



# The Messiah

by

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## Prologue

A hard blow makes me shudder. How long have I been asleep? A night, a season, a hundred years, longer? I remember people and places foreign to me. The squandering of truths. Mutilations, pyres, furnaces. Stories based on old wives' tales and fantasy. Anecdotes about the cold. Whining about sweat, heat and stench. And coursing throughout I see grotesque amounts of writhing, grovelling vanity. The notion of so-called genius laid over the top, like gold leaf in ever thickening layers. Power, idealistic kitsch, intimidation, million-dollar deals. Another whack. Now I know: I am going to change shape and colour, I will let myself be used for anything and everything. No idea how or where, but I'm going to do my best to find a place somewhere. A final blow. I am wood. Not made of wood, but wood. Time sweeps me along. With a crash, I fall down.

*This way up please!* The cheerful cartoon face on the removal box was beginning to annoy Emma. She stabbed a box cutter through the brown tape and ripped the flaps apart. It was the vases she had carefully packed in newspaper under Max's watchful eye back in Amsterdam, only to smash them as soon as they got here.

Simon's grin of triumph. "Just look what I happened to come across. Cut glass, didn't cost a cent," whereupon she had to accept yet another gift. As if she'd been living with a drowning man trying to cobble together a raft from the floating debris. Moth-eaten coats that had to fit son Max some day, boxes of sticky cords and obscure phone chargers. "A shame to throw them away."

She dumped the vases into a bin bag and took it outside. The sun beat down on the access gallery. The bag landed with a thud on the cement. The sound of breaking glass.

Hoping for some relief from the heat she stuck her head as far as possible out of the kitchen window. There might have been nice courtyard gardens out there once, but now the view was of rotting fences and poorly tiled storage bays for rubbish and recycling bins. In the distance a lone acacia was doing its best to survive.

"Berlin is very sought after these days, Miss, so we don't have a great deal of choice." When the Amsterdam

estate agent had given her the address, Kaiser Wilhelmstrasse, she had pictured a wide avenue with towering sycamore trees, and façades with heavy balconies held aloft on the shoulders of stucco gods. Grumpy the agent had helped her out of her fantasy. It was going to be an access gallery flat in a busy street. He had done his stinking best to find something at short notice. "It does have excellent public transport, just keep looking once you're there." There was nothing for it but to share the sagging three-quarter mattress with Max for now.

She would check a few more housing sites in a bit. The place was supposed to have Internet, but she hadn't been given the access code. When she tried to ring the landlord, all she got was a crackling voice message and a beep, whereupon the connection was immediately broken off. Perhaps the neighbours could help.

She walked down the gallery. Identical front doors, once painted an optimistic white, now peeling and yellowed, like a row of neglected teeth. Further down she saw an open kitchen window. She rang the bell. A red-faced man yanked the door open, glaring at her. "*Bitte?*"

She explained she had just moved in.

"*Na und?*" He had on a sleeveless vest; his feet were thrust into a pair of bare-heeled Santa-hat slippers. The pointy toes were crowned with fluffy pompons. She tried not to stare at his hairy legs. From the living room came the smell of beer and the noise of excited football commentary.

"*Und Sie wollen?*" The hand she had automatically

extended was left hovering in the air. Maybe he was waiting for a simple message, something he could answer with a yes or no. The word 'WiFi' galvanized him into action. "*Moment mal.*" He turned and yelled something. A woman's voice yelled back shrilly and unintelligibly, he shook his head, the Santa-hats took a step back and the door slammed shut in her face.

A summery Saturday afternoon in Lankwitz. The borough showed itself to be what it had always been: a village, with its own town hall, centre and periphery.

Driving to the institute, she had the road to herself. A great deal of new construction had gone up since she was there as a student. The Wood-Science Institute villa lay squeezed among the new buildings like a fish out of water.

The first days she kept making the same mistake, automatically heading for her old room, having forgotten that her office was now the one next to Viktor's. She opened the shutters on the tall windows, looked round. Not much had changed in here in those ten years. The place had not seen a painter since then; the carpeting hadn't been replaced either. She recognized the stripped doorframes, the stains on the floor.

Quickly she scanned her emails. A provisional list of participants of a conference in Parma where she was to be one of the speakers, organized by Isabel Hernandez, one of her former thesis supervisors. Isabel wrote that Emma could

stay with her if she liked. Most of the other messages weren't addressed to her personally.

She was about to empty the spam folder when her eye was caught by a subject line that read: *Urgent Request for Professor Faber*. A posh-sounding organization was looking for an authority to date a string instrument. All the *Royal String Society* wished to know for now was if she possessed the right expertise. There were no further details. At the bottom of the message was the society's logo: two violins crossed like swords, beneath a small gold crown. She answered in the affirmative.

There was nothing good on the housing sites: the rentals were all either too small, too far from Max's school, or too expensive. As she sat there staring at renovated warehouse lofts and villas offered at astronomic prices, there was a new-mail beep. Someone across the Channel had apparently been waiting impatiently for her response. The secretary wrote that the matter concerned the dating of a violin; she would be receiving the photos within a couple of days. She sent back a model contract.

At home she poured herself a glass of wine after unpacking the last of her things, and installed the television on top of the sea chest. *Her* chest. When they were dividing up the goods, Simon had been adamant that it was a man's chest; she had stubbornly refused to leave the thing with him. She'd been hauling it round with her since her school days, it

belonged to *her*.

Father refuses to have that chest in the house at first. He doesn't like having a constant reminder of a brother who so impiously squandered his talents by going to sea. "May the Lord God have mercy upon him."

Her uncle spent his last years in a Marseille slum, wasting away from some mysterious disease. At home there were whispers about a woman, far too young, and coloured, too. A family delegation was sent over to bring him back to the straight and narrow. The costly train journey merely led to a hurried, bewildered return trip home; they were greeted with profanities and never got past the front door.

His death is followed by endless supplication sessions on grey Sundays, with father praying for his brother's soul and mother tearfully mumbling along.

It's a miracle she is allowed to keep the chest in her room.

She was staring glassy-eyed at images of businessmen fleeing a burning office building. She turned off the sound, poured herself some more wine and picked up the phone.

"Yes?" Simon's voice.

"It's me. What time are you arriving Wednesday?"

"Didn't we go over this? At three."

"Have you reserved seats on the train?"

"Not necessary, don't be such a worrywart."

"Can I speak to Max?"

"He isn't here."

"Where is he then?"

"At a friend's house, I think."

"I *think*? At this hour?"

