaginary camera shifted to the figure crouching on the steps, revealing a young girl with a great mass of fiery red hair and a strange, tight-fitting jumpsuit, made of what seemed at first glance to be snake scales, though in truth much larger and more massive.

The image slowly zoomed in, lingering on the close-up of a beautiful, oriental-like face with closed eyes, and then descending to observe without any modesty the elegant profile of a soft breast.

He lowered further to graze the slight roundness of a soft yellow belly, finally ending his exploration by rotating very close to a long and tapered thigh.

There was an imperceptible noise and immediately the camera quickly returned to the girl's face.

Now the eyes were wide open and the pupils, a soft, warm yellow, flashed in the reflection of the sun.

The moment the eyelids closed and reopened on that liquid metal, he understood; he knew without a margin of error that this girl was not wearing an extravagant garment, but that what he had just seen was the girl's real skin.

An amused smile was drawn on her beautiful face, which had the only effect of making him scream in fright as that entire crystallized world exploded into a myriad of fragments around him.

Shimmering needles then slowly vanished, leaving in their place an immense darkness, filled with the prolonged echo of the cry that had escaped from his chest.

Then silence... silence and darkness.

From nowhere came a new sound, faint at first, then louder and louder, until it became something very similar to the gallop of a horse, regular and powerful.

The instant he realized that it was nothing more than the beating of his own heart, he perceived that even the darkness had limits and boundaries and he cautiously stretched out a hand forward to probe it.

A bolt of lightning from behind made him turn sharply.

He saw nothing, though his unconscious still registered the indistinct image of a fluid reddish mass.

Another flash, followed by a stabbing pain in his temples.

As he pressed his aching eyes with the palms of his hands, his brain pasted on his retinas the unmistakable outline of a Chinese dragon, immediately followed by a glow that seemed to illuminate even his soul.

Time ceased to exist.

When he slowly opened his eyes again in the omnipresent darkness, his heart had resumed its regular beat.

He had finally understood!

Now he knew exactly where he was.

In the dragon's mouth!!!

Calmly he turned back to the spot he knew to be the darkest and deepest and waited motionless, serenely for the huge blaze that would ensue.

Michele Barovier woke up drenched in sweat.

That recurring nightmare was beginning to make him nervous.

In his life he had never given excessive importance to dreams, but lately the regularity with which this one recurred, identical and unchanging, was something really worrying.

He shook his head and with a shrug got out of bed to go and fill the bathtub with boiling water.

Michele was the last descendant of an ancient Venetian family that had become rich first with the commerce of fabrics imported from the East and then with the manufacture of splendid objects in Murano glass; but only a vague memory of those glories had remained.

It did not seem to matter to him, and when occasionally the subject fell on the now lost fortunes of his family, the most he could

get out of it was a melancholy smile, mixed with a considerable dose of irony.

He was pleased with himself.

At the age of thirty-two his life was now on the way to a well-deserved consolidation, he taught art history at the Liceo Artistico Statale in Venice, even managing to gain a certain sympathy from his pupils; although to tell the truth it was the girls who paid him, more or less hidden, a much more accentuated interest.

However, he glossed over the matter.

Certainly a nice smile or a glance slightly longer than necessary flattered his self-esteem, but apart from the natural male attraction to fluttering miniskirts, his emotional involvement ended there.

He had an official girlfriend, Vanessa Della Vigna.

Beautiful, blonde, tall.

A gorgeous woman who held the reins of both their lives firmly in her own tapering hands, who took care to carefully regulate their schedules to make time for regular lovemaking and ensure that their satisfactions were authentic and gratifying.

They went out to dinner at least two evenings a week, associating with the right and chosen friends and above all, thanks to her important job at the Cassa di Risparmio di Venezia, she had already studied in advance a perfect plan of subsidized mortgages for their future home, for furniture and for the ever-present optional pension.

The only nuisance was an annoying indecision about the destination of their future honeymoon.

Michele's only eccentricity seemed to be his accentuated interest in the history of Art, which everyone said went far beyond a normal professional commitment.

It was such an intense passion that not even Vanessa felt like opposing it; on the contrary, she had even convinced herself that having as rivals women like Botticelli's Venus or ethereal ladies holding delightful ermines was an elegant game that her fiancé's

pastime allowed her to play with her closest friends.

It was precisely because of Michele's total predilection for the colours of Giotto or the formal elegance expressed by Botticelli that he was surprised at himself when he accepted the invitation of a colleague who asked him to accompany her to the opening of an exhibition of Caravaggio's work in the prestigious rooms of the Correr Museum.

Mr. Michelangelo Merisi was just not to her taste.

Certainly she appreciated his enormous talent, acknowledging his great contribution to the history of painting; but his disordered life and above all those colours, or rather, those menacing shadows so present in his paintings, were light years away from the tranquillity and tones of her favourite artists.

Carlotta had now reached her last year of teaching, then retirement, and this, perhaps, had been the real reason which had induced him that day to climb the Correr staircase, although to get there he had had to go all the way round because of the annoyingly high water that flooded a large part of Piazza San Marco.

Of course he could have slipped on a pair of rubber boots and carefully waded the few hundred meters that separated the museum from his bachelor apartment, but then he would have had to keep them on his feet for the whole time of the visit and the idea that his soles squeaked with every step on the polished floors did not convince him at all.

Not to mention that in all probability several councillors and the mayor himself would also be present.

She was waiting for him at the top of the stairs, her entrance tickets in her hand, in full view.

Michele's heart sank.

Carlotta was tall, with a dark complexion, and although she was just a step away from retirement, she was still upright and full of vitality.

Her eternal smile, combined with a slightly mocking look above her ample and heavy bosom, suggested the habit of being admired and courted; the discreet charm of what until not many years before had certainly been a very beautiful woman.

Moreover she was intelligent, witty and very professionally prepared.

The only drawback was the colours.

It seemed that there were no common dress codes for her. If you counted, you could find dozens of different colors on her, with no attempt at consistency or tonal matching.

Sometimes it reminded him of a coat rack placed, at the time of the Academy of Fine Arts, in a corner of an apartment he'd had near Campo S. Stefano.

The classic small student apartment, rented after a fierce attack of independence and furnished with what was to be found early in the morning by the canals, before the sweepers passed by.

