

*CHRYS ROMEO*



*PERCEPTION EFFECTS*



# *Perception Effects*

*by Chrys Romeo*

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## *The Canvas*



### *September*

I'm still having this vision in front of me. It just wouldn't disappear.

The first time I ever saw her eyes I could not get them off my mind for three days.

No matter what I did, no matter where I was, I could always see those eyes in front of me: sharp blue like a winter sky, intensely staring, motionless yet so alive, transparent through whatever was there, covering everything else. It seemed I couldn't do anything anymore. I was only envisioning her eyes. It had been only a matter of an instant, as she had looked at me - a few seconds at most, and yet I could not forget it, as if the image had been imprinted in my mind, burning my soul eternally... icy freezing, impossibly distant, irrevocably close, forever...

I had met her on the tramway. I took the tramway to the painting studio every morning. That morning, I was just sitting there, glancing absently through the swaying vehicle, through the first rays of sunrise that were coloring the windows in pale shades of pink and orange. My eyes were wandering casually over the crowd of unknown people, when I saw her. She was seated somewhere in front of me, her arms folded, silently staring into space. And when I noticed her, for whatever reason, she looked directly at me and our eyes met.

I felt this intense burning, as if I was becoming transparent and she was glancing right through me. Suddenly, I could hardly breathe. I stared into those eyes, letting my mind go off like a blank page, while my heart started racing unexplainably. I looked at her, sustaining her glance like a daring contest. Who would have more

strength to keep looking? Who would be the first to look away? What was that sudden captivating link between us? A storm of sensations made me dizzy. I felt anxious while looking helplessly into those pieces of winter sky, sharp and clear, abysmal and steady. There was nowhere I could hide from that open glance. It felt like falling off the top of a mountain, from unimaginable heights. Everything else around had faded away completely, as if a switch had been turned on - or off - and the whole tramway had vanished into a blank space, just like my mind at that moment. It lasted a few seconds that seemed like infinity. She wouldn't avert her eyes. She was determined like a Sphinx. She was staring me away into surrendering my soul to her. Erasing my thoughts and affirming her absolute existence. The breathless intensity was escalating, it was too much. I gave up and blinked, lowering my eyes to the floor.

I was somehow amazed to find that I was still breathing. The tramway view appeared again around me. In a few moments, after I gathered my courage, I looked back at her. She was staring sideways, thinking deeply about something. I watched carefully her hands, as she kept them folded over the elegant bag that was matching the color of her scarf: soft pink and orange, like the colors of sunrise. The tramway stopped and she got up, and then got off. I watched her walk away and I felt as if she had taken the morning light with her. The tramway seemed empty and dull after she left.

So many questions were running through my mind. Who was she? What had just happened between us? Why had I felt that way? Where did she go?

I tried to forget her the next days, but her eyes were haunting me: that direct intensity was right in front of me, like a huge wave sweeping off my mind in a permanent blinding vision. If I looked at the road, they appeared in the distance, hovering in the horizon. If I stared at buildings, the buildings disappeared and her eyes took their place, like an open sky. If I tried to look at people, I thought I saw her everywhere in the crowd – only to find that it was not so.

To be able to get her out of my mind, I decided to paint her. I thought I would take that image out of my head and place it on canvas instead. I started painting the same week, because I couldn't do anything else otherwise. I tried to remember exactly the nuance of intensity and to render it in paint. I tried to recall the soft pink scarf and the refined moonlight hands that were haunting my visions. As soon as her image started to take shape on canvas, her eyes subtly began vanishing from my thoughts. I was picturing her as if she was in front of me. I wanted her to be in front of me. And she

seemed to somehow become alive in paint. I was happy about it: I could finally have some peace of mind and serenity.

However, for some reason, I could not remember her lips. I had trouble deciding how to paint them. Soft, thin? Sensual, full? Half smiling?... Longer, shorter, pouting? What? I was confused about it. I realized I had to see her again and be more attentive to her lips, if I wanted the painting finished. For the moment, I tried to guess the shape of her mouth. It remained a timid line, a faint uncertain trace like a question. The painting was not finished, yet she was there: staring at me from canvas like a miracle. Yes, it was her. A bit incomplete, but it was her. I decided to finish the painting in the following days.

And in the following days, I met her again.

It was early morning - so early, that it was dark as night. I was waiting in the station. There were people around me, yet I was only looking at the tramway, as it was coming slowly from the pitch dark, swaying its windows, lighted inside and seemingly cozy. I got inside as soon as the vehicle stopped and the doors opened automatically. The moment I stepped inside the light, I was aware that someone known to me had climbed inside at the same time. I turned around and I saw her silhouette move through the dim light, to sit down by a window. I recognized her before I could remember to breathe. My heart dropped to the floor. I just stood there, wondering what to do. The seat in front of her was empty: there weren't too many people at that hour. I hesitated for a second, then I just gathered my courage and decided to act before I would think better of it. I went straight to her and I took the seat in front of her. It was going to be like that. No backing off now. It meant too much to me to even reconsider. I sat down, looking directly at her. I smiled.

For some reason, I believe she had noticed me too from the very first moment we got on the tram and had been afraid I would come and sit with her. Or she had been wondering if I would have the guts to do it. I did.

We looked at each other and for a few minutes, we couldn't help smiling. We knew it wasn't by chance that we were together again. It was a lucky day.

After a while of staring at each other and smiling, as if we had been caught doing something forbidden, I said:

“Good morning”.

I kept smiling. I felt as if we already knew each other well. After having painted her, she was mine somehow. She looked at me cautiously and replied:

“Good morning”...

I was surprised she actually talked. She smiled softly. She seemed a bit reserved, compared to the last – and first – time I had seen her. I was so happy I encountered her again, that I couldn't get enough of it. I leaned my head on the window, staring dreamingly at her, delighted we were finally together. She couldn't go anywhere now. She was mine to look at, for however long the ride would take. We were going in the same direction.

"This seat is not taken, right?" I said, still smiling.

She wasn't smiling anymore; she was trying to remain reserved, but there was a casual attitude about her, showing me she wasn't afraid or anything.

"It isn't", she said.

"May I ask your name?"

She shrugged and looked away through the window.

"You may."

But she did not tell me and she apparently became absent. I was somehow bewildered by this sudden change of attitude. I kept observing her. She was wearing glasses this time, maybe that was why her eyes hadn't struck me as hard as before. There was some indirect approach about her that early in the morning. The glasses had a certain something that made her mysterious and aloof. She had a different bag, matching the color of her creamy coat. Her hair was flowing over her shoulders like rebel ripples of a golden sea, with greenish shades of burned wild flowers. When she looked at me again, her eyes reminded me of a warm calm sea, clear and honestly bright. She seemed so close. She seemed so well known to me. Was it because I had spent so much time trying to reconstruct her in colors, to make her come alive on canvas, to find the true shape of her, to capture her soul in a picture?... Was it because I had spent so much time guessing, trying to imagine her, to get her out of my mind and on real paint? Was it because I felt I had actually spent that time with her as close as two souls could ever be?... I was aware my impression could have been only mine. And yet there was something more to it.

