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Leo and Lisa

Gerald H. Levin

"**I'm almost flattered**, you being such a wonderful up-and-coming artist and all," she says, "but there's no way."

He slides his hand across the varnished oak table toward her. "Lisa, darling, my little Florentine beauty: for the sake of art - classical art, at that. The kind you'd see in a museum."

"That's supposed to make me feel better? I pose nude, then you sell the picture to somebody in town - one of my neighbors, probably."

He looks her in the eye. "I'll give you double what I pay my best model."

"So now I'm your prostitute? Is that the way it is? This isn't about money. Besides, Leo, who are you kidding? If you're talking cash, you don't have it. And even if you did, I certainly don't need money from you."

"You're always complaining about your stingy husband," he says. "Aren't you?"

"Well, he is," she says, "but I'm still living a lot better than you. We should really talk about things." She brushes strands of her hazelnut hair away from her face.

He smiles, leans back in his chair. "Lisa, darling, I love that look."

"What look?"

"That look, you know, that one - that hair, and that smirk. What a look." She reaches for the bowl of popcorn. "Knock it off, Leo. I'm serious. We have to talk."

He nudges the bowl closer to her, says: "This painting - I'm thinking a portrait outdoors - is something I've considered for a while. Something moody, expressive. Know what I mean?"

"Leo, can you stop?"

"*Amore mio* — whatever you desire."

"I can't leave him. I just can't. He's got too many friends in high places. I'd end up with nothing."

"So, you'd rather stay and be miserable?"

"I don't know, Leo."

"That is a pity."

"What I do know is that one day he's going to come over here and strangle both of us."

"That would be a real pity."

"Please, already."

"I'm only saying ... "

"I know what you're saying. We'll talk another time. I have to get back. Francesco's home soon."

"You're not allowed out of the house? You should relax." He gets up from the table, walks toward a cupboard. "I have this dark rum - supposed to be great stuff. My friend Paul gave it to me; he brought it back from one of his island trips. With coffee ... *fantastico!*"

"If you think you can seduce me, you're insane,"

"I only offered you a drink. One glass?"

"Leo, you're not hearing me. I hate when you're like this."

"You've always got my attention, Lisa. It's just that you seem ... so tense."

"Tense? You think this is tense?" She sweeps her hands across the table, knocking two overripe bananas, a tube of French Ultramarine Blue and several

charcoal sketches onto the floor. The bowl of popcorn remains undisturbed.

"Alright, let's talk," she says, momentarily placing one hand under her chin and then clasping both hands on the table. "We've had fun, I'll admit - but it comes down to this: I'm married."

"And, you're miserable — with him, that is — right?"

"So?"

"So, you have to leave. Simple as that."

"Really? It's always simple with you."

"Leave him, come with me ... some place north, maybe the wine country. There's not much going on here - for either of us. I've often thought of going there, anyway."

"And what would we live on? Love?"

"I'd get work up there. You, too."

"I'm not a farmer, Leo."

"Course not, my dear. You could help me set up a studio."

"To paint what? Barns? That's it. I've got to go."

Leo strolls toward the lone window in his room. "Dismal out there, still raining. Stay

awhile. You'll get drenched if you leave now."

"OK, just till it lets up," she says, slipping off her wool cape.

"Good." He takes two glasses and the bottle of dark rum from a shelf near the window, and sets them on the table. He sits down, slides a half-filled glass of rum toward Lisa.

She, in turn, finishes off the rum with a few quick gulps, then slides the empty glass back toward him. "That's it, Leo. You, Francesco - you're both driving me crazy. I've had it."

Two hours later, a half-naked woman with a noticeable gap between her two front teeth is reclining on a tattered, green divan in Leo's flat. A rumpled cotton sheet — dingy gray — barely extends across the woman's ample body. Leo faces his easel, holding a sable paintbrush at arm's length in front of a recycled canvas. Three lit candles on the table illuminate the room, giving the model's pale skin an iridescent quality.

"I don't know why you're still running after my sister, Leo," she says.

"Especially when you know I'm available. It must be true that great artists love to suffer. Yes?"

"Yes, Mona, it is true."

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