He remembered that coat rack well; it was always submerged by multicoloured scarves, jackets and vests that the tide of friends threw on it in bulk when he came to pretend to study, before starting to roll around conscientiously and talk about tits.

Then luckily Vanessa had entered his life and everything was over.

Carlotta greeted him with the gentleness one would use towards an old lover, before impatiently taking him under her arm.

“Have you had your breakfast? You look pale to me!”

She said without looking at him.

He then saw her waving the tickets under the nose of a perfect stewardess in her dark blue suit and before the poor girl had time to react he found himself dragged into a packed room.

Instinctively Michele pulled himself together.

Almost without realizing it, with a quick and efficient gesture he ran his fingers through his hair and, while out of the corner of his

eye he recognized a senior member of the Fine Arts Department standing by the window, he carefully checked his watch

He took a step to greet him and squeaked!

Another step and a further squeak, far from subdued, resounded blasphemously through the room.

He looked down at his feet, seeing only a pair of the Rossetti brothers' shoes, but then Carlotta's yellow boat boots entered his field of vision with ease.

"Dear Professor, welcome! I am delighted to see you again! I seem to recall that you have always been an avid admirer of Caravaggio."

The voice came from a forest-green velvet suit, though the expression of derision that hovered unmistakably on the manicured face of the owner, Cultural Councillor Marco Visentin, expressed just the opposite.

"Visentin Marco!"

Carlotta's voice resounded clear and authoritative in the great bright room, and for an instant the flash of a long-forgotten reverential awe passed through the alderman's eyes.

"I see you still like to be the center of attention all the time!"

The tone was so polite that it was difficult to detect the irony that shone in the woman's hazel eyes instead.

"It's a real pleasure to see how intelligence and culture interact with your worldly image of them."

"What?... Definitely! A remarkable cultural moment!"

The alderman, noticeably uncomfortable, took refuge behind a hurried nod to a passing waiter.

"A glass of prosecco?"

The tone sounded excessively sharp, and Michele deftly stifled the smile, which unstoppably was shaping his lips, inside the glass.

Then, as the forest-green jacket quickly disappeared behind another waiter's impeccable tuxedo, he whispered in Carlotta's ear:

"How on earth can you say anything in so many words and

convince people at the same time that you have expressed something very profound?”

The dirty look he received in return made him desist from further comment immediately.

The long hand of his Rolex managed almost two full revolutions before he suddenly realized he was alone.

In the distance, ahead of him, he saw a group of people loitering, mechanically registering the sense of tiredness and boredom they emanated.

The unexpected sense of emptiness brought his colleague back to his mind.

“Carlotta?”

His words were lost in nothingness.

He looked around worriedly and only then did he catch sight of the professor leaning against a doorframe a few rooms back.

Embarrassed, he retraced his steps and in those few tens of meters he realized how estranged and how rude he had been to his friend.

The fact that Caravaggio didn’t excite him at all could hardly excuse his behavior.

“Carlotta, I... ”

“Shut up and listen!”

The elderly professor’s voice seemed to be timeless and ageless.

“Do you really think that for nearly two hours I’ve been listening to you talk about brushstrokes and chiaroscuro, about a new way of presenting reality, about scenographic perspectives and other such nonsense, without realizing that you weren’t there?”

The tone of her voice seemed to float in the air.

“I’m old but not yet senile! Or do you think perhaps I need you to make me explain a canvas?”

“But I... ”

Michele’s voice had dropped to a whisper.

“Hush! Look and then tell me what you see!”

At the command, Carlotta had followed a dangerous arc to a clear, violet-colored plastic umbrella, which Michele hadn't noticed at all before and which the woman had just pointed resolutely at a wall.

"It's a painting..." Michele whispered.

"You moron! Of course it's a painting! We're in a museum, not the Rialto fish market!"

The tone of his voice had risen considerably.

"What painting is it?"

Michele's voice had resumed its usual professional timbre, though cracked with a certain astonishment.

"And what do you see?"

Incited Carlotta again.

Now it was Michele's turn to reveal impatience and disappointment.

"I see Judith cutting off Holofernes' head and the old servant waiting for a chance to help her! Technically I can tell you that..."

"Technically?"

The old woman's hazel eyes had veered dangerously to a dark brown hue.

"Technically! But can't you see anything else at all?"

Michele at that point lost patience altogether, and the previous sense of embarrassment was replaced by deep irritation.

What on earth was he doing standing there, in front of a picture he didn't like, feeling criticized and judged by an old maid with yellow boots on her feet and a ridiculous umbrella in her hand?

He turned determinedly towards her, turning his back on the painting, but the harsh retort he was preparing to give was stuck in his throat.

Carlotta, with a fluid, confident gesture, had placed her palm on his stomach, just above the crocodile belt.

"When did you last have your real orgasm?"

He heard himself ask.

The words seemed to seep into his belly along with the pressure of her hand, and that contact and the intimacy of the totally inappropriate question completely disoriented him.

He looked first at the back of the woman's hand, surprising himself by observing the myriad of wrinkles that covered it, mingled with the rapid darting of small blue veins, then looked up at the eyes in front of him.

A torrent of molten gold now seemed to flow placidly beneath her half-closed eyelids.

He felt the pressure of his hand increase considerably.

"This is the point of the third chakra!"

The voice had now taken on the same heat as the lava present in his eyes.

"Chakra?"

At the very moment that Michael heard the sound of his own voice, the momentum increased disproportionately and he felt his own body project violently backwards.

Against the painting!

When his shoulders hit the canvas, his thoughts ran to the absurdity of the catastrophe in progress: a woman gone mad, a torn masterpiece, the equally lacerating scream of the alarm siren that would have immediately gone off accompanied by a heavy baggage of dismay and shame.

The seconds passed quickly, but he felt no sound fill the space, while instead his fall seemed to have no end.

He continued to fall, enveloped in an increasingly dense fog, until it became solid beneath him.

With some effort he got to his knees, his sweaty palms resting on a cold floor.

His head ached, and a myriad of bright spots were intent on swirling madly inside his eyes.

He hesitantly reached out a hand and felt under his fingertips

what felt like warm, rough fabric.

Greedily he clung to that one contact with reality, while his eyes were becoming accustomed to the surrounding dim light.

Just under his nose he could now make out a pair of shapeless slippers, dirty and indefinite in color, but which might once have been a bright red.