It was heavenly happiness to have her there, in front of me, as if entirely to myself. I remembered I needed to know how to paint her lips. So I dared and lowered my eyes from her glasses to the spot just above her chin... I followed the line of her lips... okay, soft and thin, not too long, not too short, as refined and determined as her hands... irresistibly captivating... one second, two, three... oh, she noticed what I'm looking at. I quickly glanced back up at her eyes. Her eyes sparkled for a while with amusement and her lips smiled slightly like a smirk. Was she wondering what I was thinking of?...

Suddenly, she got up and prepared to get off at the next station. I got up instantly and followed her without giving it a second thought. She saw it and smiled more deeply this time, even more amused.

“You don’t mind, do you?” I asked her, as we were standing by the door, waiting for it to open.

“What?” she said casually, not certain where I was going with the question.

“That I’m coming with you.”

“I don’t mind”, she said, not looking at me, as if she didn’t care either way.

We got off the tram. I was so happy she had let me accompany her that I wasn’t thinking of anything. It was enough that we were there together.

“Where are you going?” I asked her.

“I’m taking the next tram”, she said, looking at the vehicle that was approaching.

I followed her. The tram was full of people. She found a seat and I remained standing by her side.

“So how come I often see you on the tram?” I asked her after a while, trying to get her out of her absent silence.

“Is it because we probably have the same way?” she answered me with a question, glancing directly in my eyes, with a smile.

That intimidating look again. But I smiled back.

“True. So now where to?”

I was waiting for her to decide. I was no longer on my usual route, but I didn’t mind. I was also aware that I could not follow her for too long, considering we weren’t that close, since we hardly knew each other - even if I felt she was completely mine, ever since I had painted her. It was as if I had invented her. Created her. Learned her every shape and line, color and inch. Yet she was so unpredictable to me.

“I get off after two more stations”, she answered, looking out the window.

I understood that she didn’t want me to go to the end of it with her.

“I don’t know this area too well”, I said.

“There’s a shortcut behind the blocks. And there’s good bread around here”.

She smiled again. I smiled too, looking in her eyes. What did bread have anything to do with anything?...

“I must check that shortcut sometime”, I said and she smiled to herself, looking away, as if she knew that I meant I wanted to go with her someday.

I was glad that she liked the idea of us going there together - maybe soon... And I was happy it meant I would meet her again.

I watched her get off the tramway in the waterfall of the morning light. I watched her disappear along the alley and I wondered where she was going.

### *October*

I painted her lips, after I had glanced at them for those few seconds, in the tramway. The painting seemed finished, yet there was still something missing about it. I couldn't figure out what exactly. I painted the morning sky around her, the horizon and yet it still needed more.

For a while, I didn't see her in the tramway and I started missing her a lot.

Then, one day, I got lucky again. It was early morning, as usual, and the tramway had already started advancing slowly. Suddenly, I saw someone knock on the window, to stop it just as it was about to leave. The vehicle went on brakes and the door opened. And there she was.

My eyes lighted with happiness. She had been in a hurry. She passed me by, smiling casually at me. I was glad she acknowledged my presence. She sat in the opposite row, by the window.

"I don't know why I left so early this morning, it's as if I couldn't sleep and didn't know the time anymore", she told me from the other side of the seats, and I was happy she was talking to me. "And then I almost missed this tram".

I was watching her, smiling silently. The fact that she hadn't sat next to me bewildered me somehow, but she was talking to me nevertheless.

"So you're going the same way this morning?" she asked me.

"Yes, I am", I replied.

I found it difficult to pick the words to tell her anything. I was aware that I was very much in love with her at that moment and I couldn't say anything. Whatever I might have said, would not have been enough. I just sat there, watching her. I had a hard time deciding not to get up and go to her. It seemed she wanted it that way. She needed space between us. As if she had guessed I was closer than possible, because I had her on canvas, at home.

"I must find a better time to wake up", she said as if to herself, a bit amused.

I still didn't say anything. Her presence was enough to me. I was fighting the need to get closer, reach out and touch her. I wanted so absolutely terribly much to do what I had done with the canvas: retrace every line of her face, her hands, her neck, everything... even better. Even more. I pictured myself take off her glasses and maybe, just maybe for a second of freezing forever, kiss her ears and run my fingers



through the burning sea of her hair... And then go up and down from head to toes... She was mine on canvas. Yet in reality I could not touch her. Not so easily.

I turned my eyes to look out the window.

“Can I come with you today?” I asked her after a while.

“Where?” she inquired, not smiling.

“Wherever you are going. Would you like me to go with you?”

She shrugged, thinking to herself, as if considering possible consequences.

I was afraid she would guess how much I wanted to be with her and she'd say no.

“Yes, I would”, she said after a few moments, seriously and in a confident tone.

Yes!! That one word seemed like magic. I was happy again. The day had brightened up so suddenly... I could see the sun rays coming through the windows, flooding the tramway seats. I smiled. She smiled too.

She got up fast and passed me by.

“So, are you coming?...”

I followed her. She looked stunning and her earrings sparkled in the sunlight, matching her necklace. I couldn't decide what was more hypnotizing: her presence or the morning light itself. We started walking along the path. When we got to a building by the end of it, she stood in front of the glass doors and looked at me.

“I have something to sort out in here”, she told me and I understood that was where we were separating.

“Okay. So I'll see you next time?”

“Yes. See you next time”, she said and smiled.

Yes! Again. How I loved that word!...

She went inside and I turned around. Yes, I was so happy: I returned to the canvas and added earrings and a necklace to the girl in the painting...

### *November*

In the following weeks I met her again a few times... on the tramway, of course.

I was anticipating the tramway arrival, hoping to see her. When she wasn't there, I was disappointed. When she was there, I couldn't get enough of it. When she ran off each time, I wondered where she went and why she didn't let me spend time with her apart from the tramway moments. I wanted to be a part of her life, yet she kept me away from it. She kept running off and disappearing. Each time I met her I added something more to the painting. I kept adding to it and I felt there was still more I wanted to add. The canvas seemed so alive, sometimes I expected her to come out

of it. Sometimes I felt as if she knew, she sensed the way I loved her in the painting. Most of the time it was so hard to not touch her in real life, as I had learned her features so well and I returned to the canvas to find her again... and again. Sometimes I felt as if she was spending half her time in my home, on the canvas itself, staring at me...

One day, as I was sitting in the tramway, she came and sat right next to me. Her presence was so close: her hair was slightly touching my shoulder. I was so surprised by it and absolutely thrilled - I couldn't even dare to move or breathe, so that I wouldn't change anything about that closeness. I was afraid I would break the spell, had I attempted to do anything.

