



*Façon de Venise goblet, 17th century*

In a temperate kingdom, in the midst of a landmass, with great meandering rivers but no seashores, with deciduous forests, and grassy plains, a princess was born on a blue summer day. She was eagerly awaited, although she was the thirteenth child, for the first twelve royal children were all princes, and her mother longed for gentleness and softness, whilst her powerful father longed for delicacy and beauty. She was born after a long labour, which lasted a day and a night, just as the sun began to colour the sky, but before it had warmed the earth. She was born, like most babies, squashed and livid, with a slicked cap of thick black hair. She was slight enough, but perfectly shaped, and when the nurses had washed off her protective waxy crust the blood began to run red and rapid, to the tips of her fine fingers and under the blue of her lips. She had a fine, transparent skin, so the blush of blood was fiery and rosy;

when her hair was washed, it sprang into a soft, black fur. She was pronounced – and was – beautiful. Her exhausted mother, whose own blood began to stir faster again as the child was laid on her breast, said she should be named ‘Fiammarosa’, a name that just came into her head at that moment, as a perfect description. Her father came in and picked her up in her new rosy shawl, holding the tiny creature clasped in his two huge hands, with her little red legs waving, and her composed pink face yawning perfectly above his thumbs. He was, like his father before him, like all the kings of that country, a large, strong, golden-bearded, deep-voiced, smiling man, a good soldier who avoided conflict, a good huntsman who never killed droves of creatures, but enjoyed the difficulty of the chase, the dark of the forests, the rush of the rivers. When he saw his daughter, he fell in love with her vulnerable fragility, as fathers do. No one shall ever hurt you, he said to the little creature, whose wavering hand brushed against the soft curls of his beard, whose fingers touched his warm lips. No one. He kissed his wife’s damp brow, and she smiled.

By: A. S. Byatt

When Fiammarosa was a few months old, the sooty first hair came out, as it does, in wisps and strands, collecting on her white lawn pillows. In its place, slowly and strongly, grew pale golden hair, so pale it shone silver when the light was in it, though it could be sunny-yellow seen against scalp, or brow, or, as it grew, on her narrow neck. As she drank in her mother's milk, she became milky; the flush faded as though it had never been, and the child's skin became softly pale, like white rose petals. Her bones were very fine, and the baby chubbiness all children assume before they move was only fleeting in her; she had sharp cheekbones, and a fine nose and chin, long, fine, sharp fingers and toes, even as an infant. Her eyes, under white brows and pearly eyelids, retained that dark, deep colour that is no colour, that in the newborn we call blue. The baby, said the nurse, was like fine bone china. She looked breakable. She behaved as though she herself thought she was fragile, moving little, and with a cautious carefulness. As she grew, and learned to crawl, and to walk, she grew thinner and whiter. The doctors pronounced her 'delicate'. She must be kept warm, they said, and

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rest frequently. She must be fed well, on nourishing things, things that would fill her out — she must drink concentrated soups, full of meat juices and rich with vegetables, she must have creams and zabagliones, fresh fruits and nourishing custards. This regime had a certain success. The white limbs filled out, the child's cheeks rounded over those edged bones, she acquired a pretty pout and faint dimples on her little fists. But with the milky flesh came languor. Her pale head dropped on its pale stalk. The gold hair lay flat and gleaming, unmoving like the surface of a still liquid. She walked at the right age, spoke at the right age, was docile and learned good manners without fuss. She had a habit of yawning, opening her shell-pink lips to show a row of perfect, gleaming, tiny white teeth, and a rosy tongue and gullet. She learned to put out a limp hand in front of this involuntary grimace, which had an aspect of intense laziness, and another aspect, her mother once thought, of a perfectly silent howl or cry.

Never was a young girl more loved. Her parents loved her, her nurses loved her, her twelve

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brothers, from the young men to the little boys, loved her, and tried to think of ways to please her, and to bring roses to the pale cheeks and a smile to the soft mouth. In spring weather, well-wrapped in lambswool shawls and fur bonnets, she was driven out in a little carriage, in which she lolled amongst soft cushions, staring indifferently at the trees and the sky. She had her own little rose-garden, with a pool full of rosy fish in green deeps, and a swing on which, in the warmest, brightest weather, her brothers pushed her gently to and fro, whilst she leaned her face on the cool chains and looked down at the grass. Picnics were brought out to this garden, and Fiammarosa reclined on a grassy slope, swathed in soft muslins, with a wide straw hat tied under her chin with pink ribbons, to protect her from sunburn. It was discovered that she had a taste for water-ices, flavoured with blackberry and raspberry, and for chilled slices of watermelon. These delicacies brought a fleeting smile to her normally expressionless face. She liked to lie on the grassy bank and watch her brothers play badminton, but any suggestion, as she grew older, that she might join in brought on an attack of yawning,

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a drooping, a retreat to the darkened rooms of the palace. Her brothers brought her presents; she was unimpressed by parakeets and kittens, but became curiously attached to a little silver hand-mirror, engraved with twining roses, from her eldest brother.

