

### 8.3

Calandr  was a woman. In actual fact, she had always been one. But to the outside world she had been a man too – against her will and enduringly. For years – indeed ever since she had been a speaking thing – a bitter battle between the inner woman and the outer man had raged all-consumingly. There had been points at which the man had all but won, yet the woman inside lived on – obstinately, vehemently, radically – a tiny homunculus of woman crying to be let out beneath an alien skin. As the years went by the woman became more difficult to suppress, and the faade of man crumbled with increasing urgency.

Now, however, at precisely nine o’ clock on a crisp December morning, the warring factions of body and mind were unexpectedly and instantaneously reconciled, and she really was a woman, *une femme par excellence* in fact. Her hair glistened gold like impressionist fields; her skin had lost its coarseness and was smooth like silk, and her voice was a clear soprano that bounced on the air like a dragonfly on water.

This metamorphosis had not been wrought the ordinary way, nor did Calandr  find herself in an ordinary situation that frosty December morning. This was a transformation without pill, needle, or scalpel; in fact, it was wholly miraculous.

To return to the particular moment of the occurrence – 9am on the first of December, two-thousand-and-twenty – this was a day Calandr  had awaited with anticipation, although on entirely different grounds. It was the grand opening of a National Gallery exhibition that she herself had curated – showcasing one of the most significant art-historical exhumations of the modern age. For the first time, Botticelli’s complete illustrations to Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, unearthed only months earlier, would be put on public display. These paintings were to be situated alongside his famous depiction of *Nastagio degli Onesti*, long thought to be his only artistic flirtation with Boccaccio’s masterwork. The exhibition would cement the artist’s reputation as one of the great readers of *trecento* literature of the Italian Renaissance, and its success would, at least in part, be down to Calandr .

Despite having been afflicted by dysphoria that gnawed on her insides for over a decade, Calandr  found herself feeling perturbed at the inconvenient timing of her transition. What she had long envisioned as the two most significant moments of her life and career had mysteriously converged, and she was unsure whether her thoughts should lie with the queue of visitors which was undoubtedly beginning to form in Trafalgar Square, or with her wondrous rebirth. Moreover, she had no idea where she was, and her mobile phone had disappeared without trace.

What particularly puzzled Calandr  was the clamminess of the air. The clime in which she found herself was alien to the winter weather to which she had become accustomed. She was standing in a verdant garden, amidst specimens of flora and fauna that were wildly incongruous with the season. The air was filled with the scent of nectar, and above her head a nightingale swooped with whimsy. Everything in her line of sight was a veritable treat. Bewildered but charmed, she lifted her knee to take a step forward, but found that this was impossible – almost as if she were pushing against glass.

“Only two dimensions here, love,” said a voice, suddenly. Calandr  jumped with a start to find out she wasn’t alone. There were, in fact, nine others in the immediate vicinity, who had clearly

been observing her for a while. She felt it was something of an outrage to be watched by so many others whom she had failed to notice, and she glared at them in consternation.

“We thought you were Dioneo come back,” said another, “He left yesterday afternoon to go pick apples with some Breughel twink in the Northern Renaissance room. No doubt they had a romantic soirée last night. Last time he went he fell into *The Ambassadors* – nearly knocked himself out on an astrolabe...”

“Anyway, we’ve been waiting hours for him to tell his story – he always insists on going last. But I guess you’ll do,” remarked a man brandishing a lute. And he gestured towards Calandré, who by this time had realised the unfortunate truth that she was – on the day of the premiere of her own exhibition – in fact trapped inside its flagship painting, which depicted Boccaccio’s *brigata* at the height of their revelry. As she looked into the distance, she could see the glass-distorted image of a huddle of tourists entering the room.

Suddenly the potentially disastrous implications of her circumstances were revealed to her with alarming clarity. The presence of eight women and two men, rather than the seven women and three men in Boccaccio’s original *brigata*, would cast a huge shadow on the painting’s authenticity, and could cost the exhibition its reputation. It was just her luck that her first act as a *bona fide* woman would have to be – in the name of artistic verisimilitude – to disguise herself as a man from the fourteenth century.

She reached down to remove the pendant that was adorning her throat, so that she was at least somewhat less conspicuous. *Magari!* She tried three times – but with no avail. Her hand went straight through it, as if through thin air.

A woman sporting a floral crown noticed her perplexity and made the following remarks: “These aren’t real bodies. Our souls emanate shades that make impressions upon the air, and that’s how you see us as we are.”

So that was how Calandré had become a woman – a female soul had naturally projected a female body. But the irony of it all was that she didn’t actually have a body at all.

“Come on then,” continued the woman, “tell us a story; tell us how you got here.”

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Calandré thought hard about how she had, indeed, got here. The circumstances that had led her to this remarkable juncture could be traced to two significant phone calls.

