

Mario and Maria

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*One face, one voice, one habit, and
two persons!
A natural perspective, that is and is not!*

—William Shakespeare
Twelfth Night

They were—

Encroached by the sun to retreat indoors, for even the thick head of the fruitless mango tree failed to cast shadows over the unweeded lawn—nothing could escape the mounting light of morning that saw everything and illuminated the world for the world to see; but even if the pair could've somehow evaded her watchful glare, they still had been caught by her silent heat that wafted invisibly around corners, and so they had abandoned their one-on-

GELLACO
Mario and Maria

one bout of volleyball, the game just begun, the score tied, one-one; the ball, blue and yellow, rolling to stand lonely by the foot of the toolshed, in between the mango tree and the back wall, amidst the piercing glare and the stultifying heat—

Sharing the length of the worn, gray sofa throughout the morning until just before noon, heads to opposite ends, feet and legs tangled in the middle, alone by themselves, resting away the languor while sucking on mango-flavored popsicles that melted before they could be bitten, until one of them without provocation got up and went round the living room, shutting all the windows that revealed the outside garden and the public streets in a desert-like haze, banging the glass so that the panes almost shattered, that even the framed family picture perched on a nearby dresser shuddered; drawing down the blinds to keep light and heat and even breeze out; then returning, feeling for the remote between the tight cracks of the cushions with feet, with hands; and finding it, pressed the button to activate the air-conditioner with a beep, then two beeps more to increase the fans to maximum, then one beep each for each degree Celsius lower, as low as he dared; and on the last beep, the other overcame his surprise at this sudden outburst, then got up too, holding their discarded sticks sticky with popsicle residue, to dispose of their trash; and returning, he unplugged the electric fans as soon as they became redundant, then plopped back down onto the sofa, back to join Mario, head thrown back satisfied, sighing—

Soon cold, with identical goosebumps on their necks and arms and chests—for compared to the hellish and the damning breath of summer that was banished to the outside, anything was arctic; and it was arctic here, thanks to the efforts of the indefatigable machine, wheezing there on the topmost horizontal of the far wall; and so there were marks of cold, marks of guilt, there on their skins, because Mario's parents had said, "Boys, make do with the electric fans if you are going to stay indoors"—generously according one each, so you could have it steadied to you, at maximum setting—"And open all the windows, all the way up, all the easier for air to

flow in if it could mark its path out” —and all in all Mario’s parents’ rules went unheeded, for the pair was too easily defeated by the summer heat, despite having had the sole attention of a man-sized, metal fan, set to maximum; even with shirts off, and shorts rolled up to let more of the thighs breathe, the heat still fevered the body and the mind, that you couldn’t think of anything else except some succor, please, some relief, a popsicle tougher than an ice block found in the depths of the freezer—

Wearing once again their shirts, since now they were cold and goosebumped at a little past noon, quibbling at which shirt was whose since both were plain and white and worn, crew-necked and short-sleeved, identical; then looked to settle the argument by checking the label by the collar, and there they found their initial, M, and another M—there were two M’s on both: M for size (sewn onto the label), and M for initial (drawn onto the label with a black, permanent marker); and so, resigned, they wore whichever shirt they were holding since the difference didn’t exist; and once the cloth covered their bodies, comfortably warm in the cool they created, the bumps on their necks and arms and chests now beginning to subside, both were convinced they chose rightly, that this was indeed their own shirt, the shirt they were sweating in just hours ago—

Unaware that the air conditioner by then had started crying, leaking quiet drops onto the parquet; forgetting that this was why their parents imposed those rules in the first place; but, unaware and forgetting, they were quiet and content, thought nothing about their comfortable situation except that they deserved it—

Bored, clothed, and awake, the laziness of heat so soon dissipated turned into the indolence of coldness; with nothing to do, not even the chore of wiping their foreheads because their foreheads weren’t sweating anymore, not even eating because they were convinced they were full after having sucked on popsicle after popsicle throughout the morning; bored with their phones even if they could’ve scrolled just one post further, onto the next video of a waterpark recommendation in Clark, or of a beachfront vlog in

