

ANGELICA, PAINTRESS OF MINDS

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A Novel

MIRANDA MILLER



First published in Great Britain by Barbican Press in 2020

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Registered office: 1 Ashenden Road, London E5 0DP

www.barbicanpress.com

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Cover by Rawshock Design

A CIP catalogue for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-909954-41-0

Typeset in Baskerville

Typeset by Imprint Digital Ltd

For Gordon

PART ONE

AUSTRIA AND ITALY

1

They used to say I had a talent for portraits. They. Papa, his unsuccessful painter friends and the old aristocrats, bishops and monsignori who petted me when I was a child. I look at my first self-portrait, at it and into it, until I fall backwards into Morbegno in the Valtellina, where I spent my childhood.

I stared into the only mirror in our tiny apartment, cracked and silvery. Papa and the horrid Josef shaved in it, staring at their reflected faces and chatting, while I sat quietly in a corner drawing or practising my music, hating the usurper. I was the *figlia unica* – the only and unique daughter. There was no need of any other children, and certainly not of this awkward boy who sometimes forgot he was a mere cousin and called my papa his.

When I was nine, Papa returned from Lake Constance with this sixteen-year-old lout. ‘Cousin Josef will be my studio assistant now and you must stop playing with my things,’ he said.

His things! Those paper canvas, easels, charcoal paints, crayons and brushes had been my first and only playmates. Many years later when he was dependent on me, I forced my father to admit that Josef really was his son by his first wife, whom he abandoned.

Mama made it worse. ‘You have to learn to be a little lady now and stop running round in a dirty smock like a savage. If

you practise your music, we can sing together in the next concert at the conservatoire. It's time you learnt how to sew and bake. Your grandmother will help me to teach you.'

That year Oma descended from the mountains, bringing rules and dullness. From Chur in Switzerland, she carried her smelly cheeses and black clothes that stank of death. Her face was a map of poverty and suffering, places I was determined not to go to, and she and my mother conspired together to make my life as grim as theirs. There were five of us in two small rooms. My father and Josef robbed me of my studio paradise, and I was banished to light the stove, sweep the floor, darn stockings and do the work of the servant we could not afford. I felt like Cinderella with no fairy godmother to rescue me. I wept and stormed and made a great fuss, but they did not care.

'You're only a little girl,' said Papa.

'You'll never get a husband if you don't learn household duties,' said Mama.

I did have a godmother. I was named Anna Maria after her. She was no fairy, but a woman of substance who lived in Chur and sent us wine at Christmas. The Baroness de Rost. Titles make a special shape in the air when people speak them, high and arched. Such people lived in fine buildings like the Palazzo Malacrida at the end of our street, painted like a jewel box, full of people who shone and sparkled. Papa painted the ceiling in one of their salons. He told me they had roast meat for breakfast and a whole room full of musical instruments. Their six children had a vast room where they did nothing but play with toys: rocking horses, toy carriages, birds in cages, picture

books, dolls who lived in their own little houses, boats, miniature castles full of lead soldiers. I hugged Lise, my only wooden doll, and thought about those children.

One wintry evening, Papa and Josef were away in Switzerland painting the walls of some rural church. After I washed the dishes I was allowed to draw as we three women sat by the stove. My mother was in a good mood; we sang together, and I forgot to sulk because music heals all wounds.

After I was sent to my bed in the corner of the room, I lay waiting for my mother and Oma to wheeze and grumble their way to sleep. When both were snoring, I put on my clothes, lit a candle in the dying embers of the stove and went into the studio. On the cold floor I sat cross legged until dawn, drawing all the animals in Noah's ark. Time melts when you give yourself entirely to paper or canvas.

I had never seen an elephant but dreamt one up as Durer invented his hippopotamus. Lovingly I drew Mr and Mrs Elephant, amiable monsters with trunks like table legs, marching into the ark. Human beings were easier to do. Mr Noah waved his arms around like the conductor of our local choir as he told the animals where to go. Mrs Noah had a shelflike bosom like my grandmother. When Mama got up to make breakfast, she found me still there and slapped me for wasting expensive paper. But when Papa saw my drawing, he said it was good.