"Listen here, Em." When Simon called her Em, she knew he was pissed off. "Max and I have our own life here. You needing to go to Berlin so badly is your business, but it's no reason to keep bothering us. I'll ask him to call you back."

He hung up.

The smell of a warm summer evening after a brief, heavy rain, the sound of excitable voices, droning buses and souped-up scooters. The newscaster was reading the weather report; it was going to be moderately warm to very warm, normal temperatures for this time of year. She zapped through the channels until she came to an elderly couple living in a nursing home. She tried picturing her own parents in such a claustrophobic cubicle. How long could they go on staying in their own home?

What a relief to be living so far away; for her parents to visit her out here was inconceivable. They were not ones to make such a long trip, and besides, cities, to them, were infestation zones that were to be avoided like the plague. Any mention of Berlin was enough to set Mother off, yammering about what "those cursed Krauts" had done to their family in the war. Emma had never understood what those wrongs had actually consisted of. They'd been too

chicken to take in fugitives, and besides, the Holy Scripture said you had to obey authority, even if that authority suddenly spoke German – after all, it was His will. When she'd asked questions about it when she was little, she always got the same story about having to eat tulip bulbs once. So that had been the worst plague-weapon the Lord had bestowed on the Germans.

It really is too bad, Mother, but for me it's just a bit too far to pop over for a cup of coffee. From now on she could reasonably stay away without feeling guilty.

She ought to be terribly unhappy here: a cramped flat, bicycles in the hallway, three floors up with no lift, the view an infinite vista of TV satellite dishes. Across the street a restaurant was trying to drown out the pounding bass notes of the fitness centre next door with loud Turkish song. And still the screeching brakes of the buses, which went into service at 5 A.M., were music to her ears. It was her own lack of space, her own view, her very own heat and noise.

Of course she never had a call back.

A wooden staircase festooned with cast-iron vines spiralled around a lift shaft. The mirrors in the hall reflected red and white marble. Upstairs a door slammed shut, followed by the sound of high-pitched women's voices. Emma waited as the lift groaned its way down. Slowly the doors scissored open and two chitchatting ladies stepped out of the rickety contraption.

On the fourth floor there was just a single front door. A woman in a flowery kimono with a towel wrapped round her hair opened and stared at her with amusement. "Viktor, can you come here a minute?" she shouted over her shoulder.

"Emma! What a surprise." It was her boss, in a dark brown bathrobe, his wet hair gleaming in the light of the chandelier.

Surprise? They had an appointment, didn't they? Normally she'd immediately start second-guessing herself: time misunderstood, the wrong day written down. But this time she was sure, she'd been invited for dinner the second Sunday in August.

Several months had gone by since Viktor had suddenly tapped her on the shoulder as she'd stood waiting for a taxi after her final job interview. Viktor hadn't been on the selection committee, but he had muttered some

congratulations, and extended the dinner invitation. Did that mean that they were now on an equal footing? She only knew him as the director, someone who barked out orders and didn't waste his breath unless it had to do with research.

Paula grabbed her arm. "Don't trip over the suitcases. We've only just got back." She pointed at a sofa. "To be perfectly honest, we simply forgot. I'd love to cook for you sometime, but now our fridge is empty. Give us fifteen minutes, will you, then we'll go have a bite somewhere. Would you like a beer?"

Emma heard the two of them talking quietly in an adjoining room. She caught something like "forgot" and "again". A door closed and she was glad she couldn't hear the rest.

The apartment breathed history. She saw ornate ceiling medallions, tall French windows, inlaid flooring in a star pattern. All the paintings were modern. One took up an entire wall: a sombre arch in black and grey, with some beige streaks here and there. A pedestal displayed a colourful porcelain head with happy little hands sticking out.

She had been shocked to see how Viktor had aged. In her memory he was a man bristling with energy. Out at fieldwork, always the first one to rise and last to go to bed. Now he seemed portly, slow. A tired bear in a brown bathrobe.

When she was a student Emma had only met Paula once, at a Christmas cocktail party.

Berlin has been freezing for a week, with an icy wind that has chapped grooves into Emma's lips. The reception room smells like the oil stove at her grandparents' house in Ede. Next to Viktor stands a slender woman in a billowing fur coat. A wide hat, revealing only a glimpse of the elegantly coiffed hair. Red lips. She's pulling off her gloves as if in slow motion. Paula accompanies her husband only on official occasions, someone whispers. People say she's from aristocratic stock; it must be so, with such an expensive apartment in the Knesebeckstrasse. But others say her family was cleaned out by two socialist regimes: titles, lands, furnishings, everything gone. They talk of it in a mysterious voice.

She had never seen Viktor without a tie. Now, in a polo shirt that was too tight, he made a helpless impression. He could not keep up with their pace and kept falling behind, so that Paula and Emma had to slow down.

Paula explained that they had been visiting her mother for a couple of weeks. Almost ninety-four and still as with-it as she was exasperating. Impossible to persuade her to leave her house, even though she could no longer manage the stairs. Dilapidated or not, it was still the family estate, and she was staying put. She didn't want to have any workmen in, they always got everything wrong and only made a mess. Paula and her brother had been trying to get her to change

her mind, but meanwhile they were in agreement that a falling roof tile could be a perfectly good way to go too, no worse, anyway, than a fall from a drool-slobbered wheelchair in a nursing home.

The outdoor cafés in Savigny Platz were full. Paula said something to a waiter. He nodded, then returned with a small table. After shifting some chairs around he was ready to distribute the menus. He poured the champagne and left the bottle in a bucket.

Viktor raised his glass: “To Emma.”

“Thank you. Where does your mother live, Paula?”

“In Dresden, she has...”

Viktor interrupted her. “You have a new office, next to mine. Why don’t we meet early tomorrow morning so I can show you around?”

This was how she remembered him: squirming when the conversation got personal, quick to change the subject. “No need, I’ve already been there.” She told him how she kept heading for her old office the first few days.

“But all the others return next week. We’re not back at work yet, are we?” He looked at her with a frown.

“I am, Felix too, as it happens. I think it’s brilliant, the way he’s managed to enhance the chaos in his office. By the way – the first assignment’s come in.”

“Assignment?”

She told him about the violin, how this job dovetailed with the work she’d brought with her from Amsterdam.

He absently poured himself another glass and muttered something. His wife leaned over to Emma and asked who the violin’s maker was.

“No idea. I just check if there are enough growth rings.”

“Maybe it’s an Amati, or a Stradivari.”

She had to confess she was no expert, that she focused purely on the wood. “Even if it’s only an ordinary roof beam. The excitement of discovering that someone in 1224 cut down the tree that beam was made out of.”