"I want to show you something", she said breathing fast, very enthusiastic.

She reached in her bag and took out a map. It was drawn in grey lines.

"What is it?" I asked her as she unfolded the paper.

"It's a map of this area. You said you don't know it well".

I stared at her, in amazement. I still didn't dare move; I was overwhelmed, irresistibly enjoying the warmth of her presence. Her elbow was touching mine. She was moving fast and I wondered if she would fly away in an instant, just take off, as fast as she had appeared. Her presence seemed a dream come true. She explained, placing the map in front of me:

"I made it myself. Look, this here is a river."

"Where?" I asked, still surprised by the whole thing.

It was as if we were alone in the tramway. We didn't look around us anymore. She seemed as captivated by the moment as I was. Unfolding the map a little more, her hand brushed mine for a second. It was warm and electrifying. We looked at each other. I wondered where she got that energy from.

"The river is somewhere behind the hills."

She was staring in my eyes, taking it so lightly and accepting my presence as if it was what she wanted most at that moment.

"Would you like to go there?" I asked her.

"I've been there."

"Yes, but would you like to go there – with me?"

I waited. She smiled.

"Yes. I would".

"It's settled then. We'll go there".

She kept looking at me and smiling. Then, she got up as fast as she had approached me.

“I’ll see you then”.

“Okay”, I said. “I’ll see you when I’ll see you.”

“I’m glad you think the same way”, she said, smiling, and went away.

I wished she could have stayed longer, but it seemed things were changing very fast whenever she was around. I wished she could have stayed forever.

I watched her leave.

When I returned to the canvas, I painted a river too.

### *December*

I decided to give her the painting.

I thought she would like it. I thought she would certainly see how I envisioned her and how much I loved her. It seemed like the right thing to do, to finally give the painting to her. I had to let her see it.

So I began carrying the painting with me. I wrapped it in paper and took it with me on the tramway. Because I didn’t know exactly when I would meet her again, I carried the painting with me each time I was on the tramway.

It took a while, but then, one day, I met her again.

She noticed me, but she was a bit reserved – again. I wondered what caused these changes of attitude. She was so unpredictable. She was standing by the door. I went to her, with the painting under my arm.

“Hello”, I said.

“Hi”.

“Are we going to the river?”

“Now?”

“Are we?”

She shrugged. And she didn’t answer. I didn’t understand her. I couldn’t figure out what she was thinking. What were her reasons. What she wanted. She remained an unsolved question to me.

I decided to take a chance and go on with my plan of giving her the painting.

“I have something for you”, I said.

She shook her head.

“No, don’t give me any presents”.

I felt hurt, like a sudden pain in my lungs. Yet I went on.

“Listen, I didn’t buy anything. I made it myself. No strings attached.”

She was still reluctant, as I uncovered the painting before her eyes.

“Look”.

She glanced at it quickly.

“No,” she said immediately, very alarmed. “I don’t want it.”

Had she struck me on the head with something, it wouldn’t have been so bad.

I stood there, completely bewildered and not understanding anything. She seemed afraid someone on the tramway might see it. She seemed afraid to even look at it. Something that looked so beautiful to me, seemed so wrong to her and I couldn’t understand why.

I looked at the painting myself, trying to figure out what was wrong with it.

“It looks like...”

“It doesn’t look like anything”, she interrupted, very determined. “What would you do with it anyway?”

“I don’t know”, I said. “Hang it somewhere?...”

“No”, she said.

And then she turned away, not wanting to look at it anymore.

“It’s no big deal”, I said, but I was feeling very hurt and awkward.

I wrapped the painting back in paper, hiding it. Not in a million years would I have anticipated such an outcome. I didn’t even understand why. It was a nice painting. I had spent so much time and dedication on it. I liked it a lot. She was looking good on canvas. And she wasn’t even naked...

But she was what she was: unpredictable to me.

We remained silent the rest of the way. I felt as if the earth had swallowed me and it was getting dark. I saw my dreams of walking with her by the river go down the drain. “I guess we’ll never go there ...”, I thought to myself. “I guess there never was a chance for us anyway...” It seemed we were destined to meet only on the tramway. She was not capable of more. She could not allow me anything else.

I didn’t watch her leave this time. Instead, I left before her and I didn’t look back. It was no use hoping for anything anymore.

I was upset. I went home, I placed the now useless canvas by the wall and I watched it in silence. Why? Why hadn’t she liked it? What was wrong with it?... It still looked beautiful to me. But it hurt me to glance at it now.

I realized I couldn’t keep it. So I burned it. I took it to the stove and set it on fire.

I watched the flames engulf it, consume it, turn it to lava. The fire seemed so warm. And yet I felt so strange watching it disappear, as if I was burning a part of my mind and soul with it. I hoped I could burn away my feelings for her too.

Yet they were not completely gone.

Somehow, I had the feeling I would never see her again. The tramways would be empty forever.

After many days of not finding her anymore, I decided to look for her at the building with glass doors, where we had gone together one day. I remembered the path and I went up to the building where I had seen her enter. The doors were open. I stepped inside the hall: it was a gallery. An exhibition. I started walking down the hall, glancing at the paintings on the walls. I felt as if something well known to me was waiting for me there. And it was. I stopped in front of the canvas: no use trying to deny it. There it was: my painting – or one identical to it. I recognized her. She was staring at me, with those eyes I had seen the first time. The only difference was that in the painting glowing on the wall in front of me, I was present too. I was painting it. I was painting her... infinitely. Like a frame within a frame.

I'm not going to tell you who made that exhibition or who made the painting where I saw myself painting her. I'm not even going to tell you if I saw her again on the tramway or if I met her by the river, following the map she had left me.

I'm not going to tell you anything. You figure it out yourself.

The only thing I will tell you though, is that life sometimes becomes a canvas and you have to choose between watching a painting on a wall or painting it infinitely yourself. A frame within a frame... If you get in the action and do something, or just keep watching it against a wall. It's your choice. Your canvas is waiting.



## *Black Feathers*

“What are we visiting?”

“A labyrinth.”

The tourists were anxiously waiting at the gates. The antique labyrinth had been closed for a long time, but recently it had been reopened for visitors. The site was surrounded by high walls, white and dusty with marble little towers and columns. There was an absolute silence floating over the restored walls and the afternoon light was making mysterious shadows.

“What’s inside?”

Some of the tourists were wondering what was waiting beyond the gates. The guide explained to them, before opening the gates and gathering the tickets:

“Please stay with the group. Anyone can get lost easily within this labyrinth. It hasn’t been visited for decades and even though it’s been restored, there’s no one who can show you the way out in case you get lost.”