Oma was a midwife who told disgusting stories about dead babies, screaming women and drunken nurses. 'Don't frighten the child,' said Mama.

'She will find out soon enough,' said Oma grimly in her coarse dialect.

There was often a knock at our door late at night. Oma dressed and went off into the blackness to do bloody things to women's bottoms. In church I looked around at other girls my age, feeling sure they were free to draw and play. They did not have to be household slaves. I never found out the truth, for I had no child friends. Oma told stories about her family, the de Canobias, who were once aristocrats and still had their "de" and a fancy bed carved with a coat of arms to show for it.

Mama and I were to sing together at a concert. All the best people in Morbegno would be there. It took us months to make my blue silk dress with pink bows. We borrowed the small powdered wig that covered my dark hair from the wine merchant's niece. I thought the black velvet ribbon with the gold cross my godmother sent me and my mother's borrowed earrings were the finest jewellery in the world. As always my father stood over me, telling me what would charm, impress, sell. When I painted that first self-portrait I included him, because I could not conceive of a self without him.

Mama plucked my thick eyebrows, put rouge on my cheeks and lips. 'Don't smile and show that gap in your teeth,' said she. 'Don't breathe too early in the second bar of the Buoncini aria, don't wobble on that top "c".' I clutched my music, sure that the whole town was going to laugh at me. I was close to tears when my father came in.

'Aha, a young lady,' said he with an air of relief, as if a little girl had been no use at all. He examined me, and they considered stuffing the front of my dress to make me more alluring. 'Let's show off your art as well as your music. Can you paint a

portrait of yourself good enough to show them at the Bishop's palace in Como?'

So I was allowed back into his studio. The thirteen-year-old who painted that first self-portrait was already a little adult who knew that all faces must be flattered. What was I thinking as I worked? I am not pretty, but my paintbrush is a wand that can make my nose smaller, my eyes a deeper blue, my cheeks less plump. I was dressed up for that concert at the conservatory, in all my homemade and borrowed finery. Inside the rigid corset my mother said I must wear now, my body felt like a wooden oar – with which to row myself away from my provincial childhood. How difficult it was to paint that pink satin bow on the front of my dress and how terrified my eyes were whenever they stared back at me in the mirror. I held my sheets of music in front of me as if to declare, I am a young woman of many accomplishments. When Papa saw how I worked night and day to improve my painting, he said, 'Well, women can be artists.'

Mama never agreed. 'A hoyden with paint under her fingernails who stinks of turpentine. Without a dowry, who will want her?'

Then Papa began to defend me at last. 'She has talent and may yet make us proud of her.'

Mama dragged me off to help with the washing, muttering, 'Singing is respectable and may even catch a husband. But a woman who paints anything but flowers is a freak.'

'You did not always despise painters so much,' said Papa, with a smile that made Mama blush. 'Do you know, daughter, that when I was painting the ceiling of the chapel of the Prince-Bishop of Chur I heard your mother singing? Her sweet voice

went straight to my heart and she climbed up my scaffolding to admire my clouds. She said they were more beautiful than real clouds.’

‘Then you said you would be happy to live always in the clouds with me.’ Mama sounded very silly as the two old people giggled together like halfwits. Better than the usual bitter silence between them.

Out of this first self-portrait came my first commissions, the beginning of my real life. I was baptised Anna Maria Angelica Catharina Kauffman, but Anna Maria and Marianne are dull hearthside names, so I became Angelica. My name has changed with me as I take on different identities in each language. With my father, cousins, Queen Charlotte and Goethe it had the hard “g” of “gelt guilt girl Gott”; in England my name was softened to “jelly jolly genial gee-gee”. In French I sound more flirtatious – “jeune, jalousie” – avoiding the hard “g” of “guillotine”. Angelique had that playful “ique” at the end, like one of the gay, menacing songs the French soldiers sang about *magnifique* and what they would like to do to girls. In Italian, my name sounds most natural to me. Angelica is the heroine of Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso*, who the English call Roland. As a girl I loved that story – the trip to the moon – I drew the hippogriff that is half eagle and half horse – wanted to be the pagan princess with my name who drives Orlando mad with passion.

