

To *Gustavo*, my violin.

ACRYLIC MELODY

It was July and I was in Bergamo to visit a factory where energy saving systems had been installed. Maybe I could sell them in Spain. The crisis had left real estate developers on the wayside, and I had to get my beans out of another sector because real estate was kaput.

When I finished the visit and the dinner with Paolo, the manager, I decided to leave the city even if it was late. I would sleep in Cremona. I wanted to take advantage of the trip, do some sightseeing and visit the capital of the best violins. I had planned it and had taken my violin to find some luthier to check it. I arrived between 3 or 4 AM at a so called "Hotel Impero":

- Would you have any available room please? I said to the receptionist.
- Yes, but I cannot offer it now. I am sorry. He answered.
- Why? Excuse me but I just saw on the internet that there was an available room and it is very late. I have been travelling and I just need any room with a bed, no matter which one. I insisted.
- All right, but you must leave it before 9 AM. He said with a nasty face.
- So early? Why? I claimed.
- I'm sorry, these are the rules. And he stayed quiet, willing me to leave.

Surprised, I did the check-in, set the alarm clock at 8:30 AM and fell sleep like a log.

The following day, obedient, I was having breakfast at 9 AM when a very polite elderly gentleman came to me and said:

- Dear lady, I have come to apologize to you. I am the owner of the hotel. Yesterday you were not treated properly and I would like to be at your disposal to help you in anything you need.

I thanked him and I deduced that the receptionist had confused me with a whore so late at night. "He wanted to kick me out very early and I only slept five hours because of him," I thought. No point beating around the bush -I thought- and I jumped at the chance:

- Thank you very much. In fact you might help me. I need to find an affordable luthier. I know this city has the best ones, but I do not have a *Stradivarius*.. do you know anyone?
- Excellent. Of course I do. This hotel has hosted the greatest artists of classical music for decades. I know one of the best, my friend Leonidas Rafaelian. I'll take you personally. Come with me. The owner said.

And there we went, in his glamorous garnet and white *Citroën Deux-chevaux*, so bright, from the fifties, I calculated, arranged in full luxury. We arrived at a historic building, with a square courtyard

of precious stone-made arcades and a fountain in the middle, filled with fuchsia bougainvilleas. There was a tiny door with a label "*Luthier Leonidas Rafaelian*". Two minutes later, a small white-hair old man with bright blue eyes opened the door and greeted his friend effusively:

- Leo, I am bringing you a friend who needs you to check her violin.
- All right, come in, come in.

Entering the first room there were some chairs arranged in a circle, violins in showcases and a cello. In the other room, a work table full of tools, many pieces of unglazed wood hung on the walls, patterns of pieces for instruments, made of paper and photos of famous violinists everywhere with that little genius of masterpieces. I could not believe where I had come, thanks to that stupid receptionist. It was unbelievable; Leonidas had pictures with the best conductors. "What a cave of Alibabá behind that door" I thought.

- Look Virginia, I made this cello for Rostropovich. And this violin for Venguerov. I make copies of *Stradivarius* and *Guarnieri* violins; Look, look closely at the varnish I gave to his cello. Rostropovich played it in a concert in Vienna and, since then, all the orchestras ask me for violins, also the Spanish one! Leo explained.

I could not believe it. "This elder artist makes jewels and he is hidden in just ten square meters" -I thought-. Until he brought me out of the cloud-cuckoo-land and he asked me for my violin. I pulled it out of its case carefully, and when he took it, he looked at it and in three seconds he shouted:

- *¡Questo violino é una merda!* (This violin sucks!)

Horror. I wanted to hide in a hole. "Sure, the salesman from Madrid was a scoundrel and he pulled the wool over my eyes." -I thought- but I did not have any time to respond:

- I do not work with these violins. He continued.

I was ready to leave, but I suddenly heard:

- Well, since you're with Paolo, I'll make an exception. I'll check it and give it a coat of varnish. Come, come out to the patio, he said.
- Play. He said.

"No way. This crazy genius would be frightened if he heard me" I thought.

- Please, you better play it. I said.

He flooded the courtyard with a cheerful melody, between the rays of the sun and the fuchsia shades. It was a beautiful feeling.

- I will also change the soul and the bridge. In three days you may come back for it, he said.

My change of life began there. I could not even imagine the spiral of news that would come later.

- How much will you charge me, please? I said.
- Two hundred euros. Normally it's more, but I'll make a friend deal. He explained.

"What a character! And I have no job, nor expectations of selling Paolo machines and here I am, dropping banknotes on something that is not necessary. Anyway.." I thought.

In four days I showed up at his door and he was hysterical. I arrived a day late because I decided to enjoy Florence, but the genius had thought that after doing his job, I would not come back. When he calmed down, he explained me that it was his birthday and invited me for lunch. Coincidentally it was my father's, too, about his age, and we talked no holds barred. I even showed him my first paintings in a little computer from my real estate yuppie-times. The crazy elder man turned out to be very charming.

- Virginia, I am preparing a memorial for the anniversary of the death of my dear friend, the great cellist Rostropovich, with the town hall of Cremona. We have commissioned a statue from a Ukrainian artist for the city. We will have a great reception, conferences, concerts and more. Would you like to collaborate? I would like you to paint a great portrait. By the way, did you know that the Queen of Spain and he were in love? He said
- Hahaha, the queen being in love with him? You do say some silly things! Although now that I think about it, she did not miss any of his concerts and she adored him.. that's true, I said.
- It has to be ready in five months, do feel like doing it? He said.

I did not even think about it. No energy-saving machines, no show-off builders, I thought. Suddenly the crisis was wonderful. I got down to work as soon as I got home. I studied his life, listened to his concerts over and over on DVDs, soaking up every single note and every subtle movement of his fingers; his talks, his expression, his friends. I discovered that he welcomed the writer Solzhenitsyn home when he was thrown out of Russia and I rushed to my brushes. I did three large-format works: his portrait, bought the Rostropovich Foundation; another work with Solzhenitsyn, and a composition of his face and Queen Sofia in tune, with music between them.

Suddenly, without having anything to do with it, I was making a living from painting. To my surprise, he included me in the memorial book, which he sent to all the orchestras he knew and even to the Spanish Royal House. I still have trouble believing it myself. I have to go back to Hotel Impero to tell everything to the receptionist, in case that he is still there, and I doubt that.