The group advanced through the gates. The pathway was paved at first and the stones seemed ancient, yet they were soon covered by dust and something that seemed like white chalk. The guide was talking loudly, hoping to keep the visitors attentive and alert. Most of them were taking photos of the statues and little columns displayed along the way. Here and there, niches within the walls seemed to be hiding ancient vaults and secret passages.

“Please don’t touch the statues, they have just been restored. And please do not attempt to go through any of those passages, you will get lost for sure. Besides, you never know what’s in there”, the guide laughed. “Enjoy your photos, people.”

The group paused now and then to allow tourists to take photos. One of them stopped in front of a statue representing a guardian angel or something similar. It was made of marble and it had wings. It also had a long flute, announcing something.

He glanced up at the top of the statue and tried to take a picture of it, but it seemed against the sun and the focus was blurred into a bright spot. He walked around the guardian angel. It was taller than an average person. He found a better angle and tried to take a picture again. This time, the shadow made it somehow too dark and it still didn't come out right. He circled the statue again, thinking that it was taking too long and maybe it would have been better to give up and follow the group. He had already broken off from the rest of the tourists. He could still hear their voices and the guide speaking loudly. "Maybe it would be wise to get back to them", he thought. And then he noticed something down on the marble pedestal. He leaned forward and picked it up: it was a soft black feather, glowing in the afternoon light, soft and fresh, as if it had been polished. Its dark waters were making colorful nuances, reflecting light so fascinatingly and mysteriously. He stared at it, lost in thought. What was it? Where did it come from? Perhaps a bird that had flown over the labyrinth? It was an exquisite feather, from an exotic bird, most probably: lustrous and unusual.

The voices of the others were getting dim in the distance. He decided to keep the feather and glanced once more at the guardian angel, while he was stashing the fluffy thing in his jeans pocket.

"Maybe I really can't take a good picture of you today. I'll try to get it again on my way back", he talked to the statue.

Then he turned and walked away quickly, trying to get back to the rest of the group. He turned the corner. The path was empty ahead. He could hear them in an alley somewhere close, yet they were nowhere in sight. Their voices mumbling like a choir underwater seemed to rise somewhere from a parallel lane. He listened carefully. Maybe they were on a parallel path. They couldn't have gotten too far. He ran along the wall, stirring the white chalk dust in the afternoon sun. After a while, the voices just seemed to disappear completely.

"I must be off track", he thought. "Maybe they took a turn and crossed through a secret passage in the wall". He ran back, trying to find again the place where the group murmur had disappeared. He stuck his ear to the wall and listened: nothing. He ran back again, yet the statue was no longer there. It didn't seem like the same path he had come along. The view had changed. "It can't be. I only ran ahead and back. This must be the same lane". He looked around. The statue of the guardian angel was tall enough, it should have been somewhere in sight. He glanced at the silent walls. Nothing.

“Okay. Now I must think.” If he went back, there was a good chance the way would not be the same and he wouldn’t find the gates. If he went ahead, there was an even bigger chance of not finding the group again. The evening was close. Light was getting dim and the sunset was minutes away. “Okay, I’ll just wait here”, he thought. “They have to come back sometime. They’ll come back this way, for sure”. He sat down, trying not to worry about it. He took his camera and started zooming through the pictures. He hadn’t taken too many. There were a few with the gates, the walls and then the statue. The first was too bright, the sun blinding the image. The second was too obscure, the figure of the statue appearing shady and unclear. And then he noticed something in the picture: behind the statue there was a silhouette. There was someone there. No doubt about it. He stared at it, zooming in the angle. Yes, that was a person. It was certainly not someone from the group of tourists. He would have noticed her. A girl with long hair? There were a few girls in the group, but they didn’t look like that. None of them looked like that: dark long hair, dark clothes, like an ancient robe or something. Most of the tourists were wearing plain t-shirts and jeans. Nobody unusual like that girl in the photo. Besides, why hadn’t he seen her standing by the statue?

He got up and started to walk back. He had to find the statue. Maybe the girl knew her way around the labyrinth and would help. Maybe she was one of the people who had restored the site. Maybe she was something else...

He noticed a few feathers on the ground. They were the same type as the one he had found a while ago: glowing black, reflecting watery lights. He followed the trail of the feathers and found a niche in the wall. It was a vault, leading somewhere.

“Don’t worry about it”, he heard a voice.

Looking up, he saw the girl from the picture sitting on the wall. She was watching him. He realized she had been there for a longer while, watching him walk around the path like a lost puppy. She must have found it amusing to see him trying to get it right.

“Hi there”, he said. “What shouldn’t I worry about?”

“Anything... everything”, she replied, seeming amused and relaxed. “Just don’t worry too much”.

“Okay, he said. But what about the way out of this labyrinth?”

“What about it?”

“Do you know the way out?”

“Do you want to get out?”



She grinned. Her eyes were the same color as the feathers, deep and mysteriously glowing. Yet something sweet and calm about her attitude made him reconsider worrying too much indeed.

"I think I would need to get out at some point, he replied. It will be evening soon... then the night will come and I'll be stuck here by myself."

"Didn't you want to be here in the first place?" she asked, half curious, half enjoying the conversation and her position on the wall.

"I guess I did, but not for eternity", he tried to joke.

She grinned again. He was beginning to like her casual attitude. It seemed like nothing in the world, past or present, nothing in ancient history or in a distant apocalypse would be so bad as to make her worry about it. He thought centuries might pass by and it wouldn't be much trouble, as long as she was there on the wall, talking to him.

"Well, she said, I guess you're not by yourself, are you. I'm here too."

And she jumped down from the wall. However, she jumped on the other side; he couldn't see her anymore.

"Hey! Are you there?" he asked, knocking on the wall.

For a moment, there was complete silence. The sunset was spreading its last colors, bathing the walls in orange and red. The shadows were getting longer.

"Yes, I am still here." he heard her voice on the other side of the wall.

"Why did you jump over there?"

"Why not?"

"Do you always talk like this, in riddles?"

"Isn't it interesting? It's more interesting, right?"

She laughed to herself. Her voice had something deep and soft, like velvet. Something reassuring.

"Okay, he said, now what?"

"There's a passage in front of you", she answered.

He hesitated, looking at the passage. The vault was shaded by the evening obscurity. He took a step forward. If he walked through it, he might not get to the group again. But on the other hand, if he stayed there, nothing would come of it either. And besides, the girl seemed to know more about that place than the guide. He decided to trust her and he walked through the vault. There was a short tunnel, cold and silent. Then, he got to the parallel lane. It was covered in grass and many flowers were hanging over the walls in vases and a bunch of colorful branches. It seemed as if the labyrinth had come alive on the other side. It seemed as if

everything was new – or in another time. There was the statue of the guardian angel again, but this time it was covered by musk and it had a garland of flowers around the neck. The flute was shiny and covered in silver. On top of the statue, he saw the girl dressed in black. At the feet of the statue there were again a few of those lustrous feathers, scattered on the ground.