With my new name I sprouted new wings of power. If I was not as good as a man, they would force me to be a woman, to make cakes and babies. Not just as good as a man but better – than Josef – better even than my father.

‘Don’t sign it,’ Papa would say, passing off my copies of famous paintings as his own. It was not enough to paint well; I also had to simper at the rich old men who wanted their portraits painted, allow them to pinch my cheeks – and other parts – smile smile smile which my father and Josef could not do with their long, wooden faces. When Goethe, who has very sharp eyes, saw this first self-portrait he said, ‘There is a man standing behind that child with some sinister power over her.’

He was right. In the first version I painted my father looking over my shoulder as he always did. Later, as my confidence grew and his power waned, I blocked him out. There is no room for other people in a self-portrait. You might add a classical bust, as Sir Joshua often did, to remind the viewer of your greatness. But you are alone with your mirror and nobody can follow you into that painted world.

Mama was musical, but there was no music in her speaking voice, a nasal monotone full of reproach and disappointment. How she bored me and made me wish not to be like her. ‘Put those dirty paints away now, Anna Maria. Come and help me with the cooking and the mending and the dusting... What do you need another book for when you have so many already?... Going out again tonight? Ah well, I have the cat for company. Those old men make too much fuss of you, child, and will scare away the young ones.’

After we moved to Como and Oma died, I did not feel like a child at all. I earned more money than Papa and Josef together; I was the one people wanted to meet. Como was the place where I tasted the keenest pleasures of my youth. I saw the rich palaces of the silk barons – rode in fine coaches – sailed in pretty boats

on the dazzling lake. The old men my mother sneered at were powerful clerics who petted me and commissioned lucrative portraits. That modesty my mother preached was useless, for I saw how boldness succeeded. Monsignor Nevroni Cappuccino was delighted with the pastel portrait I did of him; he won me other commissions from rich families.

Then Papa decided we must live in Milan, so that I could see great paintings in galleries there. Women were not usually allowed to copy them, but the Bishop liked me, so he made sure I could work in all the private and public collections.

When I sat in the Pinacoteca Ambrosiana, gazing into Titian's *Adoration of the Magi*, I saw that all my attempts to paint were feeble. Here was a real scene, just as if I had wandered into the Bible and was able to spy on the miracle of His birth. I loved the little human details: the restless horse, the dog pissing against the beam. Titian's rich colours made my own look sickly. I trembled as I feared my so-called talent was all a delusion – yet Papa sold my copies for good money and Rinaldo d'Este, the Duke of Modena, commissioned a portrait of his Duchess.

Josef was sent off to mountain villages to restore obscure churches and I had Papa to myself. He became my agent and my chaperone, making sure my rich old admirers did not fondle me too much. He fixed my prices and sang my praises so that I could look demure. I painted a portrait of my parents together at that time but, in truth, they rarely were. I lost that painting years ago, but I remember how I painted them: my father stern and handsome, my mother flabby and anxious. I can hardly recall her features now, for I have no portrait of her.

Mama stayed at home while the prodigy and her proud father went to all the best houses. Coming home from some grand reception where I had said clever things, it was very provoking to be told by my mother to darn my stockings. Our lodgings in Milan were simple in comparison to the other houses I visited; my spirits plummeted as we entered the tiny hall that stank of tripe. Mama's querulous voice called out from the bedroom. 'Back at last? I suppose there were quails and rich cakes and fine wines. Don't blame me if you're up all night with indigestion, Johann. My head has been aching like the devil, but I don't matter of course. Don't bang that door! This leak is worse, Johann, you'll have to speak to the landlord in the morning.'

I had more of a head for figures than either of my parents, so I took charge of our finances. As they improved, my father took my work more seriously than his own and defended me against my mother's criticism.

'But what is to become of her?' said Mama. 'She is neither fish nor fowl, girl nor boy. Men don't like clever women. Her singing might get her a husband and we could make the best of her looks, but people will talk when they see her dressed like that.'

'She really does have talent, Cleofea,' said Papa. 'And if she is allowed to develop it freely, she may yet make our fortune. Then she will have no need of a husband.'

