How old could Albina Albini (was that really her name?) possibly be? 32? 35? Perhaps more.

Of course, she looked much younger. So she continued to be, as she had long been, the most sought-after actress by the major film production houses. Her beauty was resistant to celluloid, which normally shows up the early stages of feminine decay without mercy. Albina's face was more than beautiful: it was expressive, well-sculpted, with a brow, a chin, a profile whose beauties were accentuated in even the starkest chiaroscuro. And her slim figure looked equally graceful wearing an Empress's robe or a courtesan's cloak, an Amazon's riding outfit or a convent-girl's smock. For Albina was extremely intelligent, and she brought to the aesthetics and gestural vocabulary of the silent arts a certain spirit and good taste that were the envy of many a theatrical actress.

Why, then, had she not made a career on the stage?

Hearing her speak, one understood immediately. What a voice!

It was an ugly voice, ugly and masculine; and to hear her express the most graceful sentiments with that voice, hoarse as that of a dying man or an alcoholic, was painful indeed.

In the first days of their acquaintance, Tito Verri had insisted, very naively, that Albina cure her aphonia, to which she had replied—in the open theatre—that there was no escape. Then, irritated, she had also specified out loud, with a single word, the cause of her incurable ailment. She hadn't even blushed! But the young painter, a novice in that environment, had blushed instead. And the extras, the cameramen, the stage managers, the technicians, all had laughed hysterically at the little episode.

‘She's so original!'

And Tito Verri had felt attracted to that tremendous scepticism. A few days later, he became Albina's lover, hardly a rare occurrence and barely worth mentioning; but he also became her friend, a far more delicate affair. He was that friend that you don't choose, but are drawn to; that friend that Fate predestines you to have, perhaps even before birth, and presents to you in your darkest hour as a comfort. A strange affinity between certain feelings and events attracted them to one another. They had confided their lives to one another, keeping no secrets, flaunting the most brutal honesty imaginable with an almost bitter delight. For Albina's fate had traced quite a different arc to her peers.
She had once been a genuine noblewoman; she hailed from the rural nobility, her family aristocratic and extremely rich. Orphaned at too young an age, the little girl, under guardianship, had wandered from governess to governess, growing up with strange passions; from the mysticism of her early adolescence, she had graduated to an lauded predilection for reading and art, then to a marked passion for the theatre. She had left school at eighteen to make her debut, a mere extra in a first-rate company; then she had moved on to third-rate companies in order to be the star. Then, with the naive and undisciplined impatience of a beginner, she had wanted to start up a company of her own, asking her horrified guardians for more and more money. She had little luck. The money flowed, but success was not forthcoming. Taking possession of her remaining endowment, she had made the worst mistake of all for an actress: she had married a fellow adventurer who was meant to be her collaborator, working with her towards almost certain success. Instead, it had been her utter ruin, both financial and moral, and the first step towards artistic and romantic vagrancy.

Sensitive souls have no strength in their moment of ruination; they fall, horrified and resigned, far faster than those who grow up in vice, who are inured by their surroundings. The cinema had saved Albina Albini, at least in part, from mercenary gallantry.

Tito Verri had also passed through a luminous phase of artistic illusion in the grey arc of his youth. Little more than 20 years old at the time, he had made a name for himself in Monaco, in Venice. Then certain events, pathological self-criticism, and innate pessimism had paralysed the young man; to artistic drought had been added material need, and many long years had passed, sacrificed to illustration, to billboards, to every possible commercial squandering of inspiration. Now the cinema made use of whatever was left of the artist's former talent. His billboards disguised, with a certain pretension to style, the violent plots of these police dramas. No one could imagine a compelling scenario or a complex set, choose appropriate locations, or frame the action against picturesque backdrops of ruins and vegetation better than Verri. They were very well paid, the painter and the actress, but money didn't console them. At the heart of their bitterness there was the same, unacknowledged torment, which brought them close more than anything else: they were frustrated artists.

For no earthly good can make up for permanently thwarted artistic ambition.

They could read this in each other’s eyes, when in glassed-in rehearsal rooms, on stiflingly hot days, in a torrid atmosphere of madness or in the freezing, snowy ruins of a castle Albina had to repeat a scene for the tenth
time, while Verri watched over the cameramen, gave orders, constantly running around. Then they would draw close together and give each other a fleeting, weary smile, whispering to each other with bitter tenderness:
‘Accursed life!’
‘Wretched profession!’
It was their way of saying they loved one another.

A cameraman was speaking to Tito Verri in a loud voice, marking up a script with large strokes of blue pencil.
‘The second and the fifth scenes are missing, and the close-up in the eleventh, and the last three shots of the second part. Yet Fior di chiostro (Flower of the Cloister) has to be in post-production by next month.’
‘The director said to shoot the scene in the courtyard.’
‘The director is crazy. You need real brick, real steel, real trees. They cost less and they look better. What to do? My dear Verri, you know perfectly well that you’re the one who’s supposed to think of these things!’

Albina Albini, who had been tormenting a captive lioness with her umbrella, stepped into the conversation; taking the script out of the set designer’s hand, she perused it for a second.
‘A seventeenth-century monastery? Authentic? Rough brickwork, mossy balustrades, a large stained-glass window facing unkempt gardens, boxwood hedges, ivy-strewn tabernacle… I know where to find all of this.’