“Are you still wondering how to get out?” she asked.

“Are you going to show me the way?”

“Would you like me to?... And miss everything else?”

“What everything else?”

“The party. There’s going to be a party soon after it gets dark”.

He thought about it for a few moments. Something did not seem right: a party in the labyrinth?

“Who’s coming to the party?”

“You’ll see”, she replied mysteriously.

He looked beyond the walls, at the dark blue sky. The moon was already up and shiny. There were some clouds moving above and the evening shadows seemed to advance unknowingly on the grass and over the pots of flowers. The girl was looking away in the distance, but her eyes were glowing even more now, that night was falling over the labyrinth.

“How come you’re always up somewhere?” he asked her.

“The view is better from up here. You can try it yourself. “

“I’m not allowed to touch statues”, he replied.

She laughed.

“Oh, really. Now, I told you not to worry. Didn’t I tell you so? Come up here. Forget about the statues and what the guide said to you. ”

He placed the camera on the ground. Then he tried to climb on the guardian angel’s folded robe of marble. He grabbed the flute and started swinging to find balance and reach the angel’s shoulders, where the girl was standing and watching him amused. He heard her laughing.

“You’re really taking your time, aren’t you”.

“It’s not that easy. I don’t have wings”, he mumbled swinging over the angel’s arm.

“Oh, and I do? “ she laughed again.

“It’s not funny. I don’t know how you got up there. I have to work my way on this marble.”

“But here you are!” she encouraged him, as he finally arrived on the other shoulder of the angel. “Look, she continued. Isn’t it beautiful? The stars are coming out. The party is soon to begin.”

Somewhere, he heard a wolf howling. The moon was coming out of the clouds and the shadows were dark blue. Night had completely covered the labyrinth. Suddenly, from the net of paths and lanes that were hidden in the dark, there were noises and voices of people. He thought he would see the group of tourists and the guide, but something different was coming along the path: a crowd of unusually dressed people and a caravan of carriages. He looked at the girl that was standing on the other shoulder of the guardian angel.

“Do you know these people?”...

“Shh. Watch out”, she whispered, her eyes fixed on the crowd.

She was enjoying the party that was about to begin. There was a hunger in her eyes and her widening smile was glowing, as if the energy of the moment was her nourishment.

He looked at them: one by one, the carriages on two wheels were advancing towards an altar that he hadn’t noticed before. They were spreading down the lane. The horses were wearing long feathers and golden harnesses. The men riding them had wreaths of leaves around their heads and ancient robes. Some of the pedestrians had their heads covered by hoods and were carrying ropes around their waists, a few were beating drums. They gathered around the altar. Some of them lit torches. The flames were bright and strange in the night air, spreading a fragrance of resin, pine trees and melted wax.

There were trumpets and horns blowing from the distance. Then, the man leading the crowd raised a hand above them and started to speak.

“Fellows! Tonight is a great night! We have been waiting for it for ages! It is the turn of the century when the heart of the earth and the planets are beating together! It is the moment to wake up the gods and open the gates of eternity!”

Then, he stopped abruptly and looked around.

“I sense an intruder. There is a stranger among us tonight! Someone that shouldn’t be here...”

There was a murmur passing through the crowd.

“Where is the intruder? Let’s find him and rip his eyes out!”

“Are they talking about me?” he thought. “Maybe they’re not talking about me. Maybe it’s a role, a play or something. Like an open theater”.

He tried not to panic and remain still, watching them from the angels’ shoulder.

“Ooops, I think they’re talking about you”, the girl whispered, grinning amused.

“What should I do?” he whispered back. “Do you think it’s too late to sneak off to the other side now?...”

“I think it is too late”, she said calmly, as if whatever happened was destined to happen anyway, and it wouldn’t have bothered her no matter how things turned out.

Somehow, she still found it entertaining. She watched the crowd with interest.

“Where is our Blackbird?” the leader spoke again. “Let her come forward and sing to us! An eternity is about to begin!...”

“I’m up here!” she shouted at them, waving her hand and a few feathers scattered in the night, black and lustrous...

They turned around and looked up at her. And then they saw him, next to her, on top of the statue.

“There’s the intruder! Get him!”

She looked at them, then looked at him and said quickly:

“Run!”

He jumped down from where he was and started running through the labyrinth. The paths were dark and silent, the walls hardly shining in the moonlight with pale shadows. He could hear the horses running, the shouts of the crowd, he could see the torches flicker back in the distance, as he dashed from one passage to another, randomly, without even trying to figure out where he was headed. It didn’t matter, just as long as he was getting away from them, as far away as possible. After a few turns and a few passages, the voices seemed to fade away and the crowd disappeared. He sat down on the ground, breathing deeply. He leaned against the tall column that was rising to the cloudy night sky, near the vault where he had paused to rest.

“I’m sorry about that”, he heard her voice and looked up.

Of course. She was on top of the column, shrouded in mist. He didn’t even bother to ask her how she got there. He watched the black feathers falling through the air, above his head. He reached out and caught one in the palm of his hand. A lustrous black feather, soft and watery, exquisitely mysterious... He looked up at her.

“Is this yours?” he asked, showing her the feather.

She glanced at him. And grinned.

“Yes, most probably. And this is yours, I believe.”

He noticed his camera in her hand.

“Man, I thought I lost it”, he said to himself.

The camera hadn’t been on his mind much, since he had run away from that mad crowd.

“Well, you lost it and I found it”, she laughed. “Here, catch!”

She threw it down, more exactly, let it fall. He caught it and felt somehow glad that something familiar was still there with him, in that dark labyrinth. He browsed through the pictures.

“You could’ve taken a few shots”, he told her. “At least I would’ve had the proof I saw that happening.”

“You wanted me to take pictures?...”

She was about to laugh again. She seemed to enjoy the conversation.

“You should’ve said so, then. I could’ve photographed you running with the crowd chasing after you... What a picture for your collection of memories! But I don’t think there was enough time for it. They were pretty much in a hurry”, she added and she grinned. “Which reminds me... I don’t want to break it to you, but... you gotta run again.”

She was looking away from the top of the column. She obviously could see something more than him, from where she was.

“Why? What’s happening now?”

“Something’s coming. I’m just telling you, you should run. If I were you, I would do that.”

“No, I’m not running anymore.”

She grinned.

“Tsk tsk tsk. It’s gonna be something else to watch.”

The clouds were covering the moon completely. It started to rain and from somewhere, through the alleys, a roaring sound was coming closer.

“What on earth is that?” he asked her, but she just shook her head.

“I’m tellin’ you. Run.”