By the odour, which slipped wickedly into his nose, he understood more than saw that they were inhabited by heavy socks, themselves once surely white, that banded bony ankles.

As his brain realized that what he was clutching in his hand was the hem of a wide skirt of coarse wool, a dark object moved above his head and a blade of light went to illuminate the wrinkled and terrified face of an old woman.

Her mouth was open in a silent scream and a bit of whitish drool foamed slightly between the only two surviving teeth in her reddish gums.

Underneath a small cap, very little white hair gave a glimpse of stained, shiny skin, and below, wide eyes bore witness to what was undoubtedly a true instant of terror.

Something thick fell to strike his hand and a dark liquid seeped stickily between his wrist and the strap of his watch.

Michele had never had such an experience before, but he knew immediately, without any margin for error, that it was blood.

So much!

The old woman's hands began to tremble madly and the black wrapping she held in her lap swayed dangerously.

Suddenly Michele saw a gash open in that dark mass and something slipped out of it and fell into his arms.

It was a man!

It took him a few moments to realize that the whole body was missing.

In his hands he had only a lukewarm head that he was unconsciously holding by the beard.

Distraught, he stood petrified looking into two dark eyes that were staring back at him, filled with equal horror.

A sharp shriek behind him made him turn around terrified.

In front of him now stood a beautiful girl in an ochre-yellow dress on which a few black stripes stood out sharply.

A light white blouse was stretched over a beautiful breast, large and firm, with nipples so erect that only violent excitement could have caused them.

On the beautiful face, disbelief was now drawing a myriad of tiny uncontrolled movements.

She saw the girl bring the back of her left hand to her mouth and distinguished the small, off-white teeth forcefully etching the tender, velvety skin.

A flash of determination that gleamed in the girl's eyes, however, alerted him, allowing him to notice the movement of her right arm, half-hidden behind a red drape.

An instant later, very quickly, came the slash.

Had the girl not been so distraught, he would surely have died, and his head would have rolled to join the one that had slipped from his grasp in the meantime.

In the haste of the gesture, the point of the blade of a heavy sword that the woman kept hidden had caught in the curtain that hung from the ceiling and the blow, thus deflected, had only the effect of making some sparks on the floor.

Michele sprang to his feet and with the intention of putting as many objects as possible between himself and that murderous blade, sought shelter beyond the bed that seemed to occupy all the space to his left.

In disbelief, he felt his right foot catch on the large bloodstained sheet and he fell head first into the darkness in front of him.

Once again the fall seemed eternal, but the landing was surely softer and he found himself wrapped in warm cloths that covered

uselessly white female legs.

Confused he tried to get up again, but the only result he achieved was to further reveal the inside of a full and smooth thigh.

He slipped badly and his nose stopped inches from the woman's helpless groin.

A pungent smell of urine hit his sense of smell, mixed with the faint fragrance of jasmine.

Instinctively he tried to cover the woman, but the yellow-ochre skirt, furrowed with a large black stripe that he clutched in his hand, made him shiver.

With a leap he was on his feet, pursued by a small amused cry, then a red drape fell over his head, completely covering his view.

With fury he hurled it to the side, at the same time preparing to defend himself strenuously.

The woman, on the other hand, was sitting on the ground, her legs spread wide and her skirt hiding absolutely nothing of her intimacy.

In her hand she held a sharp sword, but she struggled to even hold it up and the tip seemed to have synchronized with the swaying of her large breasts, shaken by unrestrained laughter.

An expletive made him turn around.

From behind a large canvas set on a painter's easel, the severed head from before, complete with beard, had sprung up again.

Only now there wasn't all that much blood and above all it was perfectly attached to a sturdy body, covered with an elegant velvet dress.

Placed near the easel, the empty scabbard of a sword.

Shocked, Michele moved slowly, his shoulders firmly against the wall of the room, his eyes focused on the two strangers as he tried to reach a door he had glimpsed to his left.

The astonishment that had engulfed everyone was palpable and time itself seemed to have slowed its pace, but still allowed Michele to get closer to his goal.

Yet, a few steps from the door he cast a glance in the direction of

the canvas, now perfectly visible, and his heart stopped.

Vivid, fresh and throbbing, “The Beheading of Holofernes” was there before his eyes!

Parts of the painting still had the pigment wet and seemed to be waiting impatiently to rejoin the colour dripping indifferently from the long brush which the painter was holding.

Now the flesh-and-blood Judith had risen to her feet, and Michael could see how similar she was to the one in the painting; the only differences were the large bags under her eyes, which the latter did not have, and the healthy, tanned complexion that only the former impudently flaunted.

Michele went back to observe the man and in the battle that followed, between his unconscious mind that had no doubts and his brain that refused to believe, his reasoning won.

It was a victory paid dearly, however; his legs began to tremble and he felt his eyes fill with tears.

He threw himself toward the door, throwing it violently open; beyond, only a long dark corridor.

Without thinking he started to run with his hands stretched forward, but with the rest of his being tensed to hear what was happening behind him.

Soon he was out of breath and leaned back exhausted against the cold wall of the tunnel.

Only after he felt the nagging roar inside his ears diminish and his lungs stop burning; only when he finally heard no more noise and realized that he was alone, completely alone, did he cry!

It was a long time before he straightened up again, groping his way forward in the dark.

He found himself facing the door almost without noticing it.

It was a small, solid, dark wooden door, with a polished, finely wrought brass handle.

Slowly Michele reached out his hand.

Chapter 1

La biondina in gondoeta l'altra sera gò menà...

I never knew if what woke me up was the incongruity of that music between the walls of my house or the sound of pots and pans coming from the kitchen.

On my naked body I felt both the softness of the sheets and the warmth of the light blanket.

I strained my ear towards the noises coming from the kitchen that unmistakably indicated Vanessa's presence.

If only because she was the only one with the keys to my house.

My head was a blank and no matter how hard I tried I couldn't remember when I had come home, if I had returned with my girlfriend and above all why, judging by the reflection of the light filtering through the half-closed -shutters-, I was still in bed in the middle of the afternoon.

The ridiculous thing, however, was the channel the radio was tuned to.

Radio Vanessa was unmistakable, but it was also the last station my Vanessa could listen to.

Apart from the similarity of names, the two Vanesses were diametrically opposed, both in terms of musical choices and cultural approaches.