The director listened attentively: everyone knew of Albina’s intelligence and good taste.
‘With favourable light? Suitable for our purposes?’
‘I guarantee it.’
‘Then we should head there immediately. Is it far?’
‘In Varellio Pellice. Two hours by car. We’ll arrive by midday. We can get everything done in the afternoon.’

And so an automobile carrying the actress, the painter and the cameramen, and the bandwagon with just a few extras—for the film was a slight, sentimental affair—arrived two hours later in the smiling countryside.

The director got out, armed with Albina’s information, and set out to make inquiries: but half an hour later he returned, desolate, to the hotel.
‘The monastery is there, and it’s magnificent. It’s like it was made for us. But the Mother Superior is inflexible. They must have already been put out by other colleagues of ours.’
‘Did you mention my name?’
‘Yes. She said that she doesn’t remember having met you.’
‘Verri, shall the two of us go? We’ll see what we can do.’
So Albina set off with her friend; they walked through the countryside, following a wide, sloping road flanked by century-old linden trees. They reached a place where the thicket opened out onto a grassy parvis, which dominated the countryside below on one side and was shaded by a high, crumbling embankment on the other, the bricks alive with ferns and earthworms. A circular staircase made of worn, polished marble led up to an immense, panelled walnut door that the painter, like a good connoisseur, caressed voluptuously. They rang the bell. In the wait that followed, all they could hear was the deafening chorus of sparrows in the linden-thickets, and further off, the chirping of youthful voices: and the one and the other combined into a single harmony. They heard an unsteady step, the rattle of keys and coins. Surely, the stifling stench of centuries of darkness must reign beyond the door! But the door opened, and a tremulous light greeted the visitors, filtered through the trellises of a vast courtyard, in the middle of which the sky was like a blue Moorish veil.

‘The Mother Superior?’
‘Here she is.’

An imposing nun of middle age stepped forward with cold politeness.

‘You? You, the Mother Superior? But what about Sister Candida? Has she died?’

‘She’s blind. Do you know her?’

‘Mother, I was here for five years.’

‘When?’

‘Eighteen years ago.’

The nun accompanied them. They passed through colonnades and cloisters, climbed the steps to the gardens that spread out along the hill in wide terraces. The whiteness of the marble alternated with the dull green of the cypresses, the glossy green of the boxwoods. On a bench were sitting three nuns.

‘Here are the three eldest… Sister Candida… it’s a former pupil of yours!’

‘Albina Albini: do you remember me?’

The old woman lifted her wimple off her lifeless eyes, and with her bony hands grasped the beautiful hands held out to her.

‘Albina Albini? Of course! I remember you, even if I can’t see you any more! Albina Albini: the one who used to manage the Carnival celebrations so well.’

‘Just the one! And this is my husband.’

Tito stepped forward with a bow, without irony. The good, old, naive souls believed the necessary lie without hesitation.

‘We’re both artists. I followed my calling. We make cinematic projections. But only legitimate, honest repertoire, subjects drawn from the Bible or from moral literature.’
Tito confirmed:
‘For boarding schools and families. Today, we would appreciate being able to take a few shots of the scenery in the gardens and the convent.’

The old nun assented profusely with a gesture and a smile.
‘You may wander anywhere you please, like in the old days. Show your husband around. We’ll stay here for our afternoon meditation.’

Albina and Tito explored the gardens. The painter was enthusiastic as he considered the scenery, grasping at key motifs and framing shots in his mind’s eye.
‘It’s like it was made for our film. In two hours, we’ll have all the missing episodes…

Move back; come closer; move forward entirely in profile: you look better against the green backdrop…’

They had been accustomed to this preparatory work for years, which the cameramen would then follow mechanically, like a dictation exercise. They climbed up to the highest point in the gardens, then went back down to the third terrace. From the balustrade they could see the three nuns, still unmoving, and the chattering convent girls swarming around them.
‘It’s the four o’clock recess. How unchanged everything is!’
The woman sat down on the marble, observing the girls from up above, with narrowed eyes.
‘But that’s Rosa Isnardi! And that’s Ida Gaudenzi! And that’s little Gina Vitale, who died on Easter day.’
‘What’s all this nonsense?’
‘Nothing. I was just noticing how the same types of women appear again and again, as time goes by…’ Albina murmured in her gloomiest voice. ‘This is a nursery, incubating souls that will produce brides and mothers and actresses and loose women… and all of this without ever ceasing… life is so peculiar!’
‘Are you feeling sad?’
The woman turned towards her friend with her bitterest smile:
‘Sad? I’d like to feel that way, but I just can’t anymore. Sadness, my dear, is a luxury reserved for only the happiest among us.’
‘Let’s head down. Now that we’ve got the go ahead and everything is ready, we need to tell the others and get started…’
‘Accursed profession!’
‘Wretched life!’

So they set off towards the final terrace, through the crowd of merry children, who fell silent in astonishment at the sight of that worldly apparition.
On the bench, the three decrepit nuns, sitting equidistant from one another, were moving their rosaries mechanically through their bony fingers: but it was as though they were holding spindle, shears, thread.


Note

1. [Translator’s note. This is the title as published in the text of the story. In the index of the volume, it was curiously entitled the ‘Il riflesso delle idee’ (‘The Ideas’ Reflection’).]