GELLACO
Mario and Maria

Boracay; bored with the television even if the movie still had an hour to go, with protagonists, a boy and a girl, whose names they've long forgotten; so one of them, without provocation, ran upstairs, called the other one to follow him, who did; and both returned, one carrying a rattling silver box shut with clasps, the other with a bulging pouch; and they unloaded the box and the pouch on the table that flanked the sofa, the items in a rugged file: bottles, compacts, tubes—but the tubes won't stand up—so set them down—but they'd roll onto the floor and crash and there'd be lipstick on the carpet—

Giddy to commence—phones discarded on the carpet, screens facing downwards so that all notifications were flashed to an indifferent floor, ignoring for the moment any messages or calls from either Anton or Geronimo or even Jennifer; messages or calls from Mother and Father that a mechanic will come, later in the day, to diagnose or even fix the air conditioner, if possible, coming urgent; television set to mute, yet kept open on the same movie (for the wandering eye to have some momentary, silent object, a pastime, while they worked)—one of them now studied a bulbous brush—Kabuki, it was called—and he, Mario, taking a bottle of clear, scentless liquid, pumped thrice onto his fingers, then spread the substance onto the other Mario's face, coating cheeks, nose, and chin; patting his forehead; and then, taking the bottle with coffee-like, toffee-like liquid, said, "Thank god, we're the same shade"—before pumping thrice again, onto a damp sponge, that glided smooth and soft on the other's face—

Working in silence after that pat, pat, patting of the foundation—the tap, tap, tapping of the wheezing machine's tears on the parquet floor, too soft to be heard—the patting mattified and leveled the skin that once glistened with oil, that once bore a few marks of red and the tick of icepicks on the chin and on the cheeks; the other, the perfect mannequin, obediently still; now, a light coat of powder to seal the mask, Mario working steadily while the other said, "At first, I could feel there was product on my face, a heavy, clay-like layer, but now, nothing"; Mario hummed, opening a

compact of dark bronze; the other continued, still, "Did Jennifer go through all this trouble before she would come to see me—but that was a long time ago"; and at that, Mario faltered, Kabuki brush in hand, compact of dark bronze in the other, then hesitantly replied, "Perhaps"; then silence—

Hesitant to talk about Jennifer, now, who belonged, as the other said, to long ago, "Thick in the right places, the right places," said the other Mario, reminiscing; and Mario, without hesitation, said, "So am I, aren't I, look at me"—now, there was a pause, then he said while sliding the brush a bit too roughly across the other's forehead, "Well, I do—I do go through all this trouble before I see anyone, unless it's to see my parents at breakfast, unless it's a day like today, when the mask would melt off my face as soon as I step outside, and I'd feel myself disintegrating, mascara first, going with tears, then the eyebrows, with the sweat, but I don't know about your Jennifer—"

Silent after that, while he worked on the other's eyebrows, hair by hair, stroke by stroke, filling the gaps, fulfilling the arch, carefully, so that the artifice would seem natural; and before the left brow was as sharp and angulated as the right, the other Mario said, "No more about Jennifer, she's not mine anyways; I'm sorry I said her name—I only remembered Jennifer because I had always thought you do your eyes and your lips more naturally than Jennifer did hers: you paint within the line, but still plush, plumper after painting, yes, but within the line, the lips, I mean, not the eyes, but the lips, yours, plush and plump, so now when will you do mine?"—and Mario replied quite curtly, with a thin brush in hand, "After everything else is done—"

Singing while he worked on the other's nose and cheeks, reinforcing the dark shadows, carving bronze wherever it was that dark shadows naturally fell, before touching up the highlights, the high bridge of the nose, the high curve of the cheeks, with silver; the other hummed too, but with his mouth shut, careful not to derail the Master at work; but he, the Master at work, sang the chorus

GELLACO
Mario and Maria

carelessly, openly, “I am a Mermaid ... without feet I couldn’t fumble, couldn’t fall ... at all, at all ...”; but, when the verse came, he was done carving the dark and painting the light, so the other could now join him, who was even more careless and open in singing, “Children, children, we were children then ... couldn’t play hopscotch, just watching, then ...” and so they went, until the end, singing, shouting, without fumbling the rapid, intricate lyrics; the other Mario had learned those words when Mario, his friend, first announced that he was a Mermaid, back then when they were still kids, when Mermaids were no different from Dragons, and so being a Mermaid wasn’t all too surprising—before Mario had even told his Mother and his Father that he was a Mermaid; because Mario trusted this other Mario, his friend more than anyone else was; because they shared more than just the initial M of their name: all other letters too that followed—and now grown-up Mario was working on this other one, this friend’s face, enlarging his eyes with shadows, black, blue, and grey; sculpting the skin through pigment—