I stayed a few minutes listening, amused by the chattering between the hostess and a couple of fierce housewives, then I finally decided to get up.

I stretched calmly, finding myself strangely sore and, naked as I was, I headed curiously for the kitchen.

“Gesummaria!”

The woman’s exclamation froze me in the doorway.

The tone was definitely sensual, only it wasn’t coming from my blonde girlfriend, but from the fifty-something brunette from downstairs.

Actually, the term ‘brunette’ had been used by Vanessa in regards to my neighbor, one of the first times she’d started hanging out in my apartment.

“We’d better find a new place soon,- she’d said, -I don’t want to leave you too close to that man-crazy brunette!”

The tone was playful, almost, and to think he’d only met her once on the stairs.

Now the brunette was there, holding the non-stick frying pan I was using for omelettes, a lot of her ‘ample size’ highlighted by her unbuttoned blouse and an apron tied on her rounded waist on which stood out a steaming yellow polenta lying on an improbable wooden cutting board.

But most of all, with two very black eyes that pointed playfully at my dangling attributes.

“Maria? What the...”

Nothing else came out of my suddenly dry throat.

‘The Maria’ reached out an arm and picked up a white robe from the back of a chair.

“Here, put this on... I’ve just ironed it.”

And with feigned modesty and such calmness, she handed it to me.

“It shouldn’t appear so suddenly before a poor woman” he said laughing, “one might be frightened.”

I was sure it would take more than that to frighten her, so I asked hesitantly:

“Maria, I just don’t understand! What are you doing in my house? How did you get in?”

I could hear a faint note in my voice, but I didn’t pay too much attention.

“I... I thought it was Vanessa!”

The expression on the woman’s face changed abruptly, her eyes became a slit and the crease in her mouth lost the sensual air that had characterized it until a few moments before.

“You poor dear! It must have been a hard blow to you! Come and sit down here... I’ll make you some coffee.”

The fact that Maria had changed to that confidential, motherly tone disoriented me even more than her incomprehensible words.

I felt a chill creep into my stomach and without realizing it I collapsed into the chair the woman had moved towards me.

My face must have reflected absolute astonishment because, after a brief hesitation, I heard her say:

“Don’t you remember anything?”

I moved my head slowly.

“You fainted at the Fondamenta Nuove, near the vaporette... Luckily Bepi, the gondolier, saw you; he knows where you live... What an ugly face you had when you arrived! I’d just come back from Rialto and I was still holding my shopping bag with the sea bass... You took out the house keys, but if we didn’t take you upstairs, you wouldn’t have got there on your own! You wanted us to put you on the bed...”

I still didn’t understand and remembered absolutely nothing of what the woman was telling.

Maria looked me straight in the eye.

“After almost half an hour I realized I still had your keys in my pocket and went back up to give them back to you, I rang, but you

didn't open. Worried, I used them to enter and found you still asleep, in the same position we had left you."

Now his tone had changed slightly.

"Bepi had said that you certainly must have been drinking a lot, and so I let you sleep, but I kept the keys as a precaution."

Another long pause.

"...Then in the evening on the news... how awful... then I realized what you really had... poor boy... what a blow it must have been... so young and beautiful!"

A chilling sensation had descended from my stomach to my intestines and the urge to go to the bathroom had erupted most violently, accompanied by sudden sweating.

"This morning I came back up and you were still lying on the bed, so I undressed you and slipped you under the sheets.... Then I saw there were things to be done... The shirts to be ironed, the dishes in the sink... In truth it was that I didn't feel like leaving you alone, especially after the blow you had!"

"Stroke?"

I managed to whisper.

"Why, yes! Miss Vanessa... in the bath... dead! An absurd murder!"

I couldn't resist any longer and flung myself into the bathroom, but on reaching the toilet I found that my bowels had become paralysed; in return I fell to my knees and vomited, at length, I don't remember what.

When I returned to the kitchen Maria was pretending to tidy up the cutlery.

I noticed that her blouse was now perfectly buttoned and I suspected, from a slight black smudge under her left eye, that she had been crying.

She now sported a reassuring motherly air that comfortingly replaced the sensual one of a short while before and on the table, in plain sight, stood a steaming cup of chamomile tea.

“Maybe it’s better than coffee... drink it while it’s hot!”

In my head the words ‘Vanessa’, ‘dead’, ‘tub’, ‘murder’ kept swirling madly around, but some thing inside my brain wouldn’t allow me to accept them and left them swirling around in my ears.

At the same time, however, I felt with equal certainty that those same words had already settled, with all their chilling truth, in the most intimate and private part of my soul.

The ringing of the doorbell made me jump, and it was only then that I realized the heavy silence hovering in the apartment.

Maria must have turned off the radio a long time ago, but I hadn’t noticed.

I gave her a look of thanks, but she misunderstood and moved to open the door.

I jumped up, pinning her by the arm.

“Never mind, sorry! I’ll get it!”

I walked the last few steps towards the door with my heart in my throat and with the certainty that when I opened it, I’d find Vanessa outside, rummaging through her purse as usual, looking for her keys, while she shook her long blonde hair in exasperation.

I opened it wide.

Her eyes were blue, but above them was a large black hat with an obvious silver flame in the middle.

“Carabinieri! Signor Barovier Michele?”

Chapter 2

I'd been repeating the same thing for two hours.

I'd drained almost a quarter of the last bottle of Jack Daniels left in the house and I'd rummaged through the freezer half a dozen times for ice cubes.

I had firmly repelled the pressing temptations to light a cigarette and had gone to the bathroom at least three more times.

But there they were, still, sitting composed on my couch, looking at me in a friendly way.

Or rather, their smile was friendly, their eyes were not!

They didn't let go of me for a moment and checked my every gesture, my every expression, but they guaranteed they knew nothing about Vanessa and what had happened, apart from the fact that she had been found dead in her house.

"One last time, be courteous Mr. Barovier, can you tell us again what you did on Tuesday afternoon?"

'Blue Eyes', who, as far as I could remember, had been the only one of the two carabinieri to speak until then, had first identified himself with extreme professionalism and then introduced me to his colleague, who had limited himself to a simple 'Good morning!'

Then he had remained in absolute silence, his lips tight in a formal smile, his eyes very mobile.