“And does that excite *you* as well?” Paula elbowed her husband teasingly.

Viktor put down his fork and knife and sat up straight, as if he had to give a lecture. “If we must worry about the stuff people cobble together, I would choose a different profession. We don’t take on that sort of assignment.” He became more animated. To him, science was an objective search for the truth, inspired by a selfless hunger for knowledge. From his gesticulating arms, she now recognized the professor of ten years ago – passionate, heated, as if an invisible opponent were trying to take him down. “If we spent our days examining the doodads of every Tom, Dick or Harry, we’d never make any scientific progress.”

It wasn’t clear if his answer was meant for Paula or if he was telling Emma off. We don’t take on that sort of assignment – where did he get that idea? “I’m sorry, but I can’t afford to stand on that kind of lofty principle,

Professor. You see, I need to make up half my salary by taking on this sort of contract research.”

From his shocked expression she gathered that this was news to him.

“So it makes no difference to you what research you do, as long as it pays?” The irony had gone from Paula’s voice.

Emma explained that the university had made it a condition of her contract. Fortunately she had made a name for herself at Amsterdam as an authority in dating furniture, paintings and musical instruments for major museums, but also on behalf of private parties. Tomorrow she was going to Geneva to examine a cello. “But I regard it as just a collection of lumber, really.”

“You sound just like Viktor. Measuring is knowing, isn’t that right, dear?”

Viktor grumbled that Emma would do better to focus on her climate research. “Reconstructing the movement of glaciers is far more important, that’s what it’s really all about, isn’t it.” He clearly did not feel like continuing the discussion, and concentrated on the food on his plate.

A man in a wide-brimmed black hat approached their table. He walked by planting his feet to the side, throwing his full weight on every step, left, right, left, right. He collapsed in the chair beside her, slapped Viktor heavily on the back and called the waiter over. “Let’s move on to beers.”

“You might first have the decency to introduce

yourself.” Without waiting for an answer, Paula explained that this was her brother Julius.

“I’m honoured.” The man stared at her piercingly from beneath his bristly brows and when he heard she was new at the institute, kissed her hand. “Beautiful.” He tasted her name as if it was a delicacy. “Emma... Too bad that you’re a scientist. Are you just as much of a nit-picker as this old ant-fucker here?” He downed his pint in one gulp - she didn’t see him swallow once - and ordered another.

“That’s enough, little brother, enough now.”

He started picking bits of meat off their plates, like a hungry sparrow.

“And what do *you* do for a living, Julius?”

“Have a guess, gorgeous?”

“No idea. Politics, local council, or something?”

His guffaw reverberated round the terrace. “No, pretty thing, I’m a free man. Fond of fucking, true, but not ant-fucking. Every morning I sit myself down in front of a white canvas with a brush, and by nightfall I’ve come up with some truth. The essence, that’s what it’s all about. You can wield your little ruler all you like, but if you don’t capture the essence, all you’re doing is babbling brainy mumbo-jumbo. Take this table for instance.” He knocked his fist on the top.

“Four planks,” she said, “from the looks of it all from the same tree, with enough growth rings to date it.”

Viktor took over from her, explaining how the wood grain could reveal something about the weather conditions

during the tree's lifetime.

"Nice, very nice, but the *essence* of the thing?" Julius clasped the top with both hands. "If I say that that's to be found in the four uneven legs, in its ability to wobble? *That's* what I want to paint. I don't give a fuck how old it is. A carpenter may have sawed down an old cupboard last week to make this table for all we know. Is *that* something you can measure?"

"Of course not, that would be a huge mistake..."

Emma's words were drowned out by the sound of an amplified guitar. A busker had started blasting the café with his clashing chords.

Julius had stood up and kissed her hand again. "I'll see you in two weeks. And do me a favour, wear something more cheerful." He clumped off.

Paula must have caught her puzzled expression. "Julius just invited you to his birthday party. If he likes someone, he has to say something insulting first. September fifth, I hope you'll remember."

1631

*You can make anything out of wood, a stick, for instance.  
People need sticks. The plague doctor, for one, who's getting rich  
peddling his cures somewhere in northern Italy.  
He uses me to keep the sick at bay.*

Enough. I'm not going, I'm staying here. It's making me want to vomit. I've let myself be used as a stick far too long. I've had enough of pointing at houses to be set on fire, beating dogs to death, prodding putrid bodies to see if there's still some life in them.

Doctor, pack your mask, your goggles, your cloak, gloves and boots in your chest, hang your pots and flasks from the cart, harness your horse, and go. There are plenty of villages further along whose stench will greet you from afar, where there's money to be made. Just follow your nose.

How quiet it is in here. Slowly I am getting used to the dark, and in a corner of the room I can now make out a workbench. I smell wood, all kinds of wood. Some I cannot identify. Maybe my nose is still too stuffed with the smell of the burnt cloves and juniper berries that are supposed to protect the poor devils from the pestilence.

The big square is empty and clean. It was a very different story five days ago, when the plague doctor and I

arrived in town. Piles of bodies everywhere, as if giant moles had tunnelled their way up through the cobblestones. Houses were set ablaze with the inhabitants still inside.

How many times did I hear the screams coming from those roaring infernos? The other day we passed a village on the outskirts of Piacenza where the land owner had ordered everything burnt to the ground: houses, barns, cows, horses and pigs, not to mention the inhabitants themselves. His approach had worked, because the squire and his family remained in perfect health. The doctor had examined them: not a pimple, pustule or carbuncle among them.

Milan was a big disappointment. Instead of a goldmine in buboes and black ulcers, we encountered a city in perfect health. The smart-alecks had bricked up the first three houses that had the contagion, from top to bottom. A baker reported that he and his wife had had to stopper their ears for days in order not to hear the screams of the people inside. Even two weeks later you could still hear some faint moaning from one of the houses. "Most unpleasant," he declared tearfully, "especially if it keeps the customers away."

Wait a minute. Is that his cart? Sure enough, the doctor is leaving. He has quietly packed his bags and wrapped rags around the mare's hooves. I bet he wants to make his exit through the gates without making a sound. Not that anyone would hear, anyway. Even if he left town at full gallop, with a whinnying horse, nobody would take any notice. Those still

alive enough to hear are so bone-weary they could sleep for a thousand years.

The wheels of his cart tear deep into the black silence, and over it you can hear the jingle-jangle of the half-empty and depleted flasks. Twenty minutes from now he'll be far enough away to fill up his supplies. There's plenty to be found all round, even the smallest plot of land yields enough earth, scraps and stones to be ground into powders or potions. With a little luck, you can find a silver coin or gold ring. And if not, you just sieve some glittering specks from the silt in the river that can easily pass as precious metal. Sick people have other things on their mind than reading the fine print.

