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Gioconda

Translated into English by the author

The story that follows is true.

LAST NIGHT I DREAMT OF MY OLD NEIGHBORHOOD again. A dream in my sleep, a nightmare when I am awake and see what has become of it. But I've known it in its glory, I've known it as it was of old. How lucky I was to have been born and raised there in those days before the War, to have lived there through the War and the Occupation. And for some years afterwards.

In those days, before the War, in areas like ours, people still lived in houses and not in blocks of flats; there were gardens and flowers and the seasons of the year had their own individual scent each, the quiet of the night was broken only by the barking of a dog and the crowing of a rooster before dawn, the frogs croaked in the pool at the neighbour's courtyard in the summer, the milkman called early in the morning, there was the first cheerful gossip of the women at their gardens' fences. There were no cars. God, all this – and so much more besides.

There was, at that time, a poor little house that was to become very important to me. Long and low-built, it had a sloping roof and a vine that covered half the front and sprawled all over the porch. On one side it looked onto a so-called garden with two or three flower-pots, grass and weeds but also a big fig-tree, a decrepit fence that just marked the boundaries rather than protected the garden-not that there was anything to protect or anyone to protect it from – a garden, in other words, that was honest and unpretentious, made a little bit by man and mostly by God, a joy to behold. In the years that followed and are now gone, as I wandered in the parks of Europe, my heart bled for it, and I felt a longing for its obscure corners, the boulders the beetles the grasshoppers the lizards, the limitless world that was enclosed in its few hand-spreads of land, where we played and grew up and lived and came to know- above all where we came to know.

So.

In between that little house and our own, there was an open plot of land, overgrown with wild grass in the summer; we never knew to whom it belonged as nobody had ever claimed it and this was where our little gang used to gather together, a place to talk, to play, to quarrel, to love. There we played

hide-and-seek, cops and robbers, there we pretended to be explorers in the jungle, there, in the summer evenings, we lay on the grass and spoke of things that mattered.

Those of us who met there almost every day were my two first cousins and myself and the six children of the family that owned the little house. The first four of them were girls, the two younger ones boys. There were, naturally, differences of age between us all but, for a long period of time, this didn't matter and we all played together.

They were Jews and very poor, a fact which was cheerfully ignored by their parents. Anyhow, in those days and in our world there were no striking differences in the way families lived. There was an old grandmother, too, who must have seen better days in her life and who behaved with a nobility of manner that went well with her looks. She spoke in a low commanding voice and made you feel that she expected the courteous bow, the kissing of her hand. And yet she was not cold nor did one feel uncomfortable in her presence. On the contrary, one was attracted by her and ready to fall in with her. She was genuine.

Her daughter and her son-in-law, the parents of our friends, were much more simple people. But they had a natural gentleness of manner which, together with their warm hospitality, made one love them- even though one was often, quite good-naturedly, inclined to laugh at them a little. What made the whole thing quite amusing was that, in spite of their poverty, they had a perfect right to show off in some ways they possessed things which were not to be found in much richer homes in Salonika at that time. To begin with, their house, such as it was, was their own and not rented as was the case with the most people then. Only the very rich had their own private homes. Then they had a piano in their house, a very rare possession for a poor family. It had been with them for no one knew how many years and had certainly not been tuned for as long. But it was there. And the children were always going to start taking lessons, in fact the two elder daughters played tolerably well. And when Madame Leonora, their mother, would frequently come out to the porch and call them, perhaps just a little bit too loudly, to come in and have tea and then study their piano lesson, no one could say she was being anything but a good mother. Which was, indeed, exactly what she was.

The children had taken after her, they had her big brown beautiful eyes with the warm smiling expression. Only Gioconda, the fourth in line and one year younger than I, had hazel eyes, slightly slanting, with an expression that was often grave, almost sad. She was a beautiful girl. Tall and well-made, with slow sensual movements, the world lit up when she smiled. She was my companion when we played and how proud I was when I happened to hear that she spoke frequently about me to her mother – my ears would pick up such comments passing between Madame Leonora and my Mother- she was always on my side. She would pick a quarrel on my behalf while I, out of timidity and a natural gentleness of manner, or mere indifference, would not insist on something or other. On such moments, rather infrequent to tell the truth, her usual shyness would give way to a fiery behaviour that surprised us all and she would have her way- which was mine to begin with. Neither she nor I knew then what this must have meant already. She was my closest companion, from the time we learned how to talk to the time when, at fifteen, she was taken away, with all her family, by the Germans. Two years before that, she was the first girl in my life to smile up at me, suddenly and without any foretelling, with a smile that was totally different from any I had known until then, the meaning of which she couldn't have known herself, raising her eyes to mine for a brief moment, in the half-darkness of an evening in springtime, as we stood, somewhat awkwardly, under the apricot-tree in our garden, a fleeting shy smile my mind became dizzy from an unknown excitement.

