

GALLERY GUIDE

Renaissance Room

Mona Lisa – Leonardo da Vinci’s most famous painting

Leonardo da Vinci – Florentine inventor, polymath and painter of genius

Salaì – Leonardo’s chief assistant at the *bottega* and also his lover

Francesco Melzi also known as Cecco – another of Leonardo’s assistants, latterly his amanuensis, editor and collator of his manuscripts and Salaì’s bitter rival

Lisa del Giocondo – a renowned Florentine beauty and the model for the Mona Lisa

Francesco del Giocondo – a wealthy silk merchant and Lisa’s husband

Niccolò Machiavelli – a politician, operator and occasional friend of Leonardo’s

Raphael Santi – a young painter from Urbino and a confidant and admirer of Leonardo

Michelangelo Buonarroti – sculptor, painter, grouch and adversary of Leonardo

Leda – Queen of Sparta and Leonardo’s most magnificent and beautiful painting; friend of Mona’s

Il Magnifico or Giuliano de’ Medici – of the legendary Medici family of Florence; powerful patron of Leonardo in Rome

Pope Leo X – brother of Giuliano; passionate about food and music as well as God

King Francis I – teenage King of France, latterly patron of Leonardo Da Vinci in France and the purchaser of Mona Lisa, Leda and other paintings

La Cremona – the most famous courtesan in Milan, also a poet and the model for Leda

French Galleries

Room of the Sun King

Louis XIV the Sun King – admirer of Mona Lisa, Leda, absolute monarch of France

Queen Marie Thérèse – his pious Spanish queen

Madame de Montespan – Louis’s official mistress and the mother of at least six of his children

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Françoise, Madame de Maintenon – the royal governess, and latterly the mistress who succeeded Madame de Montespan

Revolutionary France

Louis XVI – King of France

Marie Antoinette – his extravagant wife; a woman of great passion and style

Citizen Fragonard – exuberant Rococo painter beloved of Marie Antoinette, who fell out of favour after the Revolution

Twentieth-Century Room

Pablo Picasso – painter and friend of Mona Lisa

Sigmund Freud – psychoanalyst and art lover

Vincenzo Peruggia – thief and kidnapper of the Mona Lisa; Italian Nationalist

Jacques Jaujard – brilliant chief curator of the Louvre during WW2; never seen without a cigarette

Jeanne/Agent Mozart – French Resistance agent, film star and Jaujard's lover

Prologue

Louvre, Paris, Today

*I*n the beginning I listened in darkness. When I was new, I had no eyes and could not tell night from day. But I discovered that I liked the music – the brisk joy of the *lira da braccio* and the flute – and the raucous studio chatter. The tickle of the charcoal. The steady warmth of his fingertips, all nudging me into life, layer upon layer. I came into being, not all at once but like the build-up of smoke in a room, one wisp at a time. His breath against my cheek as his brush blew life into me. I swam into consciousness as if from the bottom of the deepest ocean, cool and black. I was aware of voices, like the grinding of the rocks against the waves. But I was always listening for his voice. He whispered to me. He willed me into being, coaxed me out of the poplar wood. Until then I was content in the dark. I did not yet know there was light.

My face came first, edging into view against the spinning layers of white lead. He conjured me forth with tonal shadows and blocks of shading in dark washes. I was coated again and again with a layer of *imprimitura*,

translucent as a butterfly's wing. My skin was ghostly, not pink flesh, so he added a small portion of red lake and yellow and shaded me with burnt umber. My hands and dress and veil and hair were nothing but thoughts in charcoal, waiting to be. There were the first ink lines of the cartoon. The sharp point of the needle picked out my new contours, ready for the charcoal *spolveri*. His fingers massaged in the rubbing powder through the tiny holes in the paper. I was an outline, a mirror image upon wood. A collection of parts. Chin. Breasts. Finger. Nose. And with my new eyes I looked about me. The busyness of the day and the stillness of the night. I marvelled at it all. The stars flickered beyond the window lit like the studio candles – perhaps a celestial painter laboured, the Leonardo of the heavens, on a new constellation commissioned by the gods.

While Leonardo was painting me, giving me shoulders and lips and creating the cascades of my hair and the translucence of my veil, he talked to me.

‘Painting is superior to music as it does not perish immediately after its creation. This song on the lute, although sweet, has already vanished and yet here you are.’

I listened in rapture to these intimacies as something began to stir deep within me – the first seeds of love.

At first, I used to gaze at Leonardo rapt and silent. Then one day he confided to me the secrets of the heavens, saying, ‘People believe there is a man on the moon, but there are only seas. Its surface is awash with saltwater.’

I heard a voice speaking the question I wanted to ask.

‘There is truly no man on the moon?’ said the voice.

Then, to my astonishment, I understood that this was my voice. I could speak. I did not know.

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Leonardo stared back at me, astounded. He leaned forward until his eye was level with mine. Stroked my lip with his brush.

‘Are you really there?’ he asked me.

‘Yes. I am,’ I answered.

‘Who are you?’ he asked, studying me in wonder.

I looked back at him and replied, ‘I am yours.’