Still on the sofa, where they once lay lazing, legs tangled, but now sat face to face; the other Mario said, “Before you do my lips, let me do yours, why should I finish before you’ve even begun”; and Mario bared his face, allowing the other Mario to do him, began to instruct him, because after all he was the Master at work; but the other shushed him and said, “I’ve been watching you, I’ve learned enough”—interrupting: “been watching Jennifer too no doubt”—“but you’re better than her,” the other said, “in every way since you’re good to me, and besides, your lips look more natural and fuller than hers, even now, without any product yet touching it”; and at that the other Mario grabbed Mario’s small face, as small as his own, parted the hair falling to his eyes, parting it to the right, as he parted his own, to the left; and before initiating the first tap of product onto the bare, bare skin, exclaimed softly, “This is always the face I see despite the mask, the wig, the corset, the heels—this was the face I saw every day in school,” the other Mario reminded his friend, “Yes, this face, with the regulation haircut, square at the sides, short at the back and at the front too, too short at the back you said, too short

at the front; and you're glaring at me now, I can't take it, will you please just stare at the wall, or at the television, or at a window, for a while, please—"

Silent, again, when the other Mario, his friend, proceeded to work on the Master's face, falteringly, carefully, imbibing the heavy responsibility of a new god crafting the first man: eyebrows, cheeks—as he remembered the features he had seen here and everywhere, on days away from home, away from their high school, at a party or at a club which wasn't too scrutinous with I.D.'s; or at dinners at someone else's house whose parents were gone for the night, or else at someone else's house whose parents excused, or accepted, this guest Mario, now metamorphosed into Maria; or at restaurants or cafes where the servers at the register, greeting them, "Good morning, Mamsir," would jolt in surprise at the Mamsir in front of them, upon hearing his deep voice, too deep for the woman that looked like a woman, with her long, wig-like hair and painted face, who now ordered an iced coffee with less milk, less sugar; but all this time, his faithful, trusted friend saw the naked face of Mario, despite everything, and the other thought aloud, while working, "Is it a disservice, after all the effort you take into becoming Maria, that I still see Mario"; and to this, Mario said, restraining his lips while the other patted the sponge at the lines by his mouth, but still enunciating the words well enough, "I am still, and always have been, just myself—"

Both done, with only lips left to do; first, the other Mario impeccably done to resemble Maria, sculpted and painted by the Master's hand himself; second, Maria now Maria, with uneven brows, too thick rouge, and muddy cheeks, the best effort of the other Mario—but still she was Maria; only the lips left to do, and Mario said, "I'll try to finish myself; you do you, since I've done enough damage to Maria, see here in the mirror"; and Maria said, barely assessing her reflection, "But no one else is around to see, only me, and we'll wipe it all off anyway before they come home, and you didn't do too badly, notwithstanding"; but, Mario insisted and Maria relented to his pout, "I'll do you before I do me—"

GELLACO
Mario and Maria

Watching Maria do his lips: the Master saw Mario through his own eyes, the other Mario saw himself through the mirror he held up; Maria first lining the outline of Mario's slightly trembling lips, as he had seen her do to herself a million mornings before, then filling the gaps with a luscious, smooth red, and he was proud of her work, saying he could kiss himself, so plush, so plump, when Maria, the Master, leaned close—to scrutinize the job, inspect for any misses or cracks; and Maria said, "This formula is new, expensive, can you tell, you shouldn't be able to tell there's anything on your lips, lightweight, that when you go and use a straw it should remain as white as it was before you used it, and your lips as red as red"; and so Mario, without thinking and with Maria so close, kissed the naked pair of lips hovering before him, then leaned back to inspect for any blots or smudges of transfer—was there any bit of red, any transfer?—and he thought nothing of the kiss, for it was just to see if the quality of the product justified its price—was there any bit of red, any transfer at all, he thought; he thought nothing of the kiss, as though it were mere playing, in the same way he had kissed his friend Anton's cheek when a whip of cream was stuck there—to his barkada's uproarious laughter—or when he kissed his classmate Geronimo's hand, for a play, in school, where Geronimo was an old doña and he, Mario, was a young mestizo returned from travels in Spain—to his barkada's restrained laughter—so if he could kiss the cream off of Anton, if he could kiss the hand of Doña Geronimo with the innocence of a grandson, why should his kiss for Mario, now Maria, bear malice—