“I tell you for the last time, I don’t know! My memories stop at Tuesday morning. All I remember is that I was getting ready to go to an exhibition at the Correr Museum, there was high water, then nothing! I woke up in my bed this afternoon and my neighbor asserts that they found me unconscious near the landing stage at Fondamenta Nuove, but I don’t know if it’s true. I don’t remember!”

By this time my mouth was caked with alcohol, and I realized that they had certainly let me drink on purpose to loosen my defenses; but how could I tell them about Carlotta, about the dive into the painting, about the head dripping with blood, and above all about Caravaggio’s astonished eyes with the brush still in his hand?

Not to mention the model’s soft thighs or that marvellous dragon-skinned creature.

How could I explain to them the images that had gradually surfaced in my mind? Memories born first as the result of a nightmare, then gradually becoming sharper and more precise, absurd in their growing awareness that they could correspond to reality, to an incredible reality?

I raised my glass for yet another sip of whiskey.

The amber liquid in the glass sent back the reflected image of my eye and I read all the anguish in the world.

A question seemed to float in the liquor, as frozen as the ice cubes in which it was immersed: were those images and memories real?

Were they part of ordinary reality?

That reality where my friends and I lived and where the two carabinieri sitting on my couch worked?

The reality where Vanessa kissed me laughing, or was it instead the equally tangible world of madness?

“Mr. Barovier...”

‘Blue eyes’ voice was still calm, the pupils instead beginning to veer towards a menacing dark blue.

“We have come to speak with you, at your home, at the express

request of Captain Redaelli... are you really sure you have nothing more to tell us?"

A slight drumming at the door spared me the answer, and -blue eyes- hinted a quick order to his colleague, who hurried to the door.

Rather than seeing him, I intuited the military salute he performed, for my eyes, now considerably misty, were focused only on Captain Redaelli, who was entering with an amused air.

I sensed with relief that he was still a friend.

"Marco!!! Thank God!"

I was desperate, and he could see it.

"You could have said you were at the opening of the Caravaggio exhibition on Tuesday! Moron!"

His tone, as he tossed me a folded copy of the Gazzettino at the culture page, was that of an older brother.

In the middle of the paper a large photograph of Alderman Visentin and the mayor with the poster of the Caravaggio exhibition behind them. In the right corner, in profile, there was me looking at my feet.

On second examination I noticed that just at the height of my pelvis the tip of an umbrella was sticking out.

So I saw myself portrayed on the full page of the Gazzettino, behind the mayor, immortalized in the exact position of someone who seems to urinate on the shoes of a waiter.

Despite the fact that the photograph was in black and white, I knew very well that the umbrella was purple.

I shook my head and anxiously launched into a quick read of the article below.

Nothing!

Nothing about ruined canvases, destroyed masterpieces, or high school teachers and their descendants in debt for life.

I looked up with relief.

Three pairs of eyes looked at me in amazement, and I felt a profound

joy at being part of their world again, of my usual daily reality.

But immediately, with malignant rapidity, a doubt nailed me back to the chair.

Madness?

“You ran the risk of serious trouble, believe me!”

Now Marco’s tone had returned to normal, but I could sense a barely concealed apprehension.

“If they hadn’t published that photograph you would have been at the barracks by now, if not in front of a magistrate.”

The timbre was professional, without inflections.

“Marco, please! Tell me what happened.”

My desperation now bordered on panic.

The officer gave a quick nod to his men who, after giving me a concerned look, walked out, but not before ‘blue eyes’ turned once more to scrutinize me, slowly shaking his head.

“As you well know, the building where... Vanessa lived...”

Those slight pauses and the verb in the past tense were a boulder.

“And one of the few in Venice that has a caretaker, and yesterday afternoon around six, the man received a call from a neighbor complaining about the music being too loud coming from the girl’s apartment.”

Marco didn’t take his eyes off his

“He personally hadn’t heard anything, but out of scrupulosity he went upstairs anyway to check and indeed, as he approached the door, he perceived music inside the apartment. Classic, it seems, but the volume was low, not at all annoying. Annoyed by the imbecility of the phone call, he was about to return to his guardhouse when he noticed a rivulet of water that had begun to seep from under the door.”

The captain continued to speak to me calmly, telling how the alarmed guardian had rung the bell, but receiving no answer, had become seriously concerned.

His first idea, based on a possible break in the water pipe, had

soon turned into the hypothesis of a possible illness when he realized he hadn't noticed Miss Dalla Vigna leaving that day.

Hearing no other noises coming from the apartment and noting that the door's armor plating seemed decidedly solid, he had finally decided to call the fire department.

"Do you really want me to go on? I warn you that the sequence is not at all pleasant!"

I sensed my friend behind those words and nodded without taking my eyes off his.

"They found Vanessa in the bathroom... submerged in the tub... with her throat cut!"

I was so stunned that I didn't notice how he had broken up the sentence and the strange light that had hovered in his eyes as he said it.

I stood up with a giddy feeling heading for the liquor table, turned two large crystal glasses and poured what was left of the Jack Daniels into them.

I vaguely knew I already had a glass somewhere else, but I didn't feel like looking for it.

I took the glasses and handed one to Marco.

I saw him hesitate and understood.

"Are you on duty?"

I asked cautiously.

Marco stared at me for a long moment, then I saw a decision solidify in his eyes as his features relaxed into a slight smile.

Finally he held out his hand, murmuring:

"Not anymore!"

Chapter 3

I stayed in the house for three days straight, the door bolted and a laconic message on the answering machine:

-Good morning! Unfortunately I'm temporarily busy. Leave your name and the reason for the call, I will call you back as soon as possible.-

I made one phone call, to the school, to call in sick.

We were in the middle of exams for high school graduation and I knew they would have to find a replacement urgently.

The secretary was too kind, but I didn't mind, she too must have heard the news on television.

I spent the rest of the time in front of the TV watching nothing.

I decided to leave at dawn.

I needed to breathe, to walk; but at the same time I didn't want to see anyone, I didn't feel like answering the greetings of the newsagent or putting up with the usual barman's already unpleasant stare.

I just wanted to be nobody in a world of strangers.

I found myself, without having planned it, in front of the wharf from which the motorboats departed for the Lido.

I noticed that a boat was about to leave its moorings and go on to Punta Sabbioni and Burano and I decided that it would be all right.

I sat down at the bow, on the first bench.

I had only the cold water in front of me, everything else behind, and mechanically I thought back to Marco and how we had met.