My Leonardo was many things – *imaginativa*, generous, fastidious – but he was not fast and, in the time it took to conjure me, he confided in me a great many more things. He conceived new worlds in a single leaf. There was only ever one Leonardo. And there was only one painting like me. The other pictures could be looked at but none of them could see. When I was young, and my paint fresh and my varnish uncracked, I was a revelation in white lead and *imprimitura*. No one painted in the same way after me. Or no one who was any good. The lacklustre, soft-cocked, grey souls went on for half a century producing whey-faced Madonnas by the yard for altar panels in provincial churches. But after looking upon me, even the poets returned to the world with a sharpened tongue.

Please understand that I am not the pretty bourgeois wife of a silk merchant. I am not Lisa del Giocondo. I can hear her now as she was then, her voice petulant and anxious. The rattle of her worries. *The studio is stifling. Can the window not be opened?* Lisa. Lisa. Her name is like a hiss of steam. Did I have to begin with her? To be made in the image of someone so ordinary. But as the brilliant lapis lazuli resplendent on a thousand Madonnas’ robes are mined from limestone, so was I cajoled from the unyielding and reluctant Lisa.

For a short while, like mother and a foetus, she and I shared a soul. Then, I was not yet myself. The soft curl of Lisa's hair, rubbed out. Drawn, anew. The first curve of her cheek. The shape of her skull. Leonardo's thought and his intention. I was more Lisa and Leonardo than myself. But little by little, stroke by stroke, I became. My soul my own. I looked about me with my own curiosity. I saw the lemon trees glistening in their pots lining the loggia. The dust on their leaves. Perspiring musicians playing to keep Lisa smiling. To make me smile. And just like that, we were no longer the same, she and I. Praise the Madonna and all the saints in Heaven. My smile is not hers. It never was. She always needed the punchline to every joke explained. Poor, good, dutiful Lisa.

Now, as I look out of my glass prison in the Louvre, it has been hundreds of years since I saw her last. She lies in her tomb, and I in my glass coffin. Most prisoners have committed a crime. Not I. A gilded palace, no matter how splendid or filled with silent treasures, is still a jail when one cannot leave. The visitors to the Louvre queue for hours and then gawp without seeing me. I am now a fixture in the travel guides and the package tours of Europe. I've become ill-tempered and full of black bile in my old age, but the manners of the tourists are despicable. They complain to one another how small I am, or that my smile is more of a grimace. Once, I used to jostle with hundreds of others in an undignified dormitory of pictures, half-forgotten except by those who came to seek me. Yet nowadays I am everywhere, so you no longer see me even when I am right before you. You all come here to linger in my presence, to pay homage for your allotted seconds, before you are hurried on by my jailors. Still you choose

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to record on your phones the moment of your not looking while your back is turned to me.

Well, if you will not look at me at least do not search for the other Lisa. I am real. That is the secret. Frankly she isn't worth the trouble. The pious, prattling wife of a vain and self-promoting merchant. She is dead. Her bones lost, dust in a convent. Listen instead to my history. My adventures are worth hearing. I have lived many lifetimes and been loved by emperors, kings and thieves. I have survived kidnap and assault. Revolution and two world wars. But this is also a love story. And the story of what we will do for those we love.

From the very beginning I was his, for like Prometheus he breathed the fire of life into me. At first this held no fear for me, for I did not understand what I was, and that as a painting of wood and pigment I was different from a man of flesh and blood and bone. I did not know what it was to be mortal or that he must die. I only knew that I loved him, and that in time he must come to love me too. We were together many years and he confided in me his many secrets. His jealousies. The disquiet of his ambition.

And in the end we made one another immortal, he and I. Yet now he is gone and I watch in silence, alone. The cell walls might be made of glass, but it is bulletproof, two centimetres thick and sealed from the outside world. I can hear almost nothing but muffled babble. No one troubles to speak to me any more. Even if I call out, no one listens.

Listen now.

Florence, 1504

Winter

*A*t fifty-one Leonardo is still a handsome man. He wears a short, rose-coloured tunic and a cloak of deepest green velvet gifted to him by Ludovico Sforza, Duke of Milan. In his tunic and his cloaks, Leonardo appears every inch the celebrated artist from Milan blown in amongst the conservative Republicans of Florence in their plain gowns and sensible haircuts. His beautiful curling hair is now streaked with grey and carefully styled, reaching down to the middle of his chest. The silver lends him an added air of gravitas. He visits the barber regularly and his cheeks are smooth. His eyes are like those of the birds he loves, an *aquilone* perhaps or a kite, observing every detail, dark windows thatched beneath thick brows. I watch those brows. They are the internal weathervanes of the studio. This morning, Zephyrus must be sending a warm wind as, to Leonardo's delight and my dismay, Lisa del Giocondo arrives with her maid. I observe as the assistants stop grinding pigment to watch her, startled each time by her beauty. In between visits, even I forget her loveliness and am taken aback, until

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she frowns, irked, and the illusion of the mortal goddess is spoiled. She surveys with distaste the peeling magnificence of the Sala del Papa, and the stripped and scraped skins of kid goats and calves splayed across the tiles and benches; they are waxy translucent and ready cured for vellum. It's clear to me Leonardo's forgotten that she's coming, but he is all charm and attention and sits her down in the best chair. I am resting upon my easel at the far side of the hall, where I have a good vantage, but Lisa is too busy fussing with her layers of shawls and does not notice me.