Unaware that a pair of birds had flown head-first into the closed windows, that their phones face-down on the carpet were vibrating, ringing, lighting up, but until they turn and check the screen, it was as though there was no disturbance in the world, not even a forming puddle as big as an outstretched hand, threatening to spread further and further along the parquet floor to the wooden feet of cabinets—

Thinking, yes, what should've been the first thought: that they have kissed before, anyway, even before Jennifer was a girl

thick at the right places, when the idea of a Jennifer was only in the dreams of the oldest boys in their class; once, when Mario, fatigued from a volleyball bout, all but collapsed in his friend Mario's arms, in his room, in this house, and Mario, without thinking, did as his mother would've done, kissed the sleeping Mario's face—but his face turned in sleep, and so Mario kissed the corner of Mario's mouth instead; or, another, when in the basement of a club in deficit (that it now served its strongest drinks to the almost-adults who could pay their way in) Mario, dared by the bottle to kiss someone, chose Maria—only after Maria nodded yes, and then said yes with words and voice, then pulled Mario by the neck when Mario blunderingly asked again if Maria did in fact say yes, just to check, to be sure if Maria did in fact say yes—

Ignorant of the time, now, yes, what did the sky in bright orange mean?—the sunlight, low enough now, able to seep through the curtained window's veil, but the heat still couldn't, though it tried to penetrate the glass and the blinds; but the heat that pulsed in the far wilderness outside soon infiltrated their little world, like spies; heat emerged from themselves, themselves now traitors to their small kingdom of cool and comfort; they created heat that countermanded the power of the wheezing machine, there, on the topmost horizontal of the far wall; a heat unfannable, unquenchable, because it wasn't truly there; couldn't be felt by anyone else if anyone else were there; burning only for the pair now entangled on the long, spacious sofa; yes, the lipless Maria could feel it there, in the silence that hung, no matter if there was a transfer of red at last: behold, a transfer, a taint of red, not on her lips, but on her cheeks, though the lips had not landed there—

Forced to remember another time long ago when, in the darkness that followed the blowing of birthday candles, he kissed his friend on the cheek, a silent, wordless greeting, well received; and the reciprocal the next day, when it was his turn (and that was what had ended the summer last year, the end of June) but it was useless now to think about the past—and Maria now assaulted, but willing, at the lips once again, did think, and Mario, kissing and kissing Maria on instinct, did think—

GELLACO
Mario and Maria

Thinking back to the memorable nothings of their first conversation, their first outing, their first fight, their first fight over Jennifer where neither knew what it was they were fighting about (only realizing, later, that it was about Jennifer), and today, their first, true kiss, a kiss awake and sober; a kiss that landed on another pair of lips that must've felt like their own, as though they were just kissing themselves—but his friend, Mario, had loved Jennifer, and not Maria, and thus he couldn't love Maria; he couldn't love Maria because he couldn't love Mario, Mario the Master who had created Maria out of an initial Mario; for, if Mario (the other, the friend) loved Mario (the Master, now Maria), then Mario would be in love with Mario; Mario in love with himself: a self-love, the truest homosexual, the love of the same, homo-romantic, narcissistic— "Why, yes," Maria thought, "he didn't, he couldn't, and that's why he could kiss me so freely because to kiss me was nothing to him—he must've squirmed when he kissed Jennifer, shivered at the whirlwind of butterflies in his stomach rising to his throat like tsunami-vomit, unlike now, but—"; a kiss and another interrupted the thought and then resumed, "why, yes, perhaps Mario was not Maria and Maria was not Mario—"

Kissing again, and again, on the lips like a game, and Maria waited, head close by, waiting until it stopped; and the other Mario was staring at Maria, still lipless, because the lipstick's essence, true to its claim, stubbornly stuck onto his lips without transferring over to hers—and so he'll go again, and again, until he is pushed away, or until Maria miraculously gains her own red lips and loses her red cheeks, too red now, even more than when he had first put on too thick a layer of the artificial blush—