We both used to invent games of our own or change the rules of the established ones. An unspoken competition had started between us and we felt pleasure in outdoing one another in originality. We needed to be constantly together. We played, the two of us, from the time I hadn't yet started to pay any particular attention to her, we played when I was seven and eight and she six and seven, we played when I was twelve and she eleven and already important to me and I her hero. I had only to speak to her and she would turn crimson. Her family had noticed this and were amused; only we two knew nothing yet, were just happy to be together, with an intensity that increased with the passage of time, into almost a fury; it must have been the

most intense substitute for love play at a time when we didn't even know what we were made of.

CAME THE WAR AND THEN THE OCCUPATION AND I WAS thirteen and then fourteen and she had begun to develop almost from when she was eleven, a sensual expression on her face and her movements and gestures had a feminine grace that was not lost when she entered puberty, so at twelve she was already a woman in every small beautiful part of her body, her eyes her voice her manners – and, at the same time, incredibly and excitingly innocent and sweet.

All the family were handsome people. The grandmother with her severe long face, the pale skin and the rich white hair; Madame Leonora, and her eldest daughter Laura, who was almost her carbon-copy, with their old-time beauty, the big romantic eyes, the small mouth, the shy smile; Jack, the father, tall, grizzled, strong, with a kindly face and the heart of a child; Renée, the second daughter, juicy, full of life, with teasing eyes, very feminine, terribly attractive and well aware of the fact; Aline, thin and pale, a transparent face, with very delicate health and frequently unwell, most of the time sitting in an armchair which they placed in the garden during the summer and by the wood-burning stove in the winter, a book in her hand and a faraway look in her eyes which seemed to be gazing at a future that she would never see. And then Gioconda, my Gioconda, the best of them all. Last came the two boys, Peppo, with the longest eye-lashes I have ever seen fluttering over his brown warm eyes and Maurice, a mischievous little devil, tiny but strong.

This was Gioconda's family and they were lovable.

Yet there was for me, at that time, a black mark, a source of worry and discomfort. And this was a cousin of Gioconda's, two years older than I, Rudi was his name, tall and attractive, and aware of the fact, and I disliked him and he knew this too and seemed amused. He visited the family much too often for my liking and he was particularly attentive to Gioconda, or at least that's how it came to seem to me after a certain point in time, and jealousy never left my heart after that. Worse still, I had to admit that he was better than I in many ways and he liked to show off his various talents. He was slim but strong with swift and easy movements. Intelligent and a good talker, he knew funny stories and told them well and made everybody laugh. As if all this was not

enough-half of it would have been plenty- he also played the guitar and sang with a soft voice when mine was still like a croak and often broke in the middle of a sentence, changing into too high or too low a pitch and making me feel a fool. In other words, he was near perfect and I had to admit it and he knew it and he made sure that everybody else knew it, too. In other words I hated him. Little by little he became like an obsession, a sort of nightmare, and I was convinced I could not possibly compete with him. I became suspicious of every little sign, I found a deeper meaning in every little word, everything took on a particular significance in my troubled mind and became proof that she preferred him to me, that she admired him. Therefore she must be in love with him. The moment I reached that terrible conclusion I was lost in a deep despair. Which made me do a shameful thing one day, I feel ashamed of it to this day, yet which, as it later proved, was to speed up matters in my favour. He was visiting them, one hot summer day, he had actually had lunch with them; I had seen him come and know he was going to stay, so I could not eat, my throat was a tight knot and my stomach felt turned inside out. I sat at the table and thought, miserably, how at that the very moment, he was visiting a their table and how he must be telling his funny stories again and making them hang from his lips and how she must be looking at him with admiration, never thinking of me even for a moment, or, if she did, only to compare me with him and find me totally lacking in charm. Yes, that's how it must be, I had no doubt at all. Plain as sunlight it was. And the more I thought of it all, the more I saw his triumph, the deeper sank my heart. My mouth was dry and bitter. Not a single mouthful could I eat, pretending I had a stomach upset, not even pretending but telling the truth, till the moment came when I could stand it no longer and I got up from the table and went to my room and lay on my bed. I lay there, my body inert but my brain spinning, as the heat of the summer afternoon entered through the closed shutters and the open windows, together with the sound of the cicadas in the garden and a salty smell from the sea, faint bug inviting, I, lying there, not moving, all naked and soaked in perspiration, wanting to cry but not allowing myself to do so, lay there all the long summer afternoon, when everybody else slept, no sound coming from anybody anywhere, those same house when, on another day, that same summer heat, the half-light of the shuttered room and my naked