'Dearest Leonardo, I brought you a present,' she says, handing him a small package.

He crouches beside her, apparently touched by the gesture.

'Well,' she smiles, 'aren't you going to open it?'

Leonardo dutifully unpeels the paper to reveal a prayer book. He holds it up to the light and I perceive that every page is bedecked with crude and doom-laden woodcuts of sinners in torment. He stares at her in fond puzzlement and she clasps her hands tightly.

'I worry about your eternal soul, maestro. Please, I beg of you, read it.'

'If I read without belief, I'm not sure it will have the necessary effect, Madonna Lisa.'

Her lip quivers.

Leonardo bows. 'I will study it carefully. If anyone can save my soul, I'm certain that it's you.'

I have no stomach and yet I feel sick to it. Leonardo's soul does not need saving. He has his own unique faith. And if his soul ever needs saving, it will be me who does it and not Lisa del Giocondo, for all her piety. I am a

painting that can see and hear: I have been touched by the divine. Even if, now and again, I'm also touched by earthlier arrows of loathing and disdain.

'Salaì. Vin Santo. Biscuits.' Leonardo stands, signalling to his chief assistant.

Salaì. What can I say? He is a thief. Liar. Obstinate. Glutton. Yet, all this Leonardo forgives, because Salaì makes him laugh and he is beautiful. Beauty makes Leonardo overlook a great deal. This is true of both Salaì and Lisa. Salaì means 'Little Devil' and he is Leonardo's perpetual favourite, with his long ringlets like a string of polished chestnuts, and his impish grin. He looks like an angel longing to discard his wings and misbehave. Darling Leonardo cannot resist. It is my task to watch Salaì closely, to try and limit the havoc the wretch can and does wreak on us all. I warn Leonardo again and again, but he hardly ever listens. He is in thrall to beauty.

Lisa shivers. It is absurd. The studio is deliciously cool. The ceilings are high and the windows shaded. The oil paints react to extreme heat and Leonardo needs a steady, even light to draw. Lisa is never content.

'May we have a fire lit?'

'Of course, Madonna.'

Servants bustle in an instant. Everyone wants to please Lisa. It's tiresome. Even the flames in the grate burst in an instant, as if under her spell, daubing a rosy glow on her cheek. Leonardo leans forward, entranced. He signals for his brushes and his palette, determined to match my cheek to hers. To my satisfaction, the fire is built of damp logs and so begins to ooze smoke and poor Lisa coughs, covering her mouth and pearlescent teeth with a small white hand. Her eyes liquify with tears. Leonardo scrutinises every part

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of her face, unblinking in his fascination as though she is the Madonna herself.

She glances around the studio, restless as a sparrow. The chatter is subdued, all laughter muffled. Even Salai behaves. She's searching for something. For me.

'Oh,' she says, as she spies me at last, her face stricken. 'It still isn't finished.' Her exquisite nose wrinkles. 'And it doesn't look like me.'

What she means is, she doesn't like me. Which is fine. As I don't like her either. Leonardo is far more diplomatic. He places a reassuring hand on hers. She recoils. He is not her husband, and she frets when he touches her.

'A painting is visual poetry.'

Lisa looks at him, puzzled.

He tries again. 'When I paint, I paint two things. I paint a man, or here, a woman. But I also paint a mind – my mind, my ideas. This portrait is not simply of you, but also of my mind and my ideas. That part of the picture will appear to you as stranger, as she is not you, but me.'

And me, I think, but this is not the time to argue.

Leonardo gestures to his assistants to set my easel before him and Lisa, and she examines me with strained dislike. He glances between us.

'No one has created a painting like my Lisa before. She is Eve and not Eve, and the Virgin but also every woman. Petrarch's Laura and Dante's Beatrice and all Beloved Ladies. But she is also human, with tones of flesh. If you reach out and brush her cheek, you expect it to dimple. She is the lustre of life itself, filled with warmth. She's enveloped in light and shade. She's the legitimate daughter of nature and the kin of a god who speaks and breathes.'

Lisa leans forward closer and closer until her eyelashes almost brush mine, straining to see what Leonardo sees, how he sees me. Each day, I look out at the world through the eyes he gave me, while the world winks back at me. Glimpsed through our eyes, the universe is a marvel.

Lisa doesn't see it. She can't. She stands before me and continues to study me intently, her face troubled. I stare back at her, meeting her eye. Why should I look away? Her lip curls in aversion.

'This won't do at all. I need you to at least pretend a smile, or I can't paint,' complains Leonardo, half-amused.

'Oh, I much prefer her like this,' I object. 'The frown suits her.'

Leonardo does his best to ignore me and concentrate only on the other Lisa.

'Messer Leonardo, I thought you were going to paint me in profile? The pose is insolent ... '

'Not at all. Her gaze is direct. Intimate,' suggests Leonardo. There's a note of pride in his voice.