The first time my mother saw me dressed "like that" in Josef's clothes, she screamed. I thought it a great joke to wear his old shirt and breeches when he was away – also a convenience. I could cover them in paint or climb scaffolding to help my father without worrying about the tyranny of being ladylike. Perhaps

something more? As I put on his clothes, I obliterated my half-brother Josef to become my father's *figlia(o) unica*, his unique daughter/son. I laughed and hugged my tiny mother.

'It doesn't matter. Milan is enormous. Nobody will recognise me.'

'You're not going out like that!'

'I just need to run out to buy more paper. I'll be back in a moment.'

'No!' She barred the door. 'It's monstrous – immoral – the priest will hear of it and excommunicate us. Then all your old bishops and rich merchants won't want anything to do with you, we won't be invited to any more concerts, they'll cancel all your singing engagements...' In tears, she bewailed our downfall.

I ought to have comforted her, but I was furious because I was supporting both of them by then and was used to doing as I liked. There was a scuffle at the door; I pushed past her and ran out. As I clumped down the street in Josef's boatlike shoes, I felt a surge of joy that I was out here in the world where I could do anything; paint or sing or flirt or work or talk about books.

But when I got home there was always my mother, trying to chain me to her. Like most women, she did nothing except keep house. We did share a love of music. She taught me to sing and play the harpsichord, but I had surpassed her years ago and resented her endlessly nagging me to practise. I had a good ear and could perform better than the other amateur musicians without much trouble.

When there was a concert, she became hysterical with nerves. 'Hurry up, Anna Maria, we will be late! That dress is

an abomination. I can see your bosom; a young girl should not have bosoms.’

‘I didn’t grow them to spite you. I don’t like them either.’

‘That song. You must enter on the second bar. You are always late.’

‘You play so slowly. I wish I had a handsome young man to accompany me.’

‘Shame on you! And don’t flirt or people will think you are a slut.’

‘Stop squabbling.’ My father, very tall in black evening clothes, looked proud to be walking to the palazzo between two elegant ladies. I noticed that most people came by carriage, that the other women wore far better clothes than us and had jewels that out-flashed the chandeliers.

When I was singing, I flew up to the painted ceiling and liquid gold poured out of my throat. To be admired and applauded was pure happiness – all my life – until just a few years ago when my voice became croaky. Even now I hum and warble in the privacy of my studio. But then, when I was young, I felt music pass through me like the wind through the trees. I thought there was nothing finer than to sing – until the next morning, when I picked up my brush to feel power quiver from my eye to my hand. It was a time of discovery and excitement – but Mama was always there, a pudding at the foot of my rainbow.

Poor Cleofea. Now, when she has been dead these fifty years, I understand her and feel guilty about my failure to love her. She loved me but wanted a proper daughter; she was terrified that

what she called my “unfeminine ways” would bring disgrace on our family. Her headaches, dizziness and pains in the chest irritated me – until they suddenly became fatal. One afternoon, when she was pinning up the washing on our terrace, she collapsed. That evening she died.

2

My father had always seemed so proud and independent. He treated his wife as a servant. Yet without her, he could not find his gloves or prepare breakfast or remember his appointments. All those tedious household chores fell to me, leaving me no time to paint. Josef and my father demanded meals, shirts, obedience and money I could no longer earn. Three important commissions were late. My father sobbed for days and in the evening, he disappeared to the tavern. Alone with Josef, I ignored him.

‘So, the little wunderkind has to darn my stockings now. I will tell our father you refuse to cook for me.’

I sat at my easel, hating him. My brush stabbed at the Bishop’s nose.

‘Soon we will marry you off to some nobody. You will have twelve children and forget your pretentious dreams, while I shall become a court painter somewhere in Italy or Germany. I might visit you occasionally. My poor relations.’

I bit my lip so hard I could taste blood. If I let myself shout at him I would cry, and Josef would squawk his aggressive laugh, like a crow swooping down. He threw his stockings at me and they landed in my lap, stinking of unwashed Josef. I walked over to the stove, opened the door and threw his stockings on top

of the burning logs. When he advanced on me with violence in his eyes I dodged him, ran out of our apartment and went all the way to the tavern, where I pushed through the phalanx of whores and drunken sots to claim my father. He was so surprised that he came home meekly with me.