He got up. He heard something running, approaching... he didn’t know which way would be better to get some distance. And then he saw it: a beast like a bull, but larger and covered by fur, storming against the walls of the labyrinth, roaring, raging and blowing steam through its nose, with eyes burning like coals. He was not sure if the beast had noticed him or it was just raging blindly through the lanes, but there was no time to think. He started running, even though he could not see the way because the rain was pouring down so hard, he could feel water dripping in his eyes and the shirt had stuck to his back, wet and cold. He heard the bull break some pots and vases on its way, hitting the walls and stomping the ground in a hard rage, like an earthquake, shaking everything through the rain. And then, he felt someone grab his arm from beneath a vault in the wall. It was the girl again.

“Quickly, in here”.

He got inside the passage and the bull raced by and disappeared in the night. The tunnel was quiet and cold. He looked at her. He still held the camera in his hand.

“You appear at the most convenient times...”

“Yeah”, she grinned. “Isn’t that something?”

Her eyes sparkled in the dark. He noticed she was chewing a piece of gum, very relaxed, as if she saw the bull on a daily basis.

“It’s gone now”, she said to herself.

“What the hell was that?” he asked, glancing towards the entrance of the tunnel.

“Whatever it was, it’s gone – for now. Don’t worry.”

He looked at the camera.

“Too bad I couldn’t take a picture of whatever that was. I brought this camera and I didn’t use it much around here.”

“Yet you’re still alive, right?”

She enjoyed the irony of it. They watched each other for a while. And then, there was another roaring from the other end of the tunnel.

“We’ve got to go”, she told him.

He followed her without asking. She went through the passage to some stairs and eventually they arrived on a terrace. Underneath, a torrent came rushing in, flooding the labyrinth in waves of water, covering the walls and splashing the columns.

“What now? ”

He was beginning to think the night had so many surprises ahead, it would be endless. It was more like a surreal dream. It was as if the gates of eternity had really opened and the planets and time had been whirled away into a never-ending chaos. He was expecting anything now, to come out of the labyrinth, any fantastic creature of menacing legendary imagination: a gryphon, a dinosaur, a flying carpet, anything...

“What’s happening?” he asked her, as she was leaning against the ledge of the terrace.

“The apocalypse, man”, she grinned joyfully.

“You’re not serious”.

“But I am. It’s like this every night at the turn of the century.”

“You mean history repeats itself every night around here?”

“Yep. It’s history repeating or coming up with something better. But we must be smarter than that. We must turn the tables. Why do you think I’m here for?”

“I don’t get it. What is this labyrinth?”

“It’s a freaking Pandora’s box”, she laughed. “And the only way to get out of it, for you, is to build a pair of wings.”

She leaned her elbows on the ledge, grinning at him, as she kept chewing gum in her relaxed manner.

“You don’t seem very affected by it”, he said, watching her carefully.

“Why should I be?”

Why, indeed? She seemed to be, herself, one mysterious fantastic creature... she seemed to rely on a power deeper than anything known to the world.

“So how do I build those wings?” he asked her, beginning to understand that she had some answers he would need.

“We’ll figure out something”, she said, looking into the night.

She wasn’t just speaking for the sake of it. She had meaning behind her words. She had better knowledge of that place. He sat down and closed his eyes. How many hours had passed? “Will I ever get out of this?” he wondered in his mind.

“You’re tired”, she guessed.

“Kind of, yeah.”

She sat down next to him.

“It’s okay. There’s enough time.”

He felt her head leaning on his shoulder and the cold of the night turning into warmth. He kept his eyes closed. It felt so comfortable, he didn’t want to get up... he could have remained there, with her, on that terrace, in that labyrinth, in the night... and let eternity take them into an endless repeating history of fantastic unimaginable unknown mystery...

When he woke up, he was still on the terrace. It was still dark, deep in the night and the labyrinth was still flooded by water. The sky was clear, the moon and the stars reflecting their sparkles in the dark liquid that covered the mixed up paths, spreading ahead. There was a peaceful quiet above the flooded labyrinth. He looked around to find her. He saw the girl near the edge of the terrace, her dark silhouette like a shadow hidden from moonlight. She was doing something, with her back turned to him.

“What are you doing?” he asked and his voice resonated within the flooded walls beyond, coarse and strange, getting lost in the dark.

She turned around.

“You’re awake”.

She smiled and her glowing black eyes reminded him of that unknown reassuring mystery: that no matter what happened it wouldn’t be so bad - that nothing too

irreversible or irrevocably dooming could have happened as long as she was there. Like a peacefully powerful certainty, she had something about her that gave the night unexpected sweetness.

“... what are you doing?” he asked again.

“You’ll see”.

She turned her back to him again and continued with whatever she was doing, by the edge of the terrace. In a few moments, the sky started lighting up with fireworks. Thousands of colorful sparks lit the sky and the dark water below, one sphere after another spreading above and disappearing, in a multitude of flashes. It was as if the entire galaxy had started spinning and displaying its brightest stars, in a game of colors and mystic lights. He wondered where the fireworks were coming from: they seemed to appear out of nowhere, from the depth of the sky above. He could almost see the galaxy above them, spinning with its millions of light years into eternity.

“It looks like New Years’ Eve fireworks”, he said.

“It might be New Years’ night, you never know”, she replied, smiling to herself.

He got up and went to the edge, by her side, watching the fireworks together. She looked up to the sky. Her profile was lighting up, in the pale darkness, colored by the reflections of fireworks, but her eyes were glowing deeper than the sparks that were falling above water. Nothing was deeper than her eyes... nothing he had ever seen.

He glanced at what she was doing: she was building something, her fingers skillfully attaching black lustrous feathers to a frame, sticking them with wax and arranging them fast, one after another... it looked like a black, shiny design.

“You’re making a pair of wings...” he said amazed.

“You guessed right. It’s a pair of wings”.

“But your feathers... you’ll run out of them.”

“Nope. Don’t worry about that,” she laughed. “I’m never gonna run out of feathers.”

She attached one more watery, mysterious feather to the wings, and then picked up the frame, to contemplate her work.

“It’s finished. It’s ready. Now you can go.”

He didn’t understand.

‘You made this for me?...”

“Yes. Who else?”

She turned around to look at him.

“What for?” he asked, waiting for an explanation.



“Why do you think?” she grinned. “So that you can get out of the labyrinth, in the end. Isn’t it what you wanted?”

He was still amazed by the beautiful pair of wings that she had made, shining in the night with black lustrous exquisite feathers...

“What”, she inquired, as if ready to laugh. “You’re not afraid, are you?”

He was looking at the pair of wings, lost in thoughts. Something about the feathers and the wax reminded him of a warning, in the back of his mind. He felt something like a memory, becoming alive, rising up to his thoughts. The fireworks had stopped and it was dark and quiet again, above the flooded labyrinth. He was staring at the wings. She was waiting for him to speak.

“The myth of the flying man”, he said eventually, looking intensely at the wings. “It’s exactly as in the myth of the man with wings. You know? He went up to the sky and the sun melted the wax. Then he fell down to the ground. It’s history repeating... I’m gonna fall down like that too, if I take off.”