body would have filled my imagination- had done so for more than a year now- with fantasies of love that I had never experienced; naked women, their bodies there for me to touch to caress everywhere their hands to touch me in turn, my hardened body, kisses all over, erotic scenes, nebulous and unbearably exciting.

Only this day my body was flaccid, my mind lost. Jealousy and hatred were gnawing at my insides. And all the time I felt totally helpless and defeated. The lazy afternoon slowly cooled off and finally gave way to the fragrant evening. The shadows asserted their rights on earth. This was the hour we usually came out from our homes, like insects in the dark, and gathered together in the open plot to spend ourselves in play. When I found the courage to go out and meet them, Gioconda, Rudi and Peppo were standing outside their front door, talking to a couple of friends from the neighbourhood. I joined them trying to look unconcerned and friendly. Rudi was most courteous to me from the start, too courteous it seemed to me, so my confused and suspicious mind decided that he was treating me with that sort of condescension that a victor has for those he has defeated or knows he can defeat if only he chooses to do so. This impression didn't help my mood at all, of course. When it also seemed to me that Gioconda was much too silent and avoiding my eyes- therefore undoubtedly guilty-I went to pieces. Everything was now quite plain. Gioconda was in love with Rudi and that made her feel guilty towards me. Rudi knew it and that made him feel triumphant towards me. All this was too much. I could not endure it. No matter what they did or said, no matter what I did or said trying to appear cool and natural, there was a heavy pressure at the back of my head and my stomach felt as if it was gripped by a cruel hand. Every now and then I had to take deep breaths. As for Gioconda and Rudi, their slightest gesture, anything they said, an imperceptible change in the tone of their voice or in the expression of their face, a passing look, everything, seemed to me to have its own particular significance, its hidden meaning. There could be no doubt, they were in love. I tried to be reasonable. I told myself I was being silly, I was imagining things, there was nothing to it, for everything that seemed suspect to me there must surely be an explanation- all this I told myself again and again. No good. No sooner would I feel some relief than my attention would be drawn to some

new proof that my fears were right and all my own arguments would break down like a dam giving way to the pressure of rising water. My brain was drowned under the waves of my jealousy, my knees were like jelly. I felt an immense pity for myself, I felt lonely and deserted. And humiliated. This was the first taste of failure and it was very bitter.

I took part, quite mechanically, in the game the others had started, unconscious of what I was doing, my mind all taken up by my loss. It was odd how, in those few hours, I realized, very clearly, the extent of my feelings for her. All the things I wanted to do and share with her, images that fused together, shapes and colours, a life with her, all was now soaked in a warm, almost liquid sadness that was also very sweet. I wanted to sit down on a little rock, alone, the scent of thyme filling the evening air, and weep until my heart was softened. And as I thought of it, I let myself imagine that, as I would be sitting there, alone, I would suddenly feel a hand touching my face and I would turn my head and there she would be, silent and loving, in the dusk, waiting. A shot of joy would go through me at this fantasy but the next moment I would feel worse than before, the ugliness of reality would hit me again and I would know that nothing like this would ever happen, of course, that if I sat down on a little rock, alone, the scent of thyme filling the evening air, to weep, the whole thing would end, very simply, with me sitting down on a little rock, alone, the scent of thyme filling the air, weeping. This realization only increased my self-pity. And all this time I was fully aware that everything I did or thought or felt, the role I was playing and, possibly, unconsciously enjoying too, was nothing different from the deeds, the words and the emotions, of numberless young boys of my own age, ages before I was born or at the same time with me or in the years and the centuries to come, there and elsewhere and all over the world, that all this had been written already in thousands of stories and poems and songs, good bad or mediocre, had been read or listened to by every man on earth, had been imitated or laughed at, or simply ignored, by the generations and that I, myself, at that very moment, was nothing more than an insignificant, colourless cliché of an adolescent who was suffering the pangs of unrequited love. No originality whatsoever. There were moments when I recovered my old capacity of laughing at myself but these were very brief and then I sank again in the quicksand of my