I may be a woman but when you stare at me, I dare to stare back, resolute. I am not like the others who have come before who glance demurely at the floor, or their coyly clasped hands, or to the side. Look at me, and I see you too. All Leonardo's *bottega* know he's painted something revolutionary. That I am a revolutionary. I am a marvel and I will change the world, but only for those who wish to see. Lisa del Giocondo is not one of them.

How can she honestly believe that she and I still have any connection? The paper chain piecing us together snaps.

'What will people think? I am looking right at them. It isn't modest. It isn't virtuous.' Her voice is soft, worried.

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‘It’s an intimate portrait to hang in your villa. No one need see it apart from your husband. I expect he will be so proud, he’ll invite all his friends and acquaintance to view it.’

She gives a tiny smile.

Leonardo pats her arm again. This time she doesn’t flinch. ‘But my Lisa isn’t finished. Look, her hands, her arms. The dress. All are only traced from the cartoon. I have barely begun the landscape behind her. You needn’t worry. Not yet. Not for a long while.’

Not ever, I think. I am never, ever, going to live in the Giocondo villa. My place is here with Leonardo. I am not worried either. What Leonardo says is true. It takes him a very long time to finish anything. If he finishes them at all. I am not sure that I want to be finished and taken away from him.

Leonardo is angry with me.

‘Why can’t you be kinder to Lisa?’ he chides. ‘You tease her whenever she sits for us.’

‘What does it matter when she can’t even hear?’ I object. ‘Only the greatest artists can hear my *voce*. Those with true *ingegno*. Lisa is ordinary. Dull.’

Only the master himself hears my voice. At first I did not know this and unwittingly I would call out to the *garzoni* in the studio, tell a joke to Tommaso, or shout an insult to Salaì. I believed Salaì ignored me, and it took a little time for me to understand he could not hear. It was both a release from the pretence of courtesy and a disappointment. I was at liberty to be as rude as I wished, but every insult fell as if upon the wind. Leonardo and I wondered if ours was a unique bond formed between

creator and his creation. But then one day Raphael de Santi, the painter from Urbino, came to visit the studio. I remarked to Leonardo how young Raphael was, how brilliant his drawing, and, unthinkingly, he bowed to me, and murmured his thanks.

It appeared that Raphael could hear me too. That night, Leonardo and I decided that it seemed artists of true vision and genius, blessed with *ingegno*, can hear my voice. For now, it is a source of pride that only the most brilliant can hear me speak. Leonardo himself, Raphael. I wonder if there will be others. I do not care. As long as I have Leonardo, I shall never be lonely.

Leonardo grunts, still displeased with my manners towards Madonna Lisa. He is never unkind, and he is always patient with those more stupid than himself, which is all of us.

‘You might be cleverer than Lisa, but your smile lacks the sweetness of hers. As does your temper.’

‘She is made entirely of cold and phlegm. Like a frog.’

Leonardo sets down his brush. Tonight, his work is not going well, and I am not helping. He is drawing and re-drawing my hands in charcoal. The primed white lead of my panel is full of his *pentimenti*, or regrets, where he has rubbed away the *spolveri* dots and keeps adjusting the angle of my fingers again and again. If we don’t make peace, I might end up with no hands at all. I know I ought to plead forgiveness but it sticks in my throat. I want him to devote himself to nothing except me, but he is distracted and interested in many things. His sketches and designs are scattered across the studio. Salaì saunters past and Leonardo catches his hand and places a kiss upon the tender flesh of his wrist and I’m needled by jealousy, both

that he has hands and that the master wishes to kiss them. But not even Salai can placate him, and he scrubs out my fingers again, leaving only smudged stubs.

Perhaps there is prescience in his wretchedness tonight, as the door to the studio catches in the wind, a January squall, and in puffs Niccolò Machiavelli, master of misfortune wearing the pretence of friendship. We owe our present studio, lodgings and a new commission for a vast mural of the Battle of Anghiari in the council chamber all to Machiavelli. We are all in debt to him. I warn Leonardo again and again to be careful of Machiavelli's barbed benevolence. His preferred currency is neither gold ducats nor florins but favours, and he takes great pleasure in demanding their repayment. I study the black hair slicked wetly to Machiavelli's white skin, and his skull-tight smirk. Payment is due.

'Leonardo! My great friend.'

Leonardo rises from his easel and embraces him with genuine pleasure, paying no heed to my concerns. He's glad of a distraction and Machiavelli amuses him. He is clever and witty. His mind marvellous. That it relishes in dark delights, doesn't trouble him. Every aspect of life's shades fascinates Leonardo.

Machiavelli manoeuvred the Florentine Council into commissioning Leonardo, and also allowing him both studio and living quarters in the refectory at Santa Maria Novella. The Sala del Papa was built for the comfort and pleasure of visiting popes and it is suitably magnificent on the outside, with brilliant white-and-dark green-striped inlaid marble, a harmony of geometric shapes that gleams bone bright. Yet inside it is dilapidated and dingy and parts of the outer room are in poor repair. Perhaps it's

the luminous frescoes of the former Florentine rulers, the exiled Medicis, that makes the council reluctant to fix the roof as Leonardo requested and now the rain thrums in various buckets and pools on the herringbone brick floor. The rosy faces of the Medici boys stare dolefully from the walls amongst blooming rosettes of damp, the ghosts of Leonardo's youth. Several windows leak; rivulets stain the yellow walls like tears.

