

Wedding

I conceived the idea of the wedding when it was forbidden for me to talk to anybody about the devastation and the desolation left in my heart after the Italian curator Mr. P. deserted me. I knew from the start that miracles do not exist, but the simple miracle that had been offered to me melted my heart. I've never had a special interest in an international career, or for that matter, in any career at all, but here, on the verge of my sixtieth year, an old dream came true, of a man who gazes at me, and has the utmost interest in my doings, marveling in them day and night, as in due time I succeeded in making him answer my nocturnal letters as well, bless the Internet! We both exchanged day for night. I had always, even before then, loved the soothing black of night. Dalia Hertz, my favorite poet, has a poem about those who forgo sleep at night when all around them are *heard sleeping like oaks in their sunken beds*. You would have thought that those who forgo sleep should be compared to oaks, as they are the ones described in the poem as *erect from within*, but these are the forceful ways of art, always unexpected, which thus put the magnificent trees to bed under a duvet in a small apartment in the city, and, as if this is not enough, they are "*heard sleeping like oaks*", as the poem says, as if one of the well-known qualities of these stout trees is the voicing of small gurgling noises and the emitting of broken syllables into the room's stifling night air. And so, when both of us were awake and working, each in a lighted window in his own dark city, on separate continents, I lived with the sensation that there was a vigilant eye, a glittering star, that accompanied me incessantly, and it lasted a whole year, no less no more. And as if his enthusiasm was not enough, he swept into our relationship: his translator, several gallery owners, an art historian from Palermo, a young poet whom he encouraged to write poems for me, and when I was sick, and awoke from a troubled sleep, there was a message awaiting me from him and from his friend, a better-known curator, a few friendly words. Although I knew that all this Italian celebration – Italy and Sicily standing up unanimously to bow to me – was basically a mistake and not meant for me, I couldn't find the inner strength to resist the gifts that were intended for some other being, and, as if stricken by convulsions, I let my whole constitution collapse into the comforting solace extended to me as compensation for my bad life.

At dawn, before shower and sleep, I used to scan the drawings, the night's harvest, and send them to him. I really loved that there was someone to send to at the end of the day's work, to export the goods beyond my own borders,

and that there was someone to receive. Maybe this is the kind of satisfaction that children get from playing catch, sending, receiving and sending, from me to you. It is sad to think of a game of ball without someone on the receiving end. I wish I still had someone to send to. And the distance was advantageous here, as it cleansed us of unnecessary bits and pieces. When we met, the chill of proximity settled itself between us and it was as if we didn't know each other anymore. A dialogue through the computer and the scanner by way of the worldwide web suited us best, or at least me, because, to be honest, I have no idea as to what his motives were and what suited him.

Around that time, I moved to a new apartment which I bought with some inherited money, in the Cooperative Housing Neighborhood in the center of Tel Aviv. I, with a father living in Germany for the past forty years and with a mother who moved from one rented apartment to another in the last twenty years of her life, came to be a property owner in an old, established neighborhood, remnant and symbol of the Hebrew Workers Movement. From the balcony of the bedroom you overlook the spacious common backyard, surrounded by bright long railroad apartment buildings with many entrances, where the cooperative store, the laundry and the kindergarten of what was considered a kind of Kibbutz in the city, resided in the past. The courtyard remained raw and uncultivated, and in spring ragwort, wood sorrel and chubeza, the plants I grew up with, flourish there. Three years have passed since then and I'm still puzzled by the double act of belonging which was performed upon me by buying the apartment, as a result of which, the apartment ended up belonging to me, and I ended up belonging to Tel Aviv.

Settling in an apartment of my own, in a neighborhood with an ethical existential past raised the question *How is it right to live now?*, which for me is identical to the question *What is it right to paint now?* By *now* I mean, here, in this house, in this city, after retirement, on the verge of old age, and after my sleeves have dipped more than once into sickness and death. I don't have the talent to relate to the present, I lack the tools, and also my life did not encourage a straightforward view of reality, but rather, it evolved as a kaleidoscope of oblique gazes. And so, when I took it upon myself to paint Tel Aviv, I came to her obliquely, in diagonals. Tangents, from my childhood village to China and Japan in the East, to be fractured and returned to Italy and the Low Countries in the West; diagonals drawn from the faraway Fifties to much further and older days, and back to now. When it surfaced, coming back to me through the prism of different times and places,

it was a picture of Tel Aviv as a historic zigzag, aged, experienced, touched by foreign colors, stylized gestures and distant moods.