Papa finally took my side against Josef and packed him off to restore some church in the mountains. I took control of our meagre finances and would not give Papa enough to drink. I hired a woman to cook and clean and managed to finish my overdue commissions. Papa still grieved for his Cleofea. He was one of those seemingly unfeeling men whose heart held but two images: hers and mine.

After supper he sat with his head in his hands. 'Every inch of this apartment reminds me of her. A wonderful woman – a saint – Milan is a desert without her.'

I thought Milan a glorious city, but one you had to be rich to enjoy. Papa lost all his energy when he lost wife; his gloom was depleting our meagre income. I could not be my own mother father agent manager banker prodigy – so I was pleased when the letter came from Cousin Michael, commissioning us to redecorate their church in Schwarzenberg. I could remember nothing of my father's village; I had visited it only once, as a small child. In his loneliness, Papa described his Schwarzenberg as the Garden of Eden, filled with devout seraphic Kauffmans. I wondered whyever he had left this paradise.

I soon found out. The journey to Austria over the mountains was uncomfortable. There was no road to Schwarzenberg then, so we had to endure a long, bumpy cart ride in the snow. Arriving at night, I awoke from jolted sleep to see a dozen coarse faces

peering at me, pointing smoky lanterns at me and commenting on my looks in their harsh dialect. So many Kauffmans. I like to tell sophisticated friends about my simple origins and often say I would like to retire to my innocent native village. Perhaps when I reach second or third childhood.

But at fifteen, scarcely out of my first, I felt like an exiled princess. We stayed with Cousin Michael in his house on a meadow, where we shared our meals with his smelly goatherds. If Kauffmans were not exactly angels, they were certainly very Catholic. Of a Sunday we had to walk for three hours through the Bregenz Woods to go to mass in the nearest church. On the other days we decorated the little wooden church where Papa had been baptised.

Up there on my wall is the portrait I painted of myself in traditional Bregenz Woods costume, the embroidered bodice and full white sleeves borrowed from a cousin. I had quite outgrown the few clothes I brought from Milan and had no money to buy new ones. I thought this costume picturesque, but the material felt rough and however many times I washed it I could not remove the stink of cheese and goats. In the portrait my face looks flat, plump, open. Was I more honest then, or only a worse painter? I sit beside my easel, clutching my maulstick like a crucifix. Indeed, it was only painting that made those months bearable.

My job was to decorate the walls of the little nave and chancel with heads of the Apostles. Having no models to sit for me, I used the heads of the villagers, all those cousins who knew my father better than I did. They stood around watching me work, making jokes about marrying me to some village oaf. I smiled, hoping they were only joking, all the while watching Papa's face

in terror that he would decide to stay in this wilderness. Only in Schwarzenberg was he treated as a great painter. Every time a female beamed at him, I feared she would become my step-mother and I would be damned to a lifetime painting inn signs and portraits of goatherds. My father had no more ambition left, so I had to infect him with my own. At every opportunity I reminded him of the splendours of Como and Milan.

‘But I’m getting old now. City life is so exhausting. I’m tired of flattering and boasting and calculating,’ he said.

‘I will work day and night to make a good life for us when we go back. They will all forget me in Milan if we stay here too long. Patrons are fickle and soon I will be too old to be a prodigy,’ I said.

‘People are so kind to us here.’

They were, and that is why I have remembered those Kauffmans in my will – all except my half-brother Josef, whose begging letters I ignore. I smiled back at my cousins while I schemed to return to Milan, or better still to Rome where the historical paintings I longed to do would be admired. Fortunately, Papa had a taste for good food and wine, elegant clothes and galleries.

‘I need to see great paintings again, to meet people who can help me. You used to say I had talent,’ I told him.

‘You do. Why, when you were three years old, I taught you your letters and you turned them into exquisite illuminations. By the time you were eight, your drawings of my plaster casts were good enough to sell.’

‘Then you have a duty to promote my career as a painter. Please, Papa!’ I begged. But I was very much afraid that his laziness would be stronger than his vanity and love of extravagance.