Machiavelli sees me set upon my easel, and Leonardo's pigment-stained fingers, and scowls.

'You're messing around with Francesco del Giocondo's wife,' he tuts.

'The boys are working on the commission,' says Leonardo, ignoring the innuendo.

This is mostly true. But the council are paying for the master himself. Machiavelli looks around, observing the skins of preparing vellum and bubbling vats of gum arabic, as well as the laughter from the retinue of assistants and apprentices spilling over from the large room next door. Pine logs crackle and sputter in the grate. A bowl of fat figs rests on a low table beside a large pecorino and a haunch of ham, glistening with glossy white fat. It looks posed and set up for a still life for the apprentices.

'You spoil those boys,' complains Machiavelli.

'Only sometimes,' I object. 'In between the charm, he's furious at their incompetence and untidiness.'

Machiavelli ignores me. Everyone does except Leonardo.

'I take pleasure in their joy,' says Leonardo. He has no time for Machiavelli's smug parsimony. 'The painter is a gentleman. He wears well-cut clothes of fine fabric. He eats good food. Only then can he try to paint beauty and capture the human soul.'

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Machiavelli raises an eyebrow but voices no further objections. 'In that case, is there anything else you need?' he asks, solicitous as an innkeeper angling for a handsome tip.

'Salaì? What's on the list?' calls Leonardo.

Salaì dances noiselessly over to them, placing down two goblets and pouring wine. 'Towels, napkins, candlesticks, a feather mattress, a soup-ladle, lamp stands, inkwell, ink.'

'You can't get these things yourself?' asks Machiavelli, dubious. 'The advance I negotiated for you ought to be sufficient for ink and napkins.'

Leonardo shrugs. 'You offered. And I suspect this visit is going to cost me in the end. What is it that you want? You didn't come here to do my shopping.'

Machiavelli grins his crocodile smile. 'I need your assistance and expertise. I'm going to divert the Arno. Take it away from Pisa and deprive the city of their route to the sea. Everyone says it's impossible.'

'And you know I like impossible things. You're trying to tempt me.'

'Of course. I wouldn't lie to you, Leonardo.'

Now it is Leonardo's turn to laugh, but it's no good. I can see he is smitten. Diverting the Arno is an engineering scheme on the scale of the gods. I sigh. Machiavelli understands how difficult Leonardo finds it to finish a painting, especially one as monumental as this great mural. But Niccolò Machiavelli can also hear the steady drum of war, and he's sniffed a route to victory against Pisa, and he does not really care about painting or Leonardo except when it can help him realise his own endless ambition. I study Leonardo. There's a frenzy of excitement about him.

‘Do you have accurate maps? What is the soil type?’ he asks.

Machiavelli produces a folded-up document from his satchel. ‘They are not as good as anything you could draw. You must come and see it for yourself. Make new maps.

‘Imagine it, my friend. Florence with a canal! A triumphant city with a route to the city. At last we would be a republic to rival Venice or Rome herself. Create the designs, and I swear to you that I will see to it that they are followed.’

Leonardo regards him with longing. He wants to believe him. He has submitted tender after tender to the grand dukes – architectural designs for duomos, or designs for machinery of war – but while his ideas amuse and are admired, he has never had anything commissioned on this vast scale. Ambition and desire flare within him. I can see it. He glows like Icarus, catching in the orb of the sun.

‘We will be the creators of the new Florentine Republic,’ declares Machiavelli.

The politics of the scheme mean nothing to Leonardo. It’s the engineering wonder, the possibilities of altering the face of the earth. He is lost to this new scheme.

‘Leonardo! Negotiate your terms,’ I chide.

He nods, and glances at Machiavelli. ‘I shall submit a bill for my expenses. My drawings and my travel.’

Machiavelli grunts. ‘Of course. I take it the advance for the painting commission has gone?’

Leonardo doesn’t answer.

Machiavelli stands and gapes at me. ‘I don’t like the way she looks at me. It’s the way her face is just there against the background. She needs some clothes. And hands. When are you going to finish her?’

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‘Never,’ says Salai, appearing again to clear the glasses. ‘Because then he’ll be obliged to hand her over to Francesco del Giocondo.’

Salai does not like me. Until I appeared, he had no rival for Leonardo’s affection. He might not be able to hear my barbs and insults, but he senses that I am no ordinary painting. I unsettle him.

Machiavelli scrutinises me again. ‘She’s uncanny. She might just be a face. But something about her is so lifelike.’

He turns his back on me. He has no manners.

‘Oh, and here is the formal contract for the mural,’ adds Machiavelli. ‘I’ve negotiated excellent terms. A monthly stipend of fifteen florins. They’ll cover all the costs of materials, of course.’

He pushes over a piece of paper and Leonardo signs without reading.

‘It’s to be completed by next February, no exception or excuse accepted. That’s not a problem?’ says Machiavelli, sly, pricking at Leonardo’s vanity.