What do I care, anyway? It's no longer my business. Farewell, doctor. I hope you stay well, that you don't wake up one morning to find a pustule in your own armpit.

A month ago we had heard there was good money to be made further along. And indeed, in Cremona we hit the jackpot. Many of the inhabitants had fled the city as soon as they'd spotted the first lesions. Quite a few lay stone-dead in a huge stinking open pit outside the city walls.

First we inspected the houses. If we found someone lying in bed, we'd daub a cross on the front door in red paint. Some patients were still conscious, but had lesions running beneath their skin like rainbows, from yellow and orange to red and purple. Others were far gone, already

fancying themselves within the gates of hell. Delirious, they were begging to be forgiven for sins they'd never committed. With swollen, pitch-black hands, they tried to slap away the devils.

How it made us laugh to see the inhabitants trying to play at being doctor! Not bathing in order to keep the pores shut, so that the sickness couldn't work its way in. Wearing pouches filled with church-wall grit round their necks and meanwhile shitting all over the place from overdosing on laxatives. The main thoroughfares were sprinkled with rosewater and vinegar, and I can assure you that that smell, mixed with excrement, makes for a rather heady pong. None of it helped a tinker's damn, of course. No wonder they greeted us as saviours. They crowded round, fell pleadingly to their knees, kissed the doctor's boots or clung to his coattails. That's when I would spring into action, clouting and whacking away.

We selected those among the sick who were not beyond all hope. Applied leeches, opened blood vessels and rubbed a paste of onion and white mustard or boiled toad into the wounds. Anyone still in a state to count out money and able to swallow was given a sip from *The Flask*: a concoction of ground-up dittany, sandalwood, hartshorn, red coral, clay, gentian root, and unicorn horn. For a slightly larger sum we'd add some crushed emerald, ruby, sapphire or pearls. Those able to dig even deeper in their pockets had

some gold thrown in as well.

My distaste for the doctor increased as he started coming up with ever new explanations for the disease. If there were Jews around, he didn't have to do anything: the inhabitants would have taken their own measures. If there were no Jews left, he could give his imagination free rein. Like last year, when he persuaded some villagers that the sickness had been caused by a group of children playing at having a burial. I had to look the other way when they set them on fire. There are limits, after all.

Yesterday was truly the last straw. Whatever possessed him, to cast the blame on the town's cats? In no time all the animals were rounded up from the houses and barns and piled up in a cat-pyramid that by nightfall was still burning. Like a yowling bonfire, a hundred bows eking out clashing squeals from violins strung with rusty barbed wire.

I just had to turn my back on so much idiocy. Cats! The very animals that eat the rats and thus also the fleas, the root cause of the plague! Of course in the seventeenth century no one knows this, not even the doctor, but that doesn't make the whole thing any less abhorrent. Selling unadulterated lies as the honest truth. More important than all the ointments was the lavish story that people got smeared on their wounds. They would die anyway.

It is slowly growing brighter. I can now see stacks of rough

timbers piled against the walls and planed boards racked up lengthwise. The workbench too gradually looms into focus, emerging from the mists of the night. It has all kinds of tools lying on it, chisels and hammers, by the looks of it. I hear no cocks crowing, no dogs barking, no cows mooing to be milked. I wonder if there are any cocks, dogs or cows left. It's the silence of the concert hall after the performance, when everyone has left – musicians, audience, technicians, everyone.

Suddenly the sun peeks out between two low roofs, pouring a bucket of sunlight over the square. Someone yanks the door open. A man starts moving planks about, takes out a few and inspects them. Then he lifts down a handsaw from the wall and begins sawing in a steely rhythm. Next, with the same tenacity, he picks up a chisel and drives it into the wood. The force of his hammer pounding on the chisel speaks of seething indignation and stubborn determination.

The sun is now coming in through the windows at full blast. Motes of dust drift about in beams of light.

The narrower the road grew, the more the taxi driver stepped on it. He kept glancing at his watch.

Emma hugged her suitcase to her side. With the other hand she was gripping the strap over the door tightly. Don't get carsick, keep your eyes on a fixed point in the distance.

He turned into a side road, sped into a roofed parking lot, and screeched to a halt. Intently he pressed two buttons on his colossal watch, then turned round to face her. "This is as far as I go, you have to take the train up from here." The metre displayed an exorbitant sum.

Not the foggiest why she even bothered to thank him. Dizzily she stared at the train flashing in the sun that came gliding down the mountainside.

The Geneva Fine Arts Centre was a popular attraction, apparently, because the platform was swarming with tourists. Tour guides waving brightly coloured signs were trying to round up their groups in every language under the sun.

First the people coming down were let off on a platform on the other side of the tracks; only after they had exited did the doors on her side slide open to take on the next contingent. She managed to score a spot by the window; soundlessly the unmanned silver bullet sped back up the hill.

The museum was draped across the mountaintop like some molten spaceship. Again the guides held up their signs and shouted over each other to be heard.

There she was, saleswoman in wood-dating, standing for the umpteenth time in some place she'd never been, this time a blinding white square that suddenly grew remarkably quiet. The same sense of alienation as she'd had on her first visit to the Rijksmuseum's storage depot: a grey, blank box in a bare industrial park, filled to the brim with rare antiquities. Similarly, here in Geneva, at one of the richest art museums in Switzerland, there it was, the familiar sense of being lost before she could start working.

"Ostendorf." A pale man in a shabby corduroy jacket tilted his sunglasses up on his head. He pointed at their surroundings apologetically. "If we're not careful, we'll be walking around with splitting headaches all day. The architect chose this particular white stone to express the concept of eternal snow."

"Emma Faber. In that case, he's succeeded admirably."

From up close the complex resembled a temple, immaculately clean, where high priests brought their offerings to the fine arts while the ignorant masses were allowed in to stare open-mouthed at the wonders from a respectful distance. An imposing structure, discreetly cared

for by slaves who maintained the hedges and flowerbeds, promptly swept up any messes, and polished the countless windows to a mirror-like shine. Her rolling suitcase was dragging grooves through the gravel. She pictured a skinny gardener who'd have to erase her tracks with his rake. The curator led her to a second building, half hidden behind the museum, where the research center was located. It too was white; a little variety might have been nice.

In the lofty main hall Ostendorf's voice reverberated off the marble. "They bought out an entire Carrara quarry, cut what they needed and then resold the rest. Cheaper and more convenient than a bunch of individual deals. I understand they even turned a profit, too."