During that year Mr. P. commissioned several paintings from me, dedicated to Italian cities which I've never visited, under the pretext of theme exhibitions that eventually never took place. But perhaps the mere idea of painting a city made it possible for me, later on, to think of Tel Aviv as deserving to be painted too. Or more accurately, a challenge was born within me, to transform Tel Aviv into a city that is worthy of being painted, and for this I should be thankful to him. Two people facing each other, they might be blind, not having the faintest idea how they benefit or how they harm each other. Each is trying to build his own city, sometimes they imagine that they build one and the same city, sometimes they imagine that the cities they build have a shared pulse. Who knows! And so during my preliminary research for building Turin on the basis of books and the paintings of others, who happened to know her, I got the idea from Giorgio De Chirico of depicting a city through an emblem. For him, the colonnades, for me, the balconies of the ship-shaped buildings in the style of Dizengoff square, spreading horizontally, circling around like the silk ribbons that were in fashion in the Fifties and Sixties, tied in our hair and around our waists in butterfly bows.

Even before Turin, when he commissioned some paintings dedicated to Naples for an exhibition that never, ever happened, to which he gave the poetic title "Naples – Magic and Loss," I was strongly captivated by the bold reds and blues of the mid-fifteenth century French painter Jean Fouquet, whose Madonna I'd seen a few years before, in Antwerp. It might be considered the weirdest painting in the whole history of art and in the words of Johan Huizinga: *The bizarre inscrutable expression of the Madonna's face, the red and blue cherubim surrounding her, all contribute to give this painting an air of decadent impiety... there is a flavor of blasphemous boldness about the whole, unsurpassed by any artist of the Renaissance.*

This exceptional painting in which everything contradicts the instincts and the primary fancies of the soul, and at the reproduction of which I gaze so often, became an allegory for me, of the unexpected way in which my life strayed from anything natural and from anything that could be anticipated. Here is a white little girl in a red duvetyn coat of which the blue lining marks its hem, a soft red-blue coat, smooth to the touch, with a three-

cornered hood as well, to cover and keep warm. Naturally, she deserved to be embraced and looked after by life, to be given a place within it. Red and blue and white, there was no warning signal of the trap they set. Not any premonition, even on the far horizon, of the twisted, convoluted curve that my life would take, of the sly deceit by which destiny would allure and lead my cart astray, causing it to deviate from the road into the decoy of the two-dimensional world, not a hint of the way my mind would be muddled into finding solace in the monster of art. The painting of the white Madonna surrounded by red and blue angels is a model of the coffin in which the stump of my soul was buried and of which the aberrant resurrection in the guise of the artist would arise. And since my life was a long chain of replacements and substitutions, I adopted the ice-cold Madonna to be a mother to me, and a madness beset me to lay Tel Aviv in her body.

What helped me realize the building of the city and answer the question *What is it right to paint now?*, was the fresco cycle *Care of the Sick* by Domenico Di Bartolo, Fouquet's contemporary, which I'd seen in the Pilgrims' Hall of what originally was a hospital, a boarding house and an orphanage, and today serves as a museum in Siena, Italy. In the frescoes, the hospital is depicted as a bustling city where a man passes a whole cycle of life during which all his needs are met, including absorption, clothing, feeding, caring for the sick and even the arranging of a wedding ceremony and the performance of the last rites by a cleric before death. Animals also carry the burden of their little lives between the peoples' legs there, if not always peacefully, then in anger and combat, in this ideal hospital. I love it when a painting encompasses different times and different places, I love to think of a whole journey of life summarized in a rectangle, there is a sense of peacefulness in packing life and the world into a parcel which you may survey in a glance from above or at an angle. As if something was grasped and comprehended, as if the complexity and the multiplicity of life were diminished to the size of the spectator's forehead and as if things were put in order. And here, in the Siena hospital paintings, a double comfort is offered, because in the world depicted inside the paintings there is someone who tends and heals, feeds and clothes, makes matches, and escorts you on your last journey. And it is well known that we are all sick and in need of a nurse, and we all deserve shelter and care.