Leonardo waves away his concern. He always begins each work with great optimism. It slowly leaks away over time like wine from a cracked flagon.

Salai laughs, incredulous, and shakes his head. For once I agree with him.

The studio without him is a summer’s day without sunshine. We are all irritable and indolent; we lack any purpose. Leonardo has left Salai in charge, but the other assistants resist his command and squabble. Leonardo has taken on a new pupil, a slender boy of about thirteen. The rumour is we owe his father money. According to the

gossip of the *bottega*, his father is a Lombardy nobleman but, despite the debt, still agrees to pay Leonardo five lire a month for his son. Salaì enters the sum in the accounts book. The boy has elegant clothes; his tunic is lambswool dyed a brilliant red and in the chill of the evening he produces a dapper cloak of grey velvet that even Leonardo would wear, the folds catching in the firelight. Salaì bullies him endlessly. The night after Leonardo leaves, Francesco Melzi no longer wears the cloak, but Salaì preens in it beside the hearth. Francesco sits silent, feigning indifference, hot shameful tears unshed. He understands his place in the *bottega* hierarchy. Alicia our maid, helped by two other serving women, comes in to clean and provide meals but is disgusted by the disorder and mutters in discontent, and shows her aversion by banging dishes and sweeping with more vigour than necessary. The piles of discarded plates. The rotting fruit.

Salaì immediately covers over the windows with thick, rough paper as instructed – the light must be even and cool. More workmen and carpenters arrive, bringing five *braccia* length of elm wood ready to build a platform and a ladder and all the various devices in Leonardo's plans so he can reach the high places along the wall where the paper for the vast preparatory cartoon for the council chamber is to be secured. The studio is rapidly becoming a building site. Salaì struts and yells, self-important as a rooster. Two of the serving women leave in tears. Leonardo would never allow this. The maestro rules not through threats but charm and tenderness. We all long to please him. A huge ream of paper arrives for the cartoon. Salaì orders the boys to begin gluing it together. The constant smell of rancid and boiling rabbit skin bubbling in the

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cauldron on the fire for the glue is revolting. Francesco is burned when Salaì drips glue on his wrist. I'm not certain it's an accident. Alicia vomits from the perpetual stench. I long to complain to Salaì, and launch a volley of curses that he cannot hear, and almost as if he senses my disapproval, he lifts me off my three-legged easel and lugs me into Leonardo's bedchamber. I object vociferously. He justifies moving me to an absent Leonardo.

'It's for her own good. The heat, steam and fat from the glue will spoil her paintwork.'

He places me assiduously on the linen covers, although I sense that he'd prefer to hurl me down. He peers at me for a moment.

'It will be good to have a few days without your supercilious look. As if you always know best. Sanctimonious hag.' He breathes the insult under his breath as he walks out banging the door.

I am alone and furious. I stare at the ceiling. A spider's web is strung across the beams. My anger cools into curiosity. This is the first time I have been inside the master's chamber and I'm thrilled to have such an intimate peek. The room bears the imprint of Leonardo, shaped to fit him like a discarded calfskin glove. The riot of papers and familiar bound notebooks. The smell of rosewater, lavender and turpentine. The cedar chest of clothes. The linen on the bed is smooth and unmarked. The down of the pillows unrumpled, musty from weeks of disuse. Leonardo has the best bed, lavishly carved with wall hangings draped from the beams. The others all sleep on mattresses, or share several to one box bed. Although, Salaì sleeps here more often than not. I picture him wrapped in the master's arms, Leonardo toying with his

curls, the naked line of his back, anointing the lobes of his ears with kisses. I am awash with envy.

Yet while he is away, even Salai does not dare to slumber on his bed, to dream his dreams. Leonardo will not object to me resting my head here on his pillow. It is different between he and I. His affection for me will endure beyond a season, it is a love that transcends flesh and one day I am determined he will prefer me even to Salai.

Several weeks later, when Leonardo arrives back from Pisa exhilarated and exhausted, he doesn't even notice the progress. He barely inspects the sketches. I hear him call out for me at once. I am dizzy with pleasure.

'Where is Lisa? Where is my Lisa?'

He hurls open the bedroom door, lit up with happiness to see me. I smile back.

'Well, what was it like?' I ask.

'Wet. Muddy. But there are possibilities.'

His face is flushed, but beneath the excitement he looks drained and weary, like the white lead is scraped and showing beneath the bright pigment on his cheek. He orders Francesco, who has become our little 'Cecco', to carry me and the easel into the studio. I'm relieved to be back amongst the crowded *bottega* and cannot resist smirking at Salai, who huffs at the sight of me.

'Master, will you not look at the preparatory sketches for the murals?' he pleads.

Leonardo kisses him lightly upon his lips and ruffles the gold of his hair, but then dismisses him with a wave. I preen.

'A glass of wine. Some cheese. And, Cecco, are the colours ground and ready? Black, umber and a little lake.

I, Mona Lisa

Bring me the measuring spoons. No. This is for my Lisa. I'm not using tempera to bind. I'm using oil. Hasn't Salaì been teaching you properly?' He grumbles, journey-worn and yet eager to paint me.