I had just enrolled at the Academy of Fine Arts and had recently rented my first apartment.

Or to be more precise, I was paying the rent, but the premises, always judging them as such with magnanimity, actually belonged to an unspecified number of individuals, of equally vague sex, colour and religion.

A microcosm united only by the same, unique and unshakeable inability to know what one really wanted from life and by many but concrete -joints- rolled with extreme competence.

In that period, when Venice became narrow and we felt too much like 'islanders', we were irremediably taken by the paranoia of being in the 'B' series... so we went to Bologna.

I had bought a timeshare of an old military Land Rover, with pedal starter but equipped with a strong and deadly crank to start it in case of emergency.

Or perhaps it would be better to say *'of regular and constant emergency'*.

I still remember with anguish that the volume of air that entered the passenger compartment, passing through all the draughts, was only comparable to the volume of petrol that came out exponentially from the twin tanks connected to each other.

One night, coming back from one of these raids in Bologna, I was stopped by a patrol of carabinieri at a roadblock.

I don't remember why but I was alone and it was late.

In addition, the fatigue combined with the unconscious fear that uniforms can provoke, supercharged by the Sangiovese cheerfully swallowed during the previous dinner, must have put a very peculiar expression on my face.

And everything had unfolded like in a movie.

The young carabinieri advanced with the machine gun slung over his shoulder.

The formal salute with his hand on the brim of his hat.

The young man driving the car, looking cocky but with fear in his eyes, quickly rolls down the window of the Jeep.

The soldier stretches out his arm and asks for the documents, while his gaze passes from the driver's face to the gun clip screwed firmly on the dashboard.

Yes!

That stupid safari car still had the metal hooks set up to place the hunter's rifle in it.

Tucked into the clip, in plain sight, was the mount for my camera's powerful telephoto lens, complete with grip, trigger and shoulder rest.

Had it not been for the lack of the top and barrel, the whole thing was remarkably similar to the machine gun held by the carabinieri.

Especially at that time of night.

The reaction was immediate.

Simultaneously with a sudden backward leap, the soldier had raised the machine gun screaming and a blinding light had instantly split the windshield.

In that instant I knew what terror was.

Not the one provoked by the barrel of the machine gun or by the uncontrollable situation, but the one unleashed by the eyes full of fear of the young carabinieri.

If I was terrified, he was much more so.

When I had left the barracks it was morning, almost like now, and I remembered the cold air, strangely pleasant and comforting.

Leaning against a car was a boy in jeans who, when he saw me, straightened up and came towards me.

I watched him put his hands awkwardly in his pockets as he murmured:

“Marco!”

I saw again the eyes of someone who had been one step away from

killing me and he probably saw again in turn, the tired face of someone who for a few seconds had not turned into an indelible nightmare.

There was a bar on the corner and we went to have breakfast; when we left, we didn't know it yet, but we had both found a friend.

Then I had met Vanessa, while he had been transferred, at her request, to Rome to the -Comando Carabinieri Tutela Patrimonio Culturale- and when, after graduating, I had started teaching History of Art, Marco had put me on the list of external consultants.

So it sometimes happened that we worked together.

The motor-ship in the meantime, had almost reached the tip of the fort of Sant'Andrea and now in front of me I had the wide mouth of the port, while the air was getting stronger and cooler.

The memories came to me in confused waves, without a logical sense or a common thread.

I tried to relax and let them flow unimpeded.

"Vanessa, though she didn't flaunt it around, was the niece of a well-known senator of the Republic..."

I could hear Marco's voice as if he were still in front of me.

"...and so, immediately after the discovery, the investigation immediately took on a connotation of urgency and several bigwigs were unceremoniously inconvenienced. It was only thanks to the intuition of a young petty officer who was looking at photographs taken at the crime scene that they noticed the message. A quick search on the internet and the investigators were faced with an incredible revelation: the photograph of the girl immersed in the bathtub, was terrifyingly similar to the scene in David's painting 'The Death of Marat'"

I thus learned that, once the randomness of the similarity had been discarded, the cultural heritage section had also been informed, and the photographs had appeared on the monitor located on Captain Marco Redaelli's desk.

What Marco hadn't said, but what I understood very well, was that in Venice the pressure on the case had immediately skyrocketed and that being able to offload part of the responsibility for the investigation onto the Roman nucleus had been a big sigh of relief for many.

A '*cofano*', launched at full speed, after having hit hard the prow on a wave bigger than the others seemed to literally splash out of the water.

I followed the evolution of the boat with my eyes, curious to see how it would have recovered its buoyancy, but instead I saw Vanessa in her place, immersed in the bathtub, leaning on a white sheet on which stood out the folds of ironing.

Damned photos!

I had managed to convince Marco to let me see some of the snapshots taken at the scene of the crime only after repeated and exhausting insistence and I sincerely regretted my choice.

The testimony of the councillor Visentin about my presence at the Caravaggio exhibition, proved by the photograph in the Gazzettino, had completely exonerated me from any connection with the murder and, even if for everyone I was now just 'the grief-stricken boyfriend', I was still too involved to be able to assert my status of collaborator and actively participate in the investigation.

I sadistically and self-destructively refocused on what I remembered from the photographs.

Vanessa's right arm dangling over the edge of the pool.

Between her bloodless fingers was the black Mont Blanc her father had given her the previous Christmas, while on her legs floated my green terry cloth bathrobe, soaked in reddish water.

Next to the bathtub a small table in poor art which I remembered was situated in the entrance hall and on which she used to put her bag when she came home.

On the floor, the old-fashioned barber's razor, with its mother-

of-pearl handle, with which she had been killed.

In the other hand, half submerged under water, a white sheet of paper on which you could make out, smudged and almost illegible, my name written in the blue ink of the fountain pen...

The boat had now turned and was beginning a spectacular glide.
Black, red!

The blood had to be red, but in the photographs, although they were in color, it appeared black and without light.

I realized that I had been observing those images without seeing them as a whole, noticing only the details, the nuances; but now they suddenly appeared again in their chilling entirety, motionless and overbearing before my eyes.

And Vanessa was there, white, naked, with the turban equally white on her head.

Dead!

How many times had I seen her make the quick and efficient gesture with which, as if by a miracle, the towel was transformed into a supporting structure of perfect folds.