“You don’t know that”, she grinned reassuringly, not seeming surprised by his thoughts about the myth. “You might get a better chance, because there’s no sun around here yet. There’s nothing to melt the wax on your wings, this time. Go ahead, try them. It’s fine,” she encouraged him. “We’re here to turn the tables, remember? Nothing must be repeated if we can do it better.”

She extended her arm and offered the wings to him. He still had doubts in his mind, but her plan seemed to have a chance. He trusted her more than anything, in that labyrinth.

“What if I can’t take off? What if the wings won’t keep me up?”

He wanted her to tell him everything would be just right. He wanted it as a guarantee, as if her words would be enough.

“You’ll just have to try and see”, she said. “What’s the worst that can happen, anyway? You’ll fall in the water and swim your way back here. And then try again. Right?”

She smiled. He hesitated for a few moments, then shrugged.

“You’re right.”

And he took the pair of wings. She helped him attach them on his shoulders.

He climbed on the ledge of the terrace and moved a few times the black shiny design, as if trying on a new pair of gloves.

“You look fine”, she laughed. “I think you were born for these wings. They fit you perfectly”.

“Don’t joke about it now. I’m trying to have some confidence here.”

“Don’t worry, I’m right next to you.”

She was amused by the whole thing, as if it was another interesting, entertaining event.

“Would you like me to take pictures?” she grinned.

“Wait. I’ve got to make sure this works out.”

He hesitated, looking in the dark night ahead of him. The water was moving imperceptibly, as if the moonlight could have stirred lazy ripples through the water beneath the walls. He breathed deeply, trying to see something in the night sky. Some sign. Some signal that everything would be just right. Yet, he knew there was no guarantee to anything. It was a risk he would have to take. Just take off and try his chance at it.

“Let go”, she told him. “Just let go. It will come to you after you take off”.

He took that step on the air. He moved his arms quickly, felt the edge run off from under his feet, felt like falling for a second, and then he floated above the water, almost touching its surface in moonlight ripples. The wings above his shoulders were strong enough to keep him above the labyrinth. He started to move faster, gradually rising higher. He smiled. He was beginning to enjoy it. He heard her behind:

“Yeah! That’s it! You’ve got it! Keep going!”

He tried to turn around, hovering, flapping the black feathers through the cold dark night. He was getting higher now. It was an exhilarating feeling... To be so high above the water and the walls, alone in the night sky, like an absolute freedom, just him and the galaxy itself, spinning... He made a loop and the view returned to the terrace. In the distance, on the edge, she was waving to him joyfully.

“Wooo...! Go on! Go find a new year! Go find a new era! Go make it out of the labyrinth!” he heard her shout and he could still see her deep eyes glowing in encouragement.

She was jumping up and down, enthusiastically. He smiled.

And then he went even higher. It was a dizzy sensation: he wanted to go even higher, to infinity, as if to get to the very core of the galaxy, to find the meaning of meanings, to rise up to the unknown mystery of timeless myths and eternal life...

The labyrinth was lost from sight. And then he saw it: the dawn. The sun was coming up from beyond the horizon. The colorful light was spreading, slowly but steadily, covering everything... shining on the black feathers. He felt an anxious sting of worry go through his mind: what now? The sun was getting stronger. It felt incomparably thrilling to be so free, up there, so close to it... unimaginably close to the sun. And yet, he knew what would happen. He already knew. He felt his

shoulders getting warm. He knew it was a matter of minutes before the wax would start melting. He looked down: the labyrinth walls were somewhere, very far away, like a little bee hive in the dust. He noticed one feather detach from the wings and float away. And then another. And then many more. Black feathers, floating freely, drifting away ... shiny and mysterious in the morning light, like question marks going to a new direction. He felt the air run by his cheeks and he knew he had started falling. He was descending fast. He closed his eyes and waited... he felt a strange serenity light up his mind. He wasn't thinking of anything anymore...

After he hit the ground, he didn't open his eyes immediately. He had expected to disappear in a shudder, or not feel anything: just ceasing to exist. However, he was still there. The feathers had vanished from his shoulders. He was lying in the dust. The morning sun was above. He got up, as if awakening from a long sleep, scattering dust from his jeans. He looked around: the labyrinth was in front of him, with its white walls, waiting in silence.

He walked to the gates. He saw a few tourists and a guide.

And he saw a girl with long black hair, wearing a strange dark robe, standing by the gate. He approached her. She smiled at him in the morning light and her eyes sparkled mysteriously. She was leaning on the wall, casually.

"Is this your camera?" she said, extending an arm to him.

He was surprised.

"Yes. I don't remember where I lost it... Thank you."

She smiled, watching him. He looked at the labyrinth, bewildered somehow.

And then he looked at her.

"Are you selling tickets here?" he asked her, somehow confused.

"No man, I'm not selling tickets".

She grinned.

"I'm just keeping an eye on things around this labyrinth... you know?"

He didn't say anything. He just watched her, trying to figure out what it was about her that was keeping him there.

"Are you going in?" she asked him, joyfully.

He seemed lost in thoughts.

"Inside the labyrinth?..."

"Are you ?"

He breathed deeply.

"Yes,... I am".

And he went by the gates slowly, starting to look around.

## *The Lift*



From the first day I entered the hotel, I knew there was something different about it. I didn't know what until I went on the elevator.

To begin with, there was an elevator girl waiting at the door. She had chestnut hair with red reflexes and squirrel eyes, gleaming with silky warmth, in hidden observant smiles.

"Where to?" she asked me, when I got on the lift.

"The third floor", I told her.

I had luggage with me, so I didn't bother watching the elevator light up its buttons, passing in slow speed from one floor to another. I hadn't even noticed the smell of spring flowers, but when I saw the leaves ruffling at my feet, I looked up. The ceiling of the elevator had opened into a window and a few humming birds flew inside, as if coming from an unknown island. I knew it was complete winter outside, with lots of snow and freezing degrees. It was the coldest season and I was up there on vacation, for Christmas. There was no way the humming birds could have seemed ordinary.

"Where did they come from?" I asked the girl, referring to the yellow and green humming birds and the spring flowers hanging from the ceiling.

She smiled.

"From the spring season, of course."

"But there's no spring outside. Is there a greenhouse inside the hotel?"...

"Maybe", she said.

And she didn't offer anymore explanations. The humming birds flew around for a while, and then they went out through the open ceiling, just as they had arrived.

“Here you are”, she said. ‘This is your floor.’”

“Thanks”, I said and I took my luggage out, trying to get through the narrow doors that kept closing and opening.

“These doors are going crazy”, I told her.

“They’re automatic”, she answered with the same smile. “If you keep your feet by the doorway, they won’t know if you are coming or going. So they just open and close, endlessly”.