Wrestling, now, initiated by Maria because Maria thought she can't just sit there waiting to be kissed again; because they had too much energy, still, and had done nothing so far but paint their faces and kiss and test the stickiness of lipstick; too much energy and nothing else to do, no, not today in the dead middle of summer, when school's end was a far way back and school's start was a far way onward, so there really was nothing to do; and their parents,

who weren't children, had no energy like they did for wrestling, none for kissing, no energy even for lazing, resting on the sofa, where now, both Mario and Maria were fighting to pin the other down, laughing through the arm that locked down the throat, lightly, firmly pulling at the hair in an effort to get their positions reversed—yes, better to tussle it out now because there was only half the summer left, and so far, no word from Jennifer, from Anton, from Geronimo, because last they heard Jennifer was pursued by Anton but was with Geronimo, or else Jennifer was with Anton but was pursued by Geronimo—how difficult were their lives, in the tangled knot of a triangle; a pair was sensible; better to settle with a pair, though you were alone, alone together, wrestling, kissing on the long sofa in this cold pocket of midsummer; and soon, too soon, their pair of birthdays would come by, one day after the other, marking the end of summer, the end of June, yes, but also marking the long continuance of this long year because it was only halfway to December—

Wrestling, still, and sweating now, Mario's and Maria's faces melting off, like candles, a pool of color at the eyes, chocolate at the cheeks, smudged by a backhand, by a thumb treating the trickle of sweat as though they were tears, swiping them away; and they didn't know the cause of their joy, only that it was present and enduring and pulsing, like heat waves that persisted even through the polite buzzing of a doorbell—joy all the while, joy unending, laughing, screaming, now, the accidental spurt of spit from laughing and screaming, mixing with the sweat that was already on their faces even though the room was cold, too cold, that hours before they had goosebumps on their necks and arms—they had no goosebumps now—but now, the once-polite, now-impatient buzzing of a doorbell—

Scrambling away from each other, rushing, trying to think but unable to think: should they shut the air conditioner and open the windows to let the dying heat of afternoon inside, a desperate attempt before Mother or Father discover their transgression; they now prayed for fire and noontime sunlight as fervently as they had

GELLACO
Mario and Maria

once begged for coolness and respite—but warmth wouldn't leave their guilty bodies and infiltrate the air, no, even the sun was saying it was spent, making slow haste to hide behind the horizon; the family picture with metal frames was almost ice to the touch, and a sheet of mist settled on the glass pane, obscuring the faces of Mother, Father, and Mario—there was a rosary on the tabletop by the door, a rosary amidst a stash of rusted keys, and taking it up to pray, anyone would recognize the lingering chill on its pearl-like beads—but Mother or Father, yes, they had a key with them, they always do, and if they had a key, they wouldn't need to use the doorbell—for Mother and Father must have a key to their own house—yet another buzz, angrier now, and Maria was the first who reached the door, Mario behind—

Hesitating still at the door, the pair unwilling to meet their fate: fate, always unknown until you open the door to face it: what if Father had indeed forgotten his key—oh, the pounding fury of Father, received on the buttocks, a leather belt meeting flesh—for disobeying, yes, disobeying the rules set in place about the air conditioner, but in part, also for dabbling with Maria, dabbling too close with Maria, or if Mother had misplaced her key—oh, the quiet anger of Mother, as quiet and pervasive as the chill she prohibited—replacing the machine was more expensive than having it repaired, she had said quietly—too quietly that they didn't listen: and now, perhaps, no scolding, just revocations: revoking allowances, the privileges of no-curfew, the tacit permission to have Mario over, anytime, without notice—

Pulling the door open, one hand each on the chilled, smooth doorknob—to see a retreating, thickset back that didn't resemble Mother or Father: "Sir," Maria called, "yes, sir, what is it?"—and, the figure turned back around, walked back to the door, revealing a soft beardless face and an even thicker front, with a belt bag clipped around a trunk-like torso; and a kind but forceful mezzo said: "I'm here to fix an air conditioner—Number Four, Molave Street, yes?—almost five years old, wheezing, in need of a new filter maybe or a

drain line—might break soon—leaking too much, I can hear it from here—what, no rag or bucket underneath to catch the drops?—oh, the poor floor—are your parents home, can I come in, uh, Ma’am, uh, Sir, uh, Mamsir?”

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