Her tutor loved her, too. He was a brilliant young man, destined to be a professor, who was writing a great history of the kingdom from its remotest beginnings, and had not wanted the court appointment at all. He loved her not despite, but because of, her lethargy. He was sorry for her. There were days when, for no reason he could discern, she was able to sit upright and concentrate, infrequent days when she suddenly surprised him with a page of elegant calculations, or an opinion as piercingly clever as it was unexpected, on a poem or a drawing he was discussing with her. She was no fool, Fiammarosa, but there was no life in her, most of the time. She yawned. She drooped. He would leave their study to fetch a book, and return to find the white head dropped on to the circle of the milky arms on the table, a picture of lassitude and boredom, or, just possibly, of

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despair. He asked her, on one of these days, if she felt ill, and she said, no, why should she?, directing at him a blank, gentle, questioning look. I feel much as usual, she said. Much as I always feel. She spoke, he thought, with a desperate patience. He closed the window, to keep out the draught.

During her early years, the earth went through one of its periodic coolings. Autumn came earlier and earlier, the rose leaves were blown about the enclosed garden, there was a nip in the air in late summer, and snow on the ground before the turn of the year. The palace people redoubled their efforts to protect the princess, installing velvet curtains and bed-hangings. On very cold nights, they lit a fire in the pretty fireplace in her bedroom, so that the coloured streamers of reflected flames chased each other across the carved ceiling, and moved in the soft hangings on the walls. Fiammarosa was now at the edge of girlhood, almost a woman, and her dreams troubled her. She dreamed of dark blue spaces, in which she travelled, without moving a muscle, at high speeds above black and white fields and forests. In her

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dreams she heard the wind coil, howling, round the outside walls, and its shriek woke her, so that she heard with her ears what she had dreamed in her skull. The wind spoke with many voices, soft and shrill, rushing and eddying. Fiammarosa wanted to see it. She felt stifled in her soft blankets, in her lambswool gown. She went to the window, and dragged open the curtain. Behind it, her breath, the breath of the room, had frozen into white and glistening feathers and flowers on the glass, into illusory, disproportionate rivers with tributaries and frozen falls. Through these transparent, watery forms she could see the lawns and bushes, under snow, and the long tips of icicles poured down from the eaves above her. She put her cheek against the frozen tracery, and felt a bite, a burn, that was both painful and intensely pleasurable. Her soft skin adhered, ever so slightly, to the ice. Her eyes took in the rounded forms of the lawns under snow, the dark blue shadows across it, the glitter where the light from her window sliced it, and the paler glitter where the moonlight touched the surface. And her body came alive with the desire to lie out there, on that whiteness, face-

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to-face with it, fingertips and toes pushing into the soft crystals. The whole of her short, cosseted history was against her; she drew back from the glass, telling herself that although the snow blanket looked soft and pretty it was dangerous and threatening; its attraction was an illusion of the glass.

But all the next day, she was possessed by this image of her own naked body, stretched on a couch of snow. And the next night, when the palace was dark and silent, she put on a flowered silk wrap, covered with summer poppies, and crept down the stairs, to see if there was a way out into the garden. But all the doors she could find were locked and barred, and she was discovered by a patrolling guardsman, to whom she said, with a tentative smile, that she had come down because she was hungry. He was not to know that she always had sweet biscuits by her bed. So he took her to the kitchen, and poured a glass of milk for her in the larder, and found her some white bread and jam, which she nibbled, still smiling at him, as she questioned him about his work, the places where the keys were kept, the times of his patrols.

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When she followed him into the larder, as he ladled milk from a great stone jar in the light of a candle, she felt cold rise from the stone floor, and pour from the thick walls, and sing outside the open grated window. The guard begged her to go into the kitchen – ‘You will catch your death in this draught,’ he said – but the Princess was stretching her fingers to touch the eddying air.

She thanked him prettily, and went back to her hot little room where, after a moment’s thought, she took her wrought-iron poker and broke up the banked coals of her fire, feeling faint as she hung over it, with the smoke and the bright sparks, but happy, as the life went out of the coals, the reds burned darker, and were replaced by fine white ash, like the snow. Then she took off her gown, and rolled open the nest of bedclothes, and pulled back the great curtains – it was not possible to open the window – and lay back, feeling the sweat of her efforts cool delectably in the crevices of her skin.