And so, in my new home in The Cooperative Housing Neighborhood, from Domenico Di Bartolo's idea and from the colors of Jean Fouquet, I started to picture my *Care of the Sick*. In my mind's eye I already see the balconies

that unfold like ribbons, a lucky match between form and content, and here is the element of care and compassion expressed in the relationships between the figures which I still have to invent and draw with much enjoyment. But painting is not writing and a solution must be found as to how to show the full curves of the balconies from the outside and simultaneously show the activity inside. In traditional Japanese painting they used the *Fukinuki Yatai* (blown-away roof) method, that lets the spectator peep in from above, from his seat in the clouds, into the house, and see the activity in the different partitioned rooms of the interior. And since life evolved there mainly in sitting or kneeling or reclining on the floor, it was quite easy to spread it all out on the surface of the painting. About Japan and how she saved my life I still wish to tell, but in accordance with the spirit of this place, I found a different solution, that of placing scaffoldings in front of the buildings, and arranging all the human activity along the planks. Thus, I could combine two types of impermanence innately so different; the careless Israeli hodge-podge, an outcome of a short and hasty history, and the other, the Japanese, which developed into a life prospect and a world outlook, subtly shaped by long years, where the ephemeral and the beautiful are one and the same. I liked the thought that by stretching wooden scaffoldings over the length and the width of the paintings I wrapped a Japanese envelope around Tel Aviv, though a shaky one and lacking in charm. And in this Tel Aviv, a hospital on scaffoldings, either male or female nurses will scurry along the walls, ascend and descend on ropes and ladders, bathing and clothing, carrying on their backs, embracing and putting a hand on a forehead, pushing wheelchairs, evacuating corpses, keeping an eye on the infants, hanging babies in cradles and lifting them high up in their strong arms.

As my teacher of color I choose Jean Fouquet, and following his teachings I colored the houses of Tel Aviv in pure red and blue. From him I got the idea to stop mixing colors. I purchased a cart with many drawers and ordered tubes of oil colors from all around the world. Indirectly, this series of paintings is a tribute to the magnificent paint companies of England, Holland and Germany, of Japan and China, of France and Italy and America. Each tube I bought added a tiny square of color to my expanding color chart, and the tubes themselves I arranged according to their brands in the spacious drawers. With this I've found a pretext to indulge in a pastime I've loved since childhood but which was allowed only rarely till now, either by reason of saving money or due to restrictions I forced upon myself, that of buying colors and trying them out one after the other on a white surface. From Fouquet I learned to let color caprices have full expression. He did what

Matisse did five hundred years later, allowed a brilliant independent color, usually Lapis Lazuli blue, to cover the walls and the floor and even some of the figures in front of them, but with Fouquet it is even more daring, because the world is depicted three-dimensionally. With Matisse, the liberation of color goes hand in hand with the liberation from perspective and gravity, leading towards abandoning the world in favor of a flat pattern, unlike Fouquet in whom the independence of colors stands in contrast to his naturalism and as a result exults and glorifies them and gives free reign to their mad behavior, they do as they please in the familiar, normal world.

But there is method in this madness and I never cease to learn from Fouquet about arranging and organizing colors in groups. How a family of colors crowd together and in its midst a color of a completely different origin bursts forth and signals to a similar, but not identical, hue, at the other end of the painting. The color families themselves widen to encompass the aberrant ones, and in this way strange and unexpected clans are formed. In those paintings in which the human activity takes place outside, in a landscape, the bold colors of the nearby activity are placed on the background of the monochrome underpainting that builds perspectival depth, and so they turn out to be even more arbitrary and stubborn. Unlike Matisse where the world surrenders and melts into art, here a dichotomy and a sort of rivalry remain between the two, between the world with its stiff and hard- to-fathom ways, and its reluctance to yield to our wishes, and art that beats her wings powerfully even while in captivity. And this split is closer and more faithful to my life experience.

The work of painting has become the work of coloring, for me, and Japanese painting during its different eras, with its stress on outline and its unwillingness to mar the world with muddy shadows and gradational build up of three-dimensionality, encouraged and inspired me in this. If I acquired from Fouquet the brilliant whites and reds and blues, then from the Japanese I received the kind of nuanced shades that in the West might not even be considered colors, hues they are capable of naming *Frozen Peach*, *Rose Grey*, *Misty Blue* and *Cloudburst*. For me Fouquet's *Group Theory* was especially useful and challenging in the cross- breeding of these two sources of influence.