A number of corridors led into an amphitheatre in the central hall, which was filled with bookcases arranged like the spokes of a wheel. Designer furniture, massive, towering doors that swung open at the touch of a finger, and, arching overhead, a skylight like an immense eye looking up to heaven; it was like staring into a giant iris.

A man in a spotless dark blue suit was walking towards them. Ostendorf tried to halt him. "May I introduce you to..."

Absentmindedly the man looked up, shook her hand, and walked on.

"That's Eberhard Schweigenbrecher, our new director."

So pleased to have made your acquaintance, Emma thought. She followed Ostendorf down the corridors, passing various divisions, with separate cubicles for just about every possible procedure. Every so often she'd peer in through the glass. Electron microscopes, mass spectrometers, a fully equipped chemistry lab. He proudly showed her the radiology division: the lead-lined space even held an ultramodern MRI scanner. "For our research on mummies."

All she could do was nod, in awe. If only they had all that equipment in Berlin.

The cello was lying on its back, swaddled in a pile of thick white cloths.

"These are pH-neutral and lint-free."

He showed her a microscope suspended from a frame on wheels. As he left he pointed at the ceiling corners: "I am obligated to point out to you that by law we have to record everything on film. When you're finished, just press this red knob. I wish I could offer you some coffee, but in this room there's no eating or drinking allowed."

Apparently she couldn't just leave without a pass.

As the sound of his footsteps died away, she had to suppress the childish urge to wave at the security cameras. She took out her equipment, positioned the microscope over the cello, and connected it to her laptop.

On the screen appeared a close-up of the cello's

surface. The edges were finished with a narrow band of chequered ivory and ebony; an f-hole gaped darkly in the golden brown. She zoomed in closer, moved the arrow to the earliest margin separating the zones of latewood and springwood, and clicked. As always, it was like falling out of time; the width of these rings would never change, the rain and sun had fixed the wood grain forever in this unique pattern: a fingerprint, a barcode.

After two hours of intense concentration her neck and shoulders were stiff. She checked the data once more, then let the laptop run its calculations. Numbers zipped by on the screen. She got up and stretched.

Sometimes she dreaded this sort of job. Even though she was always careful to explain to her clients that they were paying for her time, and not for the result, they sometimes felt cheated in the end.

"Weren't you going to provide me with a date for this painting?"

"I warned you that it's not always possible. Unfortunately, this panel has too many growth anomalies to allow me to tell you anything meaningful."

"So you're telling me I'm paying for absolutely nothing?"

She superimposed the cello's zigzag patterns over the timeline graphs on the screen: no doubt about it, she had a

date. With a sigh of relief she pressed on the red knob.

Ostendorf promptly appeared, as if he had been waiting round the corner. “Well?”

“A youngest ring from 1632.”

He smiled broadly. “Congratulations, nice work. And so fast, too, I thought you’d be at it for quite a while longer.”

“Fast?” It depended on the way you looked at it, she explained. Pegging the date of a piece of wood wasn’t that difficult, but building up the reference timeline took years, it needed hundreds of dated records. Weeks of fieldwork, sometimes not far from here, for instance, high up in the Alps. Months of peering through microscopes. Endless calculations. Today’s dating result was nothing more than a swift and simple finale.

“I will inform Schweigenbrecher.”

When she said that that was a bit premature, that she still had to back up her conclusion with statistics, and write the whole thing up, he waved her objections away. That was for later, just a matter of working out the details. This time he left the door open.

She packed up her things and looked round, a bit aimless. Now that she was done, the cello had turned back into a corpse: a hollow wooden belly with a long, thin neck. She pushed the cloths aside; only now did she see how fine the inlay was. Elegant black garlands festooned the sides. At the top, on either side, ivory griffins spread their delicate wings among the dark wreaths. She snapped a photo; the

cameras overhead were still tracking her every movement.

Ostendorf was back. “Lovely, isn’t it?” He sounded tender, almost. “The experts can instantly tell, just from the type of marquetry, who built it. Will you come with me, please? The director is expecting us.”

The resistance of her rolling case told her there was sand crunching inside a wheel. Perhaps the rubber was leaving black streaks on the virgin marble. Don’t look back.

Schweigenbrecher was standing at his desk, talking to an older gentleman. Proudly he announced the result of her investigation, as if the Geneva Fine Arts Centre were the only institution in the world that could have managed something this complex.

The other man bowed slightly. “Steven Hammersmith, the cello’s owner. My wife and I are most grateful to you for your efforts.” He had a neatly trimmed beard, a bowtie danced under his Adam’s apple, his skin was leathery, tanned.

“You are welcome, it’s just my job.”

“Still, it calls for a celebration. May I invite you to a modest dinner at our house tonight?”

Her flight back wasn’t until the next morning, so why not?

“I’ll send someone to pick you up at half past six. Where are you staying?”

“Professor Faber is staying at the Grand Hotel

Kempinski. I'll swing by there later, she can ride with me." Schweigenbrecher apparently assumed that the invitation was also for him.

Hammersmith smiled. "I don't think that's necessary, we'll be seeing each other again next week, to go through the paperwork. But if it's not too much trouble, perhaps you could drop Mrs Faber off at her hotel, that way she doesn't have to take that wretched little train down."

Ostendorf, who had been summoned by his boss as soon as Hammersmith had left, dropped her off in front of the hotel with a hearty goodbye.

Porters in uniform led her to the front desk, and a boy in red livery showed her to her room. After putting down her luggage he stayed hovering in the doorway. Clumsily she fumbled in her bag for her purse; all she had was notes, the smallest, fifty francs. He accepted the note impassively, touched a finger to an imaginary cap, and shut the door.

A leather couch, some ample armchairs, a separate bedroom, two balconies with views of the lake. Usually she was put up in a cheap family hotel. She took a bottle of whiskey from the minibar, added some ice and took out her laptop. The ice cubes made crystal-clear ticking sounds in the glass. She started on her report.

*I am minding my own business  
when a family quarrel breaks out.  
A young lady rubs her belly and immediately  
shouts of bloody murder are heard.*

As old Feraboschi throws open the cupboard door with the gaping cracks behind which I'm lying gathering dust, he welcomes his daughter and snaps at his son, "Gian Pietro, go wait in the library."

Early in the spring it's always terribly draughty in here, notwithstanding the carpets that were gifts from business partners who couldn't pay up, the black drapes the emaciated servant has pulled shut, and the fire in the hearth that's kept alight even in the springtime. But ever since the poplars started shedding their seed-fluff like snowflakes across the Po valley, I've been hot, even after sunset.