The next night she reconnoitred the corridors and cupboards, and the night after that she went down

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in the small hours, and took a small key from a hook, a key that unlocked a minor side-door that led to the kitchen-garden, which was now, like everywhere else, under deep snow, the taller herbs stiffly draggled, the tufted ones humped under white, the black branches brittle with the white coating frozen along their upper edges. It was full moon. Everything was black and white and silver. The princess crept in her slippers between the beds of herbs, and then bent down impulsively and pulled off the slippers. The cold snow on the soles of her feet gave her the sense of bliss that most humans associate with warm frills of water at the edge of summer seas, with sifted sand, with sunny stone. She ran faster. Her blood hummed. Her pale hair floated in the wind of her own movement in the still night. She went under an arch and out through a long ride, running lightly under dark, white-encrusted boughs, into what in summer was a meadow. She did not know why she did what she did next. She had always been decorous and docile. Her body was full of an electric charge, a thrill, from an intense cold. She threw off her silk wrap, and her creamy woollen nightgown, and lay for a

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moment, as she had imagined lying, with her naked skin on the cold white sheet. She did not sink; the crust was icy and solid. All along her body, in her knees, her thighs, her small round belly, her pointed breasts, the soft inner skin of her arms, she felt an intense version of that paradoxical burn she had received from the touch of the frosted window. The snow did not numb Fiammarosa; it pricked and hummed and brought her, intensely, to life. When her front was quite chilled, she turned over on her back, and lay there, safe inside the form of her own faint impression on the untouched surface. She stared up, at the great moon with its slaty shadows on its white-gold disc, and the huge fields of scattered, clustered, far-flung glittering wheeling stars in the deep darkness, white on midnight, and she was, for the first time in her life, happy. This is who I am, the cold princess thought to herself, wriggling for sheer pleasure in the snow-dust, this is what I want. And when she was quite cold, and completely alive and crackling with energy, she rose to her feet, and began a strange, leaping dance, pointing sharp fingers at the moon, tossing her long mane of

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silver hair, sparkling with ice-crystals, circling and bending and finally turning cartwheels under the wheeling sky. She could feel the cold penetrating her surfaces, all over, insistent and relentless. She even thought that some people might have thought that this was painful. But for her, it was bliss. She went in with the dawn, and lived through the day in an alert, suspended, dreaming state, waiting for the deep dark, and another excursion into the cold.

Night after night, now, she went and danced in the snowfield. The deep frost held and she began to be able to carry some of her cold energy back into her daily work. At the same time, she began to notice changes in her body. She was growing thinner, rapidly – the milky softness induced by her early regime was replaced with a slender, sharp, bony beauty. And one night, as she moved, she found that her whole body was encased in a transparent, crackling skin of ice that broke into spiderweb-fine veined sheets as she danced and then re-formed. The sensation of this double skin was delicious. She had frozen eyelashes and saw the world through an ice-lens; her tossing hair made a

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brittle and musical sound, for each hair was coated and frozen. The faint sounds of shivering and splintering and clashing made a kind of whispered music as she danced on. In the daytime now, she could barely keep awake, and her night-time skin persisted patchily in odd places, at the nape of her neck, around her wrists, like bracelets. She tried to sit by the window, in her lessons, and also tried surreptitiously to open it, to let in the cold wind, when Hugh, her tutor, was briefly out of the room. And then, one day, she came down, rubbing frost out of her eyelashes with rustling knuckles, and found the window wide open, Hugh wrapped in a furred jacket, and a great book open on the table.

‘Today,’ said Hugh, ‘we are going to read the history of your ancestor, King Beriman, who made an expedition to the kingdoms beyond the mountains, in the frozen North, and came back with an icewoman.’

Fiammarosa considered Hugh.

‘Why?’ she said, putting her white head on one side, and looking at him with sharp, pale blue eyes between the stiff lashes.

‘I’ll show you,’ said Hugh, taking her to the

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open window. 'Look at the snow on the lawns, in the rose-garden.'

And there, lightly imprinted, preserved by the frost, were the tracks of fine bare feet, running lightly, skipping, eddying, dancing.

Fiammarosa did not blush; her whiteness became whiter, the ice-skin thicker. She was alive in the cold air of the window.

'Have you been watching me?'

'Only from the window,' said Hugh, 'to see that you came to no harm. You can see that the only footprints are fine, and elegant, and naked. If I had followed you I should have left tracks.'

'I see,' said Fiammarosa.

'And,' said Hugh, 'I have been watching you since you were a little girl, and I recognise happiness and health when I see it.'

'Tell me about the icewoman.'

'Her name was Fror. She was given by her father, as a pledge for a truce between the ice-people and King Beriman. The chronicles describe her as wondrously fair and slender, and they say also that King Beriman loved her distractedly, and that she did not return his love. They say she

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showed an ill will, liked to haunt caverns and rivers and refused to learn the language of this kingdom. They say she danced by moonlight, on the longest night, and that there were those in the kingdom who believed she was a witch, who had enchanted the King. She was seen, dancing naked, with three white hares, which were thought to be creatures of witchcraft, under the moon, and she was imprisoned in the cells under the palace. There she gave birth to a son, who was taken from her, and given to his father. And the priests wanted to burn the icewoman, "to melt her stubbornness and punish her stiffness", but the King would not allow it.