Every time I was surprised to think that it didn't serve to contain her hair, but only to wonderfully highlight her long and elegant neck, her kissable throat.

More than once we had started from there.

Now there was nothing elegant about her throat.

A sharp line divided it in two.

At the top, a waxy whiteness made her blend in with her chin and cheeks; at the bottom, that marvelous throat was invaded by the blood that had dripped down to soil her large breasts, warm...

Suddenly I realized that that body had no more warmth and with tears stinging my eyes I hated it!

For the first time in my life I felt I could fiercely hate whoever had stolen that warmth that rightfully belonged to her and that I

still felt on her.

In the meantime the motorship had docked at Punta Sabbioni and I was absent-mindedly staring at the few passengers getting off and the considerable crowd of tourists waiting to board.

I watched them slowly as I saw on their holiday faces the desire to have fun.

As the line grew thinner and thinner, I felt that my ideas were running out and as I looked at the now empty pier I realized the abyss inside of me.

I was at a standstill.

No idea about Vanessa's death and absolute darkness about what had happened to me.

Suddenly I didn't feel like being led anywhere, neither by the boat, nor by the events, nor even less by a multitude of intrusive carabinieri.

I threw myself like a madman towards the boarding door and just as the sailor had almost finished closing it, I slipped aside.

With a leap I was out, and distinctly I heard a very unpleasant dialectal expression breaking upon my back.

With a wave of my hand I tried to excuse myself, but I was already running towards the next landing-place where another motor-ship was about to leave, only this one would take me back to Venice.

I sat down again at the bow, but this time I wished I could make the ship sail faster, my ears straining at the dull noise of the engines turning in the belly of the hull.

Carlotta!

I had to see her!

Talk to her!

Face her and confront my fears and the unknown that terrified me.

I couldn't keep wracking myself with uncertainties and doubts, I had to know exactly what had happened that day at the Caravaggio exhibition!

Chapter 4

“Jimbutas Carlotta”

The small brass plaque, with the name engraved on it in clear letters, gleamed in the midday sun.

I paused to admire the elegance of the workmanship; it had the air of being very old, and the craftsman who had made it had undoubtedly been skilful.

There was no bell, but a ring, also in brass, to be pulled with force.

In Venice one often sees contraptions of this kind on the sides of doors, where a system of rods makes a bell tinkle directly inside the house.

Most of them are now only ornamental, but the one I had before me looked as if it were perfectly efficient and frequently used.

As I cautiously operated it, I paused to consider that although I had heard my colleague's foreign surname pronounced several times, only now, seeing it written on that beautiful plaque, did I realize that I did not know its exact origins.

The inlaid wooden door opened with a slight click.

I entered.

A magnificent garden welcomed me in a mixture of colours and scents and once more I could see how strange and wonderful Venice was.

Wandering around the calli you could see colourful walls, bridges, canals, palaces, but only if you had the chance to observe an aerial view you would be astonished by the amount of green that flooded it, enclosed in hundreds of secret gardens.

And this was definitely one of them, gorgeous, with a real well vera in the middle.

As I approached it in admiration, I noticed its perfect state of preservation, but the thing that amazed me most was the five-pointed star in solid wrought iron that formed its lid.

During the period of the plague, the Venetians closed the well-vessels with heavy sheets of iron as a precaution, lids that are still today the favourite seat of children when they play in the squares, as well as wonderful blackboards for their coloured chalks.

Here, however, it was not a complete lid, but only the interweaving of sturdy iron bars to form a perfect geometric figure, with enough space in its center to pass a small wooden bucket suspended from a pulley.

I began to realize that the garden must be much larger than I had at first imagined when a little further on I found myself in front of a small crossroads.

In front of me I had now the imposing entrance of a large house, while on the left, after about twenty meters, a gate was placed to mark the water entrance and let you glimpse a small 'sandalo' moored to the classic painted wooden poles.

On the right, instead, there was a glimpse of a small greenhouse, with large windows supported by a wrought iron frame in clear Art Nouveau style.

At the side of the path, a stupendous marble statuette representing Ecante.

I had guessed more than once that Carlotta's cultural background was far deeper and more solid than the normal standard of doctrine, but I was certainly not prepared to find in her garden a beautiful

statue of the Goddess of the Crossroads, the Trivia Goddess.

I was still gazing at the perfect forms of the goddess, in her features of youth, mother, and old woman, when the door of the house opened and an old woman appeared on the threshold.

A helmet of long white curls, an immaculate bathrobe tightly fastened at the waist and on her feet a pair of Nikes, equally white.

Looking at that beautiful unknown face I was seized with doubt, and all at once I realized that that house and garden certainly could not belong to a modest high school teacher, and that I must therefore have made a mistake in looking up the address.

“Can I help you young man?”

The tone was sweet, but not mild.

“Sorry ma’am, I must have made a mistake, I was looking for Mrs. Jimbutas.”

“So you found me! I am Mrs. Jimbutas.”

The tone was amused.

“Lilith Jimbutas!”

Confusion must have been etched on my face.

“I... I was looking for Carlotta... Carlotta Jimbutas.”

“Ah!! My sister Carlotta! Why didn’t you say so at once!”

On his face the smile had become identical with that which a cat might exhibit towards a mouse.

“Come inside... I’ll call you right away! We were just doing some yoga, you know, at our age you have to keep in shape a little!”

I saw her disappear as quickly as she had appeared and for a moment I wondered if she was really real, then I distinctly heard her ringing voice:

“Carlotta! There’s a handsome young man here looking for you!”

I gathered my courage and crossed the threshold of the entrance, finding myself in a small, dark wood-paneled foyer.

In one corner, a small round three-legged table with a large wooden bowl on it stood out as the only piece of furniture.

As I walked past I saw that the bowl was full of keys of various sizes and shapes and some must have been very old.

Following the voice I found myself in a large round hall, with a very high ceiling, softly illuminated by the light coming from three large French windows embellished with beautiful Venetian glass.

A well-balanced ensemble of colourful glass rounds, hand-cut and held together by a perfect lead frame.

Three enormous black leather sofas faced each other around a large and very low stone table, also perfectly round, placed exactly in the middle of the polished marble floor.

Above, a large wooden balcony ran all around the room.

I moved forward until I almost touched the table and noticed that on the top was a mosaic depicting a large silver moon on a cobalt blue background, with two other small crescents on its side.

