

## Letter from the last Duchess

This letter is for the next Duchess whoever she may be and is intended as a warning - from one woman to another. Keep it secret, Dear Lady, and so you will protect both of us, as if under a cloak or curtain. Just like the brocade hanging which covers my portrait still keeps me hidden in perpetuity from anyone but the Duke - or those to whom he chooses to show me off, for vanity of his ownership. Please understand that I wish to remain dead and this letter is sent from the grave. Other than the obscurity of a far-flung nunnery, the grave is the safest place for women like us when we have failed to please a Duke or some other man of high position and thick head - but thin skin.

When I was sitting for my portrait, the artist, Pandolf, paid me those compliments he assumed I expected as the wife of his wealthiest and most powerful patron. I tried to seem modest and flattered, though felt no blush of pleasure come to my cheeks or quicken my heart. The only emotion to bring a flush to my neck was fear of danger when he happened to get too close as he was adjusting my mantle. As you must know, Dear Lady, the Duke can brook no physical proximity between his property and another man, no matter that he is in his service and submissive to his rules. No touch, however innocent, can be allowed and even if it leaves no mark, it is to him as if the object has been tainted or stained, and cannot be made whole again.

When I was a little girl, my father the Earl was very fond of me and counted me amongst his greatest ornaments, even as much as my mother his wife whom, you may know, was considered the most beautiful and cultured debutante of her season. My father would order the most elaborate and expensive outfits to be made for me, including fantasy costumes which transformed me into a mermaid, a faery princess, a genie and on one

occasion, a little bear, complete with a golden chain around my neck. I learnt to dance around prettily, smiling a coquettish smile and even winking my eyes to those who gazed on me. However, never did I speak when in his presence, except to my father himself. And only then to reply to his compliments or questions. To speak to anyone else in front of the Earl was forbidden and prepared me as well for marriage as any other discipline such as music or flower arranging.

I used to speak to my mother, of course, and she to me. That company - or one might say *conspiracy* of women - is well hidden from men, and long may it remain so. If they suspect that we have minds with which to think or to reason, (let alone emotions or affection to offer or withhold), then we are entirely lost. If powerful, wealthy men, (and what wealthy man isn't powerful?), begin to think of their wives as *people* but inferior to themselves - they will start to regard them like the servants and slaves that provide their domestic comforts. In such a circumstance, our necessary condition, like that of the servants, would become survival and our conditions would therefore become negotiable. Better to be the highly prized ornament with no feelings or brains than a sentient beast fit only to serve and to be abused. Better to be the rarity purchased at high price than just another pretty face and supple body to be replaced when its shine starts to wear off, or a cleaner option arrives on the scene.

Of course, as I know to my cost, even rare and precious objects can lose their novelty and the Dukes or Kings who own them will seek to find any excuse to buy something new.

There was a famous King of England who decided that his wife the Queen was a dud, the cast-off of his dead brother who hadn't managed to produce a son and heir, and he wanted to get rid of her. He still valued her somewhat, though, is my guess and he didn't want to accuse her of anything in order to purchase her removal. Better that the marriage

itself was claimed to be irrevocably tainted in some way and they were both innocent victims of circumstance. That way, he retains his reputation as a fair and godly man, (or so he thinks), and she remains this pearl of great price.

Her daughter wasn't in the reckoning, of course. The King didn't really care for daughters except as bargaining chips with other men from whom he wanted something. And so that King of England got himself a new Queen and his real wife and daughter passed into the safe obscurity of religious devotion. Wedded to the King of Heaven, they could wait their time, albeit bitter and anguished. In fact, I heard the daughter survived her father, became the Queen and married a beautiful foreigner. Almost a happy ending except that the foreigner didn't find her very appealing or attractive and so he stayed away most of the time. In her religious reverie and childish sexual innocence, (both foisted upon her by the late father, of course), she believed herself to be pregnant when in fact she was sick - sick to the heart. And what a blood price she extracted from her nation in recompense. Blood, blood, blood for the life stolen from her.

Another story I learnt at my mother's knee was the Princess who married the Priest. This Priest was also a King but he wasn't interested in that and had no skills in statesmanship or just rule. His wife, (young, beautiful and politically advantageous), was much more interested and skilful at being in charge and so she took over while her husband became more and more saintly, endowing colleges and helping the poor, that sort of thing. Unfortunately for the Princess, she was never really accepted as the Queen by the people, especially when she started to talk. If only she had kept her mouth shut. The people loved her when she was a beautiful, silent child-woman who brought peace to the kingdom and was even more beautiful than her emblem the daisy. Before she became a person, she was something else and being an ornament protected her. Once she became a person, her

beauty couldn't compensate for her trying to muscle in on men's work - what with her being a foreigner, as well, she never stood a chance.

These are some of the things my mother taught me - long before I became the property of our particular Duke. So, Dear Lady, I hope that your mother has taught you the same things. Perhaps your mother also warned you about smiling as well as talking? Let me elucidate.

As I have mentioned, smiling was amongst my chief accomplishments when I was a little girl. Smiling made people happy when they saw me and so I learned to smile a lot. However, what I didn't appreciate then was that my father interpreted my smiles as affirmation of him and his goodness. A small child, pretty and well-dressed projected the notion that everything was well in his world: his family, his court and his country. The smile of an innocent child is a powerful thing - and the Earl understood this very well.

However, as my mother was at pains to tell me, Dear Lady, and as I would wish to emphasise to you, the smiles of a child and the smiles of a woman are very different things. The public smiles of a woman must be only for her husband or father. If your husband sees you smiling at another man, he will give commands and then smiles will stop altogether.

However, what of this life after death? Is it without smiles, without beauty and without happiness? Let me assure you that it lacks none of these things. My life of the grave is full of treasures but none which money can buy.

Here is my story. When my husband the Duke 'gave commands,' my friends came to my aid, so while all those smiles and my warmth of feeling "too easily impressed" might have been my downfall, they were also my saving grace.

One friend was the cook charged with slipping poison into my food so it would seem that I had succumbed to sickness. What he put into my food caused me to fall into an apparent coma but with no harm to my person.

Another friend was the doctor called to treat me and pronounce me dead when the poison had taken effect. He pronounced me dead but in doing so saved my life.

Yet more friends made sure that I was taken to a place of hiding while my coffin was weighted and sealed 'for fear of the contagion spreading.' I was so sad to hear of how my ladies cried and mourned - I would not have deliberately caused them any hurt - but their genuine tears ensured the Duke believed I was dead and maybe even his tears were real in the end?

And ultimately, my friends brought me to this haven of peace and tranquillity where I am a possession no more and can take my own name, dropping the gift of his like a stone. So, Dear Lady, know that I am not Lucrezia de' Medici or the Duchess of Ferrara but a name which you cannot know because it is my ultimate shield and protection. Just know that I am a Child of God, like you, and we deserve to be happy.