“You should tell the hotel to have it fixed”, I said, throwing the suitcase in the hall and stepping out.

“Would you like to go up to the top floor?” she asked me.

“Why would I go there? My room is on this one.”

“I was just asking. I thought maybe you’d like to see the whole season. You know, as a Christmas present.”

I stood there, not even beginning to understand what she meant. She just kept smiling, as the doors closed and the elevator went down.

On that day, I went to see the lights in town. I used the stairs to get outside, still thinking about the spring flowers and the humming birds. It was very snowy outside, but it was nice and the view reminded me of childhood fairy tales. When I returned, I saw the elevator girl again, waiting and smiling.

“Hi”, she said.

“Hi. Take me to the first floor please”, I said.

I wanted to have dinner on the first floor, where there was a cozy restaurant.

“Did you have a good time in town today?” she asked me.

“Sure. It’s nicely decorated. So many lights, very cheerful.”

“I’m glad you liked it.”

I was aware the ride was taking longer than expected. And it was getting warmer inside.

“Why does it take so long?” I asked her and she seemed to have been expecting the question.

“It’s a longer season this time.”

“What do you mean, a longer season? I only want to get to the first floor.’

”I know.’

Suddenly, the elevator went to a halt. The ceiling window flipped open again and the smell of heated fields of wheat filled the space. The lights were going on and off. A few wild flowers fell through the window and a little seagull rushed in, smashing against the walls in panic. After a few seconds, the seagull found its way out again. I

could hear seagulls screaming in the distance, somewhere beyond the elevator ceiling.

“Is this even possible?” I thought to myself. The elevator seemed to have been suspended in the middle of the air, somewhere, in summer days. The elevator girl remained undisturbed.

“There’s a short power outage”, she said, as the lights kept going on and off. “Nothing we can’t handle.”

I was staring at the ceiling window. I was expecting seashells and sand to fall through anytime now. I wouldn’t have been surprised one bit if the girl herself would have turned into a mermaid and started singing. She kept smiling, as if she was reading my thoughts.

“Are you sure you don’t want to go up to the top floor?” she asked me again, in a sly tone of voice.

“I’m just going to the first floor restaurant”.

“Okay, it’s your choice. Enjoy your dinner”, she said, undisturbed.

The elevator started again and I arrived at the first floor in a few moments. I went out, still wondering what had happened.

The third day, I decided to take the elevator down, just to see if there would be autumn inside it this time. I called it and it arrived, after taking a longer time. The doors slid open and I saw the inevitable elevator girl, waiting for me with a smile.

“So, are you finally going to the top floor?” she asked me.

“Actually, I was thinking of going down”.

“As you wish”, she said.

She was very elegantly dressed, as if for a special occasion. She was sparkling.

“Are you sure you’re going down?” she asked me again, before pressing the button.

“I’m very sure. I want to discuss something with the people at the reception desk”.

“Okay.”

She started the elevator. It was going down smoothly... I was watching the ceiling. Anytime now, anytime. Autumn would arrive.

“Are you looking for something in particular?” she asked me, a bit amused.

“Not really”, I said.

But I kept staring at the ceiling window. Anytime now... dry leaves and maybe squirrels, coming through. It would happen. It was a certainty.

And yet, the elevator remained silently smooth, descending.

“Is there something wrong?” she asked me when we arrived at the ground floor and the doors went open.

I didn't move. I was somehow wondering why I hadn't witnessed another season coming through the ceiling window. I was just standing there, thinking.

“So... are you going out? Or going up again?” she asked me, very politely.

I looked at her.

“What is it with this elevator?”

“What do you mean?” she said, very calm.

I thought about it. I decided to just go to the reception desk.

“See you later”, I told her and watched the doors close, hiding her smile.

I approached the reception desk, very determined.

“I want to ask you something”, I said to the person behind the desk. “It's about the hotel elevator.”

The receptionist looked at me, as if not understanding.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, there's something about the elevator. Something unusually strange.”

“There can't be anything unusual or strange about the elevator.”

“Yes, but there is.”

“There can't be, apart from the fact that there is no elevator. We apologize about it. We understand if you find it inconvenient, but there won't be any discounts for that reason.”

This time, I was the one staring.

“I've just been on it”, I said.

“The elevator hotel is not functioning. We regret this inconvenience. It hasn't been functioning for two weeks and we intend to replace it because it cannot be fixed, but we can't do this now, on this holiday season. Maybe next month. We are sorry about that. We hope you can use the stairs instead. Thank you for understanding.”

And the person seemed to just dismiss the topic completely, ignoring my presence.

I turned around. Would it have been possible that I was the only one seeing the elevator? I looked back at it. There was a yellow tape over the door, spelling “Caution”. The elevator lights were out and everything around it was quiet. I realized I had never seen anyone else go up or down with me, on that elevator.

I stepped towards the doors. I took away the yellow tape and I pushed the button. And, just as I thought, the lights went on. I heard the elevator coming down. When

the door opened, the girl smiled, as if expecting me. She was wearing a Christmas hat and seemed very cheerful.

“Here you are, again. Going to the top floor?” she asked me.

“Yes, I’m finally going to the top floor this time”, I said and went inside.

I wanted to see what it was about. The elevator started slowly. The girl kept smiling. And then, just as I thought it would, the ceiling window flipped open and, as we were climbing, with each floor there was another season coming in: humming birds, spring flowers, wild flowers, seagulls, sunlight, then dry leaves, acorns, chestnuts and finally snow flakes and cold air, in a blizzard. Then it went on and around again, from the beginning. The lift was going up and it didn’t seem to arrive to its destination anytime soon. The ride seemed endless. I looked at the girl.

“What is this elevator anyway?” I asked her.

“It’s your Christmas present”, she said.

“Where are we going?”

“Just up, as you requested.”

She was smiling, undisturbed.

I thought about it. Then I said, abruptly:

“Listen, take me back to the hotel, wherever that is now. Just take me back.”

“Have you changed your mind about going to the top floor?”

She was a bit surprised that I had decided otherwise.

“I think so, yes. I’ll go there another time. Not today.”

She wasn’t pressing the button yet.

“What are you waiting for? Take me back”, I said, becoming anxious.

She was staring at me, smiling, yet something unexplained was keeping her still.

I wondered if she was as automatic as the sliding doors. Finally, she raised her hand and pushed the button.

“It’s not my decision. I’ll take you wherever you wish”, she said casually, and we started going down. “I’m glad you understand how it is”, she added, smiling.

I breathed deeply, somehow relieved.

When I stepped out, I just smiled at her, knowing I wouldn’t take the elevator again very soon.

“Thank you for the ride. Happy holidays!”

And I turned away.

I had realized the most important thing about that elevator ride: the Christmas present was life itself... and the final floor was just another enigma I would have to find out some other time...