From the sound of Feraboschi's voice, this time I'm not the only one. Hot is too mild a word for it; he is seething. His fat arms embrace his daughter, his withered lips plant a kiss on her cheek, and his beady eyes gaze over her shoulder in my direction, spitting fire.

No idea what this has to do with me. Skilled hands have shaped me, I have been endlessly polished and oiled, I

rest on a shelf, gleaming. I just lie here indifferently, no matter how cold or hot I feel, stubbornly ignoring the woodworms chomping all round me.

Francesca dries her tears and stuffs her lace handkerchief back in her sleeve.

Her father takes her face in his hands. He tips her head back, inspects her neck, which is all black and blue, and hisses, “Couldn’t that bastard keep his hands to himself for a change?”

What follows is a classic scene in the Feraboschi household: Father sums up the injuries his daughter has sustained since her marriage. “This is the toll you pay. Let it be a lesson this time.”

Francesca hangs her head, rubs a hand over her pregnant belly, sniffs, and nods.

When she has gone, Feraboschi calls his son, points at the cupboard and says calmly, “Family comes first. My unborn grandson included. My decision is final. You know what you have to do.”

This wasn’t what I signed up for. I was supposed to be just a thing lying on a shelf: a gleaming object of no consequence whatsoever. But apparently I do have a role to play, because once his father has left the room, Gian Pietro’s hand grasps me and picks me up. Clumsily he slips me under his shirt against his naked skin, just above the belt. He is muttering curses against his father, his sister, her husband, this place, this night.

By the light of a flickering torch we cross the garden, out into the sleeping town. The fluff is everywhere, and it still looks as if it’s snowing: the flakes drift down, hovering in the air as if cupped by invisible hands, then suddenly whirling upwards again like souls escaping.

We halt in a narrow alley. Gian Pietro snuffs out the torch.

When I’m alone, I can handle time very well. What I’m doing then is not called waiting, but existing. This is different, however: Gian Pietro is sweating, and I can feel what he’s feeling. His heart is pounding, his temples throb and he’s suddenly aware of his tongue. He pictures the skulls on the tombstones of the filthy rich buried in the church. From the tavern outside which we’re waiting comes an ever louder hubbub, stomping, singing.

By now I know the power relationships in the Feraboschi family back to front. The top dog is the old man, who like a modern-day Mafia boss orders houses to be built or torn down, either sells lands and old ruins for a fortune, or restores them, and rules his not-too-bright family members with an iron fist. Next comes Francesca, who in a horny mood got herself knocked up by a widower and is now with child. A shotgun wedding obviously. According to Feraboschi he had to pay the church a small fortune in order to arrange the timely nuptials. His daughter hadn’t chosen just anyone for her little fling: no, it was Capra, that

carpenter, that boozier, who'd wasted his first wife not even a year before. Dead as a doornail she was, discovered lying under the conjugal bed. Fallen down the stairs, let's say. Francesca's brother Gian Pietro is on the bottom rung of the ladder, he's a complete nothing, and is sent out on trivial errands at his father's bidding: assistant trench digger, scaffolder's mate.

The mother of the two children wasn't much use to them. She was carried off by the galloping consumption when they were only knee-high. An ordinary little cough, that's what everybody thought it was, but a week later they had to order the gravestone.

Father did try out a second wife, but when she too kicked the bucket, he gave up. Since then he seeks his pleasure outside the city walls. To each his own, right? In Francesca's case the apple didn't fall far from the tree, anyhow.

A zonked figure has appeared in the tavern doorway. He gropes at the doorframe for support, drops something, bends down, falls to his knees, rummages about, muttering to himself. When he stands up again, he's clutching a metal key. He pokes it into the empty air as if there's a secret entrance out there somewhere, burps unabashedly and then mumbles thickly, "To bed, to bed, said Capra!"

Gian Pietro's skin, against which I lie nestled like a scrawny baby, feels clammy. Holding his breath, he stays as

close as possible to the walls, and it's clear he is stalking his brother-in-law. Capra lurches left, right, from time to time staggering a few steps back. He falls down and starts crawling on hands and knees, barking like a dog, then whinnying like a horse at his own little jest. After what seems like ages we finally find ourselves in the square of Saint Agatha, where both Capra's home and his shop are located.

I still have no clue what role I'm supposed to play here. Gian Pietro has unbuttoned his shirt to the waist. The night provides no relief from the heat, and his hands shake as he pulls me out. Capra is slumped on the church steps, vomiting his brains out. Gian Pietro strikes a spark from a flint and presses the flame to my back. I'm getting hotter and hotter, I'm on fire and suddenly I know: I am a firearm, an arquebus!

Killing Giovanni Capra is a piece of cake. He's sprawled on the hallowed marble like a puppet, and doesn't even see us. My detonation makes his head vanish. Bang, as if we've pricked a balloon.

Windows are flung open round the square. A woman's voice shouts "*Bravo!*" Somewhere someone applauds. Fluff dances about the pillars.

Gian Pietro walks back to his father's house with his head down. He picks up the purse from the mantelpiece and the packed bag in the hall, then shuts the door behind him. Before the first sunbeams graze his brother-in-law's corpse, he has passed through the city gate. He takes the path to the

farm where, he hopes, a horse has been saddled for him.

4

The fish opened its mouth and snapped at the glass. In a reflex she took a step back. After a second attempt it gave up, turned sideways and gazed at her with one weary eye.

“Pike. Harmless on the whole, although one of them attacked a couple of swimmers once, years ago. The creature was almost three feet long, weighed eight kilos. Turned aggressive on account of out-of-whack hormones. You don’t even want to know the junk that’s been dumped in the lake. Although the water is pretty clean now.”

Her host tapped his ring smartly against the glass, and the fish scooted away.

As long as it doesn’t have a diamond, Emma thought. One tiny crack, and they’d have a tsunami here in the basement. She could just picture it: Lake Geneva bursting through the glass, gushing into the room and smashing the other tanks. Drowning down here, while the pikes snacked to their hearts’ content on the tropical fish.

“I thought, what Sea World can do, we can do too. But with thicker glass, of course. We had the basement dug out. In hindsight, a whole lot of trouble for a bunch of boring fish in a murky lake.”

A wide gesture at the aquarium in the sidewall. “These are my tropical darlings. Just look at them swanning around in their colourful jackets, so proud, so wise. And there is

yours truly.”

He had pulled a booklet from the bookcase and was pointing a manicured finger at a black-and-green spotted fish with long whiskers and a tail like a shark’s jaws. “*Petricola Hammersmithis*. I discovered it in Tanzania.”

“It keeps changing colour.”

“That’s what everyone thinks, but it isn’t really so.”