'Then one day, three northmen came riding to the gate of the castle, tall men with axes on white horses, and said they had come "to take back our woman to her own air". No one knew how they had been summoned: the priests said that it was by witchcraft that she had called to them from her stone cell. It may have been. It seems clear that there was a threat of war if the woman was not relinquished. So she was fetched out, and "wrapped in a cloak to cover her thinness and decay" and told she could ride away with her



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kinsmen. The chronicler says she did not ask to see her husband or her tiny son, but "cold and unfeeling as she had come" mounted behind one of the northmen and they turned and rode away together.

'And King Beriman died not long after, of a broken heart or of witchcraft, and his brother reigned until Leonin was old enough to be crowned. The chronicler says that Leonin made a "warm-blooded and warm-hearted" ruler, as though the blood of his forefathers ran true in him, and the "frozen lymph" of his maternal stock was melted away to nothing.

'But I believe that after generations, a lost face, a lost being, can find a form again.'

'You think I am an icewoman.'

'I think you carry the inheritance of that northern princess. I think also that her nature was much misunderstood, and that what appeared to be kindness was extreme cruelty – paradoxically, probably her life was preserved by what appeared to be the cruellest act of those who held her here, the imprisonment in cold stone walls, the thin prison dress, the bare diet.'

'I felt that in my bones, listening to your story.'

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'It is *your* story, Princess. And you too are framed for cold. You must live – when the thaw comes – in cool places. There are ice-houses in the palace gardens – we must build more, and stock them with blocks of ice, before the snow melts.'

Fiammarosa smiled at Hugh with her sharp mouth. She said:

'You have read my desires. All through my childhood I was barely alive. I felt constantly that I must collapse, vanish, fall into a faint, stifle. Out there, in the cold, I am a living being.'

'I know.'

'You choose your words very tactfully, Hugh. You told me I was "framed for cold". That is a statement of natural philosophy, and time. It may be that I have ice in my veins, like the icewoman, or something that boils and steams at normal temperatures, and flows busily in deep frost. But you did not tell me I had a cold nature. The icewoman did not look back at her husband and son. Perhaps she was cold in her soul, as well as in her veins?'

'That is for you to say. It is so long ago, the tale of the icewoman. Maybe she saw King Beriman only as a captor and conqueror? Maybe she loved

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someone else, in the North, in the snow? Maybe she felt as you feel, on a summer's day, barely there, yawning for faintness, moving in shadows.'

'How do you know how I feel, Hugh?'

'I watch you. I study you. I love you.'

Fiammarosa noticed, in her cool mind, that she did not love Hugh, whatever love was.

She wondered whether this was a loss, or a gain. She was inclined to think, on balance, that it was a gain. She had been so much loved, as a little child, and all that heaping of anxious love had simply made her feel ill and exhausted. There was more life in coldness. In solitude. Inside a crackling skin of protective ice that was also a sensuous delight.

After this clarification, even when the thaw came, and the snow ran away, and fell in damp, crashing masses from the roof and the branches, Fiammarosa's life was better. Hugh convinced the King and Queen that their daughter needed to be cold to survive, and the ingenuity that had been put into keeping her warm and muffled was diverted, on his suggestion, into the construction of ice-houses, and cool bedrooms with stone walls

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on the north side of the palace. The new Fiammarosa was full of spiky life. She made little gardens of mountain snow-plants around her ice-retreats, which stood like so many summer-houses in the woods and the gardens. No one accused her of witchcraft – this was a later age – but there was perhaps a little less love for this coldly shining, fiercely energetic, sharp being than there had been for the milky girl in her rosy cushions. She studied snow-crystals and ice formations under a magnifying glass, in the winter, and studied the forms of her wintry flowers and mosses in the summer. She became an artist – all princesses are compelled to be artists; they must spin, or draw, or embroider, and she had always dutifully done so, producing heaps of cushions and walls of good-enough drawings. She hated 'good enough' but had had to be content with it. Now she began to weave tapestries, with silver threads and ice-blue threads, with night violets and cool primroses, which mixed the geometric forms of the snow-crystals with the delicate forms of the moss and rosettes of petals, and produced shimmering, intricate tapestries that were much more than 'good enough', that were

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unlike anything seen before in that land. She became an assiduous correspondent, writing to gardeners and natural philosophers, to spinners of threads and weavers all over the world. She was happy, and in the winter, when the world froze again under an iron-grey sky, she was ecstatic.