I instinctively raised my head towards the ceiling and, astonished, I saw a large dark blue sky painted on it, scattered with golden stars representing the Big Dipper.

“I’ve been waiting for you! I was just wondering when you were coming!”

Carlotta’s familiar voice fell from above, bringing me back to reality.

I searched for her with my eyes.

From my vantage point, I could see that there were four doors on the balcony, positioned towards the cardinal points, each with its own symbol painted on it.

One of them was open and leaning against the doorjamb my colleague was staring at me with an amused air.

“Make yourself comfortable... I’ll be right down.”

The voice fell from above as she disappeared inside the room.

“Herbal tea? This is great for colds!”

I turned sharply and saw Lilith come storming in holding a silver tray filled with cups, sugar bowls, pitchers, saucers and cookies.

“Actually, it’s the middle of June and it’s hot!”

I intruded.

I saw her suddenly freeze thoughtful, then shrugging her shoulders she quietly retraced her steps.

“Maybe you’re right... I’ll go see if I can find a bottle of iced limoncello!”

“Don’t mind her, she’s just a bit eccentric!”

Carlotta appeared quietly behind me.

“Sometimes she has trouble remembering where she is, you know, by dint of traveling.”

The last words seemed directed more to herself than to give me any real explanation.

She let herself sink with a sigh onto one of the couches and only then did I notice that she seemed to be wearing solely a light white silk kimono over her tanned skin.

Her attitude and movements were more like those I would have expected from a young girl than those of the old professor I knew, and if it hadn’t been for the wrinkles that drew on her face and marked the backs of her hands, I might have thought I was looking at a real beauty.

I suddenly realized that she must really have been, and to my astonishment I felt regret for not having known her in her full glory, surprising myself by imagining myself in the same room, with all those sofas and Carlotta thirty years younger.

“Hey! Playboy!”

The tone was somewhere between amused and flattered.

I looked at her blushing, embarrassed that she could absurdly have read my thoughts.

“Excuse me?”

“Forget it!”

The timbre of her voice had returned to normal, though her eyes continued to smile wryly though.

“Tell me rather... how was your trip?”

A vise seemed to suddenly tighten in my chest.

She knew!

And if she was talking about it so quietly it couldn't just be a personal nightmare of mine.

Like a castaway clinging to the last floating wreck, however small, so I tried to maintain an impassivity that turned out to be ridiculous.

“Journey? I don't understand...”

“But yes! The journey into the painting, from Merisi!”

His face had taken on an expression of anxious curiosity.

“Tell me!”

There were a few moments of silence, then before my barred eyes she assumed the typical expression one uses when explaining something to a child.

“You've been on a journey, you've been to another dimension... you've probably heard of parallel worlds, right?”

She didn't take her eyes off my face for a moment.

“The painting is a door... it's one of those points of contact that join one universe to another.”

I was stunned!

If until then I had thought I was the one about to go crazy, now I was in front of someone who really was.

Without realizing it, I had my hands balled into fists in my jacket pockets and in my left hand I was clutching my house keys, the jagged side of which was tearing my palm slightly.

I felt the shape of the key ring that held them together, a small silver pyramid that Vanessa had given me for one of my birthdays.

Her memory filled my eyes with tears, but at the same time I found myself filled with her confidence and reasoning.

This new linearity of mind allowed me to see things as they really were and in front of me I saw only a woman now old, ridiculous in a dressing-gown that seemed not to belong to her, with deep

wrinkles that started from her throat to creep deep into the furrow of her heavy breasts, too pitilessly exposed.

I stood up slowly, quietly.

The only thing I wanted at that moment was the chance to get out of that house to breathe freely.

There was a sharp snap, like those made by whips, and one of the three large French doors swung open under a violent thrust.

At its exact center a strange figure appeared, with a dark sky behind him, with ominous gray clouds swirling about, making the man's stillness all the more disturbing and dangerous.

The figure raised his right arm in my direction and I felt my heart slow abruptly, while a cold sweat began to run down my back and then down my legs.

I was no longer breathing.

The man was in shadow and I could only make out the cold glint of his eyes, yet I was sure I had seen him before.

I fell to my knees, my right hand pressed against my throat.

I was going to die! I could feel it!

My heart skipped a beat, and each beat seemed like it should be the last, but then unexpectedly came another, lonely one.

In my left hand, outstretched towards my executioner, the small silver pyramid seemed to glow.

I suddenly realized that yet another beat had not come, and as darkness began to envelop me, I waited for the end.

Instead came a powerful kick to my outstretched hand, which forcefully threw the pendant against the wall.

Immediately I started to breathe again, but the air came in forcefully burning my lungs and making me dizzy.

The man made a gesture of annoyance, accompanied by a hoarse sound, then I distinctly saw Carlotta, her arms raised, standing between our two figures.

A moment later, a blinding flash seemed to envelop her

completely, while the window panes rattled fearfully.

I watched in astonishment as the white kimono slowly sagged, and I found myself staring at a bundle of white silk from which my colleague's exhausted face emerged, her eyes like two opaque white globes.

I saw her mouth move, from which a slight gasp came out with extreme difficulty.

I bent anxiously towards her dry lips, almost touching them, trying to catch a faint murmur:

“Dragons! Look for the dragons!”

The man had meanwhile advanced a few steps, making his figure even more majestic and imposing.

I could now see his face distinctly, and was fascinated.

It was a perfect face, without defects, but for this very reason it could paradoxically be the face of anyone.

It had no personality, or perhaps it encompassed them all.

I saw him raise his hand again towards me, majestic and terrible, but at the same time as his gesture, a dirge invaded the air.

With difficulty I turned my head towards the source of that strange music.

Lilith was standing behind me, her left arm stretched forward.

As if it had been a natural extension of her arm, a long, double-bladed knife, its handle completely black, was pointed at the terrible figure.

The woman's eyes were fixed, while her lips moved in a fast, cadence.

In front of my eyes suddenly materialized my set of keys and I instinctively grabbed it, while I got up staggering with difficulty. Then I rushed out as fast as I could.

I found myself panting in the early afternoon sun, with the echo of Carlotta's voice repeating in my ears: “Look for the dragons!”

In my eyes I still had the figure of Lilith with a knife in hand, tall, haughty, focused; and only then did I realize it, completely naked.