Mr P. dropped into my world when I was in the midst of painting the *Golden Temple* series, which together with *Eternal Summer*, its antecedent, depicted with amusement life after death. A love as big as the one I'd fallen into, after

the death of my Japanese boyfriend, for Japanese culture, I'd never known before. And I also loved it then, that I became a widow without ever getting married and life was for me in those days like a new incarnation in which I had nothing left to lose. The Italian Mr. P. on the other hand, upon entering my life, brought with him the old Western dichotomy, brandishing new prospects of life and simultaneously commissioning paintings dealing with the theme of the *Triumph of Death*. In short, when I was already delving deeply into Japan, he was jerking and jogging me back to Europe and in so doing, he thwarted the beautiful balance I'd reached, in which I had become close to fulfilling the *Zen* saying: *Live your life as if you were already dead*.

When he left, the idea of the *Wedding* burst forth. Tel Aviv is first and foremost the arena in which I never got married. In each and every corner of Tel Aviv I never got married, in each and every day in Tel Aviv I never got married. I never got married in King George Street towards Haavoda, I never got married all along Ibn Gvirol Street and on the beach near Frishman Street and not even in Hakalir Street near Gan Ha'ir. As a consolation prize, a festive flower, I'll prepare for myself a painted wedding, and if anyone calls me I'll say: I have no time, as I am preparing for my wedding, I have no time as I'm in a hurry to my wedding. When I say that I never wished to be an artist, that the only thing I ever wanted was to get married, people doubt it and laugh. They, because they did get married, had to face the fact that life's discontents and tediousness go on as before, after marriage as well. As for me, since I never married, a wedding did remain an ultimate and final act like in books and in the films of Yasujiro Ozu, who never married as well, and from his film *Late Spring* I borrowed the title for my wedding paintings, or rather, for the series of paintings in which I do get married. And from this film *Late Spring*, in which there is a certain confusion between father and bridegroom, I have chosen Chishu Ryu, the exemplary father, to be my bridegroom.

The film is about the father giving away his daughter, Noriko, to the bridegroom (who is absent from the film), a theme I quite fancy. I imagine it as if the father stretches out a long hand to send his daughter away on one of those narrow swinging dangerous bridges from Hokusai's paintings, and at the other side the long outstretched hand of the bridegroom is extended, to receive her. The moment the father drops her hand, the bridegroom will take hold of her other hand, the father lets it drop but his hand stays ready, still in the air, to ensure safe passage. To be thus protected between the two of them, is for me the ultimate good for a woman and a daughter. In the film,

Noriko is reluctant to leave her father, but he devises ways to reject her and send her away, and he even contrives a lie for that purpose, pretending to be getting married himself. Towards the end of the film, a bit drunk after his daughter's wedding, laughing, he calls it *the biggest lie of my life*.

All this, my life has missed, the pleasant and serene absorption in oneself, with downcast eyes, when you know someone is looking at you. This is what I call beauty, the inner confidence in the presence of the good father. From my life beauty had slipped away, the daughter disappeared as though she never existed, and there are moments when I still sense how I let her fall, to be swallowed up by deep waters, and I feel so sorry for her, and dream vainly of saving her. As for me, it seems as if I swallowed both the father and the bridegroom, my head swelled up so it lost all shape, I exhausted myself in a Gold Rush that knows no repose, in a desperate chase after beauty, which always, when I got hold of it, was no longer beautiful.

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The threads of rain and the grey of winter seem to be glued to the window panes, and inside the house, near the warmth of the heater, preparations for the wedding in Spring are proceeding. The dripping ficus trees that shelter the house bend forward a bit like a crowd of onlookers, approving and reassuring. The plastic shutters of the balconies opposite, they too nod in agreement, and just as Dalia Hertz puts the oaks to bed in between the sheets, so will I put Tel Aviv on as a dress, and the three puppeteers of the Bunraku theatre will turn my lowered face and direct my steps towards my bridegroom who holds out his hand to me from a distance of a thousand leagues.

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