'Leave the boy alone. He's taken good care of me. Unlike Salaì,' I complain, as Cecco races back with the brushes.

Leonardo ignores my snipes about his favourite. I regard the studio with interest. The builders have finished construction of Leonardo's scaffolding and it teeters around the edges of the room with hanging platforms and pulleys and hoists resembling great siege mechanisms. Leonardo, however, for once pays no attention. He stares only at me. He plucks at his brush and begins to mix paint, blending carefully.

'I studied the blood flow of the Arno, but I was also thinking of you, *mia amata* Lisa.'

He has not called me by such an endearment before, and I'm touched. I recognise that something has shifted between us during his absence. He has missed me, and in his mind he's been thinking of me, holding my face in his mind, and so for now at least, he wants to devote himself only to me. All other routes and distractions lead him back to me, show him how to finish me.

He stands for a moment and, reaching into his satchel, pulls out a hand-painted map and unfurls it, holding it aloft so I can see. The tributaries of the rivers splice apart and sluice across the paper in blue and brown, curling and rippling in a vigorous frenzy of ink. Leonardo taps the page with a long finger, but he scrutinises me.

'The *vene d'acqua* of the earth is like the blood flow of a woman. The life cycle of a woman is short while the earth is eternal, but still they reflect one another. As a

man, or indeed a woman has bones inside her, the supports and armature of flesh, so the world has the rocks, foundations of the earth. As a woman has in her a lake of blood, where the lungs rise and fall in breathing, so the body of the earth has its ocean sea, which rises and falls every six hours as if the world breathed.' He looks at me and smiles. 'We must give you breath and a pulse. Or make it seem very nearly so.'

He thrusts the map at Cecco and reaches instead for a measuring spoon and, like an alchemist, adds a pinch of lake and a smear of oil and mixes it with a blunt palette knife on the board.

'But even that isn't enough.' He frowns, reaching for something else beyond my understanding. 'You, my Lisa, are different from other women. You are the Universal Woman. Eternal like the earth. I'm painting every woman and the earth herself at once, glimpsed, I think, over your shoulder. Woman and the earth itself and the very forces that give her life.'

I tingle with possibilities. It is like that with Leonardo. He sees the correlation between all things, and as long as I am in his presence, I sense them too. When he leaves the room, the light of understanding extinguishes.

He reaches out with his brush and begins very slowly to smooth more layers around what will become the waves of my hair. He murmurs as he works, half to himself.

'The curls of your hair move like the waters of the Arno.'

He tickles along my hairline, where it touches the sky. 'Fetch a mirror!' he calls. 'She wants to watch.'

It's true. I do. Who else is privileged to witness their own creation and, even more, to remember it?

I, Mona Lisa

I stare back at myself in the glass as Cecco props it up before me, on a waiting easel. We smile shyly at one another. Two Madonna Lisas. It is too easy to call us beautiful. Our eyes are hooded and knowing, our hair is smudged charcoal *spolveri*, the edges of our gowns edged in chalk over the layers of gesso and waiting to be painted. Leonardo confides softly as he works.

‘You will wear a veil. Dark and needle fine. Translucent and the boundary barely visible against the tinge of blueish sky. In nature the air has darkness behind it and appears blue,’ says Leonardo.

I gaze back at him, only half-understanding. He sees the connection between all things. Nature, painting. Life and death. Shade and light.

He tells me with pride that I began for him as an experiment. Vexed by what he insists upon calling the unfortunate and sorry paintings of Sandro Botticelli, he determined to create me. I reveal what is possible in the science of painting and *prospettiva*. But that’s not good enough for me. I don’t want to remain as an experiment. I want to be more than an *invenzione*, however astonishing. He confided to Lisa del Giocondo that I am Petrarch’s Laura and Dante’s Beatrice. Yet if I am a beloved lady, then I must be loved. And I want to be loved by Leonardo.

Salai abandons waiting for him to comment on the mural sketches and disappears to bed, muttering and disgruntled. I notice him filch a bottle of the good wine to take with him, the reserve vintage kept for guests. For once, I choose to say nothing. Still, he glowers at me with loathing. Tonight his bed will be cold and empty. Tonight Leonardo belongs only to me.

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Salaì's temper does not improve. Over the next few days, Leonardo pays scant attention to the preparatory drawings for the mural. It is to depict the wild triumph at the Battle of Anghiari, the skirmish of screaming horses, warriors and billowing flags. Before he left for Pisa, Leonardo had completed dozens of sketches of horses and howling warriors, and schooled the assistants as they attempted similar studies, but now he has lost all interest. He desires only to paint me. He sends back to the apothecary all the paint for the mural. At that, even I protest. The mural must be finished. We need to be paid and we need somewhere to live.

'I'm experimenting with a new recipe of oils and pigments. I don't want to paint *Anghiari* in tempera or in fresco,' answers Leonardo.

At this Salaì loses his temper. 'Maestro! You don't think it might be helpful to confide your plans to me rather than to a ... than to her! I'm trying to run your *bottega*.'

Leonardo fixes him with a look of measured disdain. 'She listens and doesn't argue.'