He pressed the guide into her hands. His name was on the cover; the back sported a photo of a much younger Steven. Shoulder-length hair, cocky grin: ladies’ man, fast talker.

“Those were the days,” he said without taking his eyes off the tropical fish. “I wrote that book in a weekend. Started it Friday evening, finished it Sunday night, five minutes of midnight. You think I’m lying, don’t you?”

She replied she didn’t think anything and put the booklet down.

“No one wanted to believe me, so I did it again. Here.” He gave her a second guide, smaller than the first. “Hammered it out in an even shorter space of time, Saturday morning to Sunday afternoon. The photographs are mine as well, I took them myself. All a matter of not wasting time, using every second, no hesitating. Writing is like an excited form of breathing: in, out, in, out. Meanwhile it’s sold over a million copies.”

“The publisher must be happy about that.” She couldn’t think of what else to say.

“The publisher?” The high-pitched voice of his wife, Zoey. “That’s him, you know. Why let others pocket the profit if you can keep it all for yourself, isn’t that right, darling?” She threaded her arm through her husband’s. “Will you come to the table, you two? I thought you’d be in the music room, I’ve been looking for you everywhere. Weren’t you going to look at the violins? You and your fish.”

“What are we having?”

“Three guesses.”

On the way to the dining room she caught a glimpse of a kitchen with two chefs standing at huge cookers, stirring. Zoey looked back over her shoulder, waited, and gave Emma her arm. “Such dears they are, it’s so nice when someone offers to lend a hand, isn’t it?”

She could feel how thin her hostess was. Careful, or she might snap the skinny arm in the little black dress in two.

Steven sat down at the head of the table, took out a cigar and blew the first puff up to the ceiling, bored.

“So exciting, that dating business, isn’t it, Steven? Come on, eat something. It must be incredibly complicated. Must need a very steady hand, Emma, am I right?”

Emma saw Steven bite back a yawn. As she was explaining to Zoey that it was more a question of years of experience and the right kind of equipment, out of the corner of the eye she saw him pushing his plate away.

Taking no notice of his guest he lit another cigar and snapped at his wife, "What's this supposed to be?"

He then leaned towards Emma. "Don't eat it. Sick pigeonshit on a rock." A voice like a razor blade.

He tapped his dinner knife against one of the three round pebbles piled on top of each other on a driftwood base. It had a soggy mint-green substance on top. He picked up the plate and slammed it down on the floor. "I'd rather eat the stones. A person should eat fish, nothing else."

"Hey, don't be so nasty, our Chinese friends have done their best to amaze us. It's in their blood, even just the presentation alone, those colours, lovely, isn't it?"

"Korean, Zoeykins, not Chinese."

"Well, ok, what difference does it make." Zoey winked at Emma. "Has he told you yet how many violins we own? Steven, why didn't you show her the music room?" Enthusiastically she babbled on. "First we had a separate concert room added onto our house, I mean the villa in California. But by the time it was finished it was already too small. Every famous musician wanted to come play there, like that conductor, what was his name again, Steven?"

"Von Karajan." Her husband glared at the plate that had replaced the pile of pebbles. It held some thin stripes of red meat spread out like a fan. "I won't eat that either. I'm not in an operating room, goddam it!"

"Right, Von Karajan, so he came up with the idea of building a completely new concert hall close to where we

live. Wonderful, isn't it. He didn't live to see the result, poor man. Because by the time all the permissions are in – man, the paperwork never ends. But now it's finished, we'll have an opening shortly with a huge party, would you like to come?"

Emma had to laugh. "Just fly out to California for a party?"

"Why not? We often fly over the ocean for a concert."

Emma explained that beside her work she also had a son and could therefore not just pack up and go.

"Do you hear that, Steven, a child, isn't that something?"

He stubbed out his cigar. "Do you ever come to the States?"

"Occasionally."

"I have a big job for you. Come and see us in L.A., we'll go hunting for fish. Do you like scuba-diving?"

"I'm afraid I never got past the documentaries of Cousteau."

"Ah, Commander Cousteau, boring old fucker. He invited me to go with him, once, in the *Calypto*, but I politely declined the honour. Know what I said to him? I said, Jacques, I'm not going, because you're an extremely boring old fucker."

He studied her closely, then started to laugh. "*You're* not boring, are you, *you're* a keeper, she's good, this one, she's damn good!"

Inside the little bird's nest on her plate lay a puff pastry cup filled with ragout. She had just pulled a piece of straw out of the nest and so found herself chewing on the presentation. She joined in the laughter. "I don't have to go all the way out to L.A. for that. Just send me some detailed photos." Like Steven, she left the rest of the bird's nest untouched.

"No way, I insist, you have to come, seeing is believing, you're coming for a visit."

She did not respond, but glanced overtly at her watch and announced that she had to get back to her hotel.

Zoey sat up. "Why don't you spend the night here? Much nicer than a horrid hotel. Then you two can keep talking business, right, darling?"

"That's a lovely offer, but it's impossible, I'm afraid. My luggage is back at the hotel and the flight to Berlin departs at 6 tomorrow morning."

Steven looked surprised. "I thought you were based in Amsterdam? You work in Berlin now? We didn't know. Well, whatever. I don't do business with institutes anyway these days, so no universities either, I'm only interested in working with individual experts."

Standing up abruptly he started rattling his car keys. A servant appeared out of nowhere to help her into her coat.

"Six times two is twelve, times eight is ninety-six, times four is three hundred eighty-four, times nine is three thousand,

four hundred fifty-six." Steven pointed at the car in front of them. "Look there, that license plate: GE62849. A shame you can't multiply letters, only numbers. I can't help myself. My brain is always working, it never stops. Thinking is the only way to escape boredom. Too bad that I also need a few hours for sleeping. Do you do a lot of thinking? I bet you do." He pointed to another car. "No point trying it with that one, that's clear. There's a zero in it. Did you know that fish sleep as well?"

She suppressed a yawn; she had the feeling her neck was sprouting a set of gills. Not much more of this and all she'd be capable of would be snapping her jaw like a fish.

"But seriously. About that research. Can't I hire you? It's a big job, some twenty instruments." He was drumming his fingers on the steering wheel.

She tried hastily to find a polite way to say no, but could think of nothing except, "I'll discuss it with my boss."

"Or I'll take out a subscription on you, a season ticket."

It made her laugh, but he was being serious.

"In case I haven't made myself clear, I'm paying for everything: business class airplane seat, five-star hotel, and of course a hefty compensation. Just name your price. You can start with the rest of the quartet. Two violins and a viola. Even a dead man can tell they belong together, but for an official certificate we need an authority, so, someone like you. After that will come the really big job."