The first was an anonymous tip-off from a gruff-voiced man whom she had never encountered in her whole life, informing her that among his family’s private collection, which had lain untouched in a basement for centuries, he had discovered a set of drawings and paintings which he had ‘strong reason to believe were by Sandro Botticelli’. He was also in conversation with the *Uffizi*, Florence, who – he assured her – had certified the artworks’ authenticity and offered him a competitive price for them. However, the collection was hers (as a representative of the National Gallery of course) for free, on the condition that Calandré herself should curate the exhibition. She was to send an envoy from the National Gallery to collect the drawings from a secret location, where they would be transported in a humidity-controlled van to the East Door

of the gallery to begin the delicate process of unloading. When she finally asked him who he was, he hung up without saying goodbye.

Thus Calandr , having completed her PhD in Renaissance Florentine Art just a year earlier, became the first transgender woman to curate an exhibition at the National Gallery. Backlash from the tabloid press was fierce; its response was encapsulated by a front page in the Daily Mail, which showed a doctored image the editor had entitled *The Birth of Venus (with burgeoning stubble)*. And so it transpired that *Botticelli and Boccaccio: Stories from Exile* became one of the most politically charged exhibitions the gallery had seen in a long time.

The second phone call played out thus:

It was 8am on the morning of the premiere. Calandr  was sitting in a bucket chair in her London office, staring wistfully at a framed print of Botticelli's *Primavera* on her mantelpiece. She had just hung up on an exasperating phone call with *Healthy Hildegard*, an alternative medicine start-up that created herbal remedies based on the medical writings of twelfth-century beguine and polymath Hildegard of Bingen. In desperation at lengthy waiting lists for an NHS gender clinic, she had allowed herself to be persuaded by the company's owner – an eminent medievalist but a shoddy businesswoman – to sample their alternative endocrine therapies, namely their flagship HELIOTROPE™, which purportedly contained 'enough oestrogen to grow a womb from scratch'. The stone's unique selling point was that anyone who had this cryptocrystalline quartz mixture about their person would immediately pass as a woman, regardless of whether they had medically transitioned. Calandr  had phoned the office to tell them the stone was useless and to request a refund, and had been placed on hold for twenty minutes, forced to listen to computer-generated Gregorian chant whilst she waited for 'endocrinologist Sandra' to pick up the phone.

Despite the stone's inefficacy, she appreciated its smooth surface and its weightiness as she held it in her hand. She had been clasping it throughout the telephone call and it had grown warm to the touch. The specks of red amidst the carbonic blackness of its sheen glinted in the lamplight, and Calandr  thought to herself what a shame it was that a stone so beautiful was completely without power.

When endocrinologist Sandra finally arrived on the line, she explained that whilst *Healthy Hildegard's* products had all been tried and tested – with positive results – she was unable to guarantee that human hormonal balance in the twenty-first century exactly replicated that in a twelfth-century test-subject, and that must be where the discrepancy lay. Calandr , none the wiser, hung up and lent back in her chair despondently.

She must have fallen asleep, for the next thing she knew she was inside a gilded picture frame, being ogled by hundreds of tourists who probably had no nuanced appreciation of Botticelli's work, and secretly couldn't wait to get to the gift shop to buy a fridge magnet. It must have been nearly nine-thirty by now, at which time Calandr  was due to give a tour to a specially selected group of VIPs, including the arts and culture correspondents from several major broadcasting companies.

She imagined the smug laughter of those who had always thought her ambitions beyond her. She would be made a laughing stock, becoming not only the first transgender woman to curate an exhibition at the National Gallery, but the first woman to run away from her own exhibition on its opening day. People would begin to speculate that she had fled because she wasn't a

woman at all, just another power-hungry man who wanted to take advantage of diversity quotas to get to the top.

She realised that she still had the HELIOTROPE™ in her hand, and it dawned on her that the stone that had caused her miraculous transition was also responsible for her painterly imprisonment, and that she could not have one without the other. The body she had so desperately yearned for was inextricably intertwined with the Botticelli scholarship that was her life's passion. There was an uncanny logic to the fact that, for her, life as a woman was life in painted form.

Calandr  thought about the perks of remaining behind the glass, a free holiday in Tuscany being a particularly tempting one. Yet something in the real world was pulling her back, a force as inexorable as the moon's hold on the ocean. The world inside the frame was one of diminished vitality, in which she felt eerily cut off from her wondrous new form, one in which her nerves seemed to lead to nowhere like tributaries running dry.

And she knew now that she must seize the real with both hands. For the truth of the matter was that Calandr , in spite of material circumstances, *was* a woman, in mind, soul, and body – with or without medieval mineralogy's help. She was a speaking thing, a thinking thing, a loving thing, and crucially – an embodied thing. And that was what made her human, what made her woman.

She hurled the HELIOTROPE™ through the glass as hard as she could, and shut her eyes, and waited...