Actually, this isn't true at all, but it infuriates Salaì deliciously. To my disappointment, the row is cut short by the arrival of Lisa del Giocondo. Today Lisa is pale, and more fretful even than usual. She sits in the upholstered chair beside the fire and fusses, unable to be still. Leonardo places her carefully in the requisite pose, leaning her left arm upon the armrest and laying the other on top, to signal our virtue. Her slim fingers toy with the velvet of her sleeve. Leonardo presses his hands upon her shoulders, twisting her, angling her right shoulder further back, and her face turns out directly towards him,

I, Mona Lisa

frowning. He takes out his brushes and tries to work but it's no good. She fidgets and sighs, impatient.

Leonardo offers her a glass of Vin Santo, the fire to be stoked up or raked out. No, no, she wants nothing. Yet still she cannot settle. She is peevish and unhappy. Even so, I recognise she is lovely, and I appreciate now, having glimpsed myself in Cecco's mirror, that it's true, she's more beautiful than I. Nevertheless, Leonardo is not interested in reproducing a simple copy of female charms.

However, I have no sympathy for her wretchedness. All work in the *bottega* has halted for Lisa, for this, and here she sits sighing and crossing and uncrossing her feet in her fancy embroidered slippers. I agree with Salai – I cannot bear this woman bringing her tedious troubles to our studio. Her fretful children, the duplicity of her servants. We have been forced to listen whilst she has whined about them all. Nothing pleases her. Yet Leonardo displays no such exasperation. He sets down his brush and leans forward, his countenance grave.

'What's troubling you, Madonna del Giocondo? We are friends, I hope,' he says. 'Have the servants been stealing buttons again?'

'No ...'

Tears, round and fat as Medici diamonds, somersault down her cheeks. I have never seen her cry before. I have only observed the livid sobs of the maids. These clear, wobbling tears, and her rasping, catching breath, is new. I am fascinated.

'Please,' she murmurs. 'They must go.'

Leonardo dismisses the assistants with a gesture.

He asks no questions, only waits. His expression is kind, brimful with concern.

‘Come, Lisa. What is the matter?’ I ask.

Leonardo pours her a glass of wine, presses it into her hand and wipes her tears with a square of silk.

‘My sister,’ she says at last. ‘She was denounced in a *tamburazioni*.’

Leonardo takes her hand and murmurs in sympathy. ‘What did it say?’

She swallows and mutters, unable to look at him. ‘The accuser says that four men went to the convent of San Domenico in the middle of the night where two nuns were waiting for them and stayed there three or four hours ... and you must imagine the rest. It’s rank with sin.’

‘And your sister is one of these nuns?’

‘Sister Camilla Gherardini. There is to be a trial.’

She begins to sob again.

‘Florence is full of convents and full of bawdy men longing to tell lascivious stories. It doesn’t mean that it’s true.’

She shakes her head. ‘The allegation in the *tamburazioni* is full of details about the ... the indecencies.’

Leonardo shrugs. ‘So the anonymous wretch who dreamed up the denunciation has a lewd imagination. He scribbled down the filth in his mind and then popped it in the drum.’ He sighs and pats her hand. ‘Madonna Lisa, simply because someone writes it or speaks it, doesn’t make it true. I am sure your sister will be found not guilty.’

She gazes at him with gratitude that is close to adoration. There is the sound of a scuffle from behind a door, and it is clear from my vantage that Salaì and the other assistants are prying. Leonardo is outraged, but he can’t betray his fury without revealing to Lisa that the assistants have been listening and know her humiliation.

I, Mona Lisa

‘A rat. They have caught the rat that has been raiding my larder. Don’t kill it now, boys,’ he calls, his voice hard. ‘I want to make it suffer later. I don’t like sneaking vermin.’

Lisa shudders at the thought of the rat. Silence falls from outside the door.

After she has gone, Leonardo calls them all into the studio. They file in shamefaced and stand before him. He is angrier than I’ve ever seen him. The assistants are lined up together, quaking like captured enemy soldiers. Tommaso, handsome and with his tomato-red hair. Pimpled Giovanni, surprisingly plain for Leonardo’s studio. The master prefers to surround himself with beauty, but beauty falls from Giovanni’s brush. Ferrando, who until little Cecco’s arrival didn’t do much else but grind colours.

‘Boys, you have disgraced me. And you,’ he says, turning to Salaì, ‘you are the one who knows how I too was denounced. I was barely older than you and accused in an anonymous *tamburazioni*. Charged with sodomy. Arrested. Placed in a prison cell. I was fortunate that the charge was not upheld.’

I stare at him, frightened, and wondering how he managed to get away with it. I have little doubt he was guilty.

He admonishes us, furious and defiant. We are all ashamed. We have taken vicious delight in the salacious. None of us loves Lisa, but now we are all envisioning a young Leonardo terrified and suffering in a foul jail cell and someone else enjoying his mortification.

‘Where is your compassion?’ he says, his voice soft with fury. ‘And you, my Lisa, need to learn more humanity.’

I stare back at him, stung. I long to cry. I wish that I could have plump tears tumble down my cheeks like Lisa del Giocondo.