“Which do you play yourself, the violin or the cello?”

“Nothing, I don’t even know how to hold a bow. It’s just pure love of those heavenly curved bodies, I get all worked up when I see one of those delicious shapes with the delicate grain, I just need to possess it. And I’m not monogamous, so the more the merrier. If I know there’s one for sale somewhere, I must and will have it, I don’t give a damn how much it costs.”

“So all you do is look at them?”

“You mean I’m a voyeur? Maybe I am; never thought of it that way. My darlings have to be played, cherished, stroked. But back to business. Do we have a deal?”

“Let’s just start with those other three instruments. As for the bigger job, I’ll think about it. Just let me know what exactly it entails, and when you need it done by. The only thing is that I can’t be away from Berlin too long.”

“I’m in a hurry to have the quartet done, it’s going to a museum, a little gift of mine. Oh, don’t worry, under no circumstances will they be allowed to lie lifeless behind glass, my treasures have to move, they have to dance, skip, sing.” Tapping the beat of an imaginary tune with one hand, he swerved into the driveway of the hotel.

“Many thanks for your hospitality. I’ll send you the report about the cello in a few days.” She got out of the car.

He didn’t answer, turned the car and drove away.

Fishing five francs out of her pocket, she gave the coin to the porter, who impassively held open the door for her.

1666

*The young lady pays a visit to the workshop.  
A skirt is biked up and a pair of trousers pulled down.  
A shutter can never shut an eye.  
I’ll say no more.*

It’s early in the afternoon and the streets and squares simmer in the heat. In a shady spot next to Pescaroli’s workshop a child lies sleeping with his head resting against the flank of a panting dog. Inside someone starts whistling an aria. It’s young Antonio. From my vantage point on the dividing line between street and studio I notice no reaction from the dog. It must be exhausted, dehydrated.

Antonio seems to be floating through space. He stops whistling and starts humming, stares at the package in his hands, throws it up in the air and catches it again. Then he puts it down on the workbench and runs into the back of the workshop.

He returns with a violin of unvarnished wood, carefully wrapped in a clean cloth, as if he’s afraid of leaving fingerprints on the pale wood. With a practiced gesture he hooks the scroll of the instrument over a copper hanger in the ceiling beam, takes a step back and inspects it.

His demeanour implies that he is the lord and master of this workshop. If Pescaroli were here he wouldn’t dare.

When his boss is around, his arms hang meekly by his side, and he's all "esteemed teacher," and "yes, master". But the moment the carpenter falls asleep upstairs in his chair after the midday meal, head tilted back, mouth wide open, gently snoring, Antonio becomes a different person.

He'd made the deal himself with Pescaroli, one Monday morning after Master Amati left his umpteenth violin in the workshop to have the inlay work done. The accompanying drawing showed down to the last detail the marquetry that was to be applied in rose- and olive-wood on the neck and back.

"You know where the veneer is kept; it must be finished by next week," said his master. Whereupon the youngster cried, "On condition that you'll finally let me build one myself. I know exactly how they're made, I can do much more than just marquetry."

Perhaps it was the hunger in his eyes, or the desperate determination in his voice, but whatever it was, Antonio is now allowed to do more than just the inlay work on other craftsmen's furniture or instruments. He's even got permission to use the most expensive boards, the maple and fir from the oldest stack that's been drying for dozens of years. Provided, of course, that he doesn't spend a minute less working for Pescaroli, that his marquetry work remains phenomenal, and the tempo of his work doesn't slacken.

The other shops in the street are closed at midday. But since Antonio does not have a key to the chest where his

master stores the lamp oil and candles, he keeps the shutters open halfway. He hums and he's sweating; he shrugs off his shirt.

I am one of the half-open shutters, therefore nothing escapes me, I watch both the workshop and the street. As Antonio tears open the package and takes out a small box, outside a young lady dressed in black, carrying a gossamer parasol, approaches, hips swaying.

Antonio is gazing for the first time at the labels that will sign his work: *Antonius Stradivarius Cremonensis Alumnus Nicolaij Amati*. He is beaming.

The young lady, who has almost reached the shop, is the widow Francesca Capra, born Feraboschi. She looks round and hurriedly unbuttons the top of her blouse.

The dog by the entrance pants and shifts position. In his sleep the orphan stretches his arm, palm up, as if he's begging. Francesca jumps over them deftly.

"I have come to drop something off for Pescaroli," she calls, stepping into the fragrance of wood.

I hear Antonio thinking he has no time for this, that he still has to varnish his violin. But when he turns and looks her over, he says, "At your service, Madam."

She leans against the workbench and fans herself with an elegant hand. "May I have a sip of water?"

When he returns with a bowl of water, she is holding one of his labels. "Do you build them yourself? Which one,

then?”

Breathlessly she admires his work. She's standing with her back to him; his violin and her hourglass figure seem to harmonize like the lines in a love-sonnet.

Antonio comes up behind her. “If you'll wash your hands first, I'll let you touch it,” he says, dipping one of her fingers into the water. She leans backwards and presses against him. He dries her finger on his trousers and rests his hand on the curve of her hip.

Perhaps it is the extraordinary nature of this day: the perfect violin, naked and defenceless, waiting for his touch; the labels that proclaim he is his own master. It may also be the stillness of the afternoon and the scorching sun outside. Be that as it may, Antonio feels he's about to explode. When Francesca continues to lean against him, he hikes up her skirts.

She doesn't say anything, remains there motionless, her buttocks gleaming.

I'm the master, he thinks to himself, tilts her down and mounts her. The woman gives a little groan. Antonio keeps his eyes fixed on his violin as his hands knead the back of her body. He comes almost immediately.

Wordlessly he pulls out of her and tugs his trousers closed. She looks at him wide-eyed; the corners of her mouth turn up as if she's trying not to smile. Clumsily he brushes some sawdust from her hair.

Not until she has disappeared from sight - a demure silhouette under an elegant parasol - does he realize she hasn't left anything for Pescaroli.

The rest of the siesta goes by in a daze. With trembling fingers Antonio sticks a label inside the violin's belly, still thinking about the woman. Next he mixes the varnish and applies the first coat. “No spilling, no sweating,” he mutters to himself to the rhythm of the brush.

By the time he hears Pescaroli stumbling down the stairs, the violin is hanging up to dry in an alcove at the back of the workshop, carefully concealed behind draped cloths. He stuffs the box with the labels in his pocket. Amati's apprentice? His master would never forgive him for that lie, he'd kick him out in the street if he ever found out.