

THE CONFESSION

*The Great Hall, Palazzo della Signoria
Florence, Wednesday 18 April 1498*

It's late afternoon as Fra Girolamo Savonarola shuffles onto the raised stage at the front of the Hall of the Five Hundred. He drags his sandalled feet, scuffing the stone floor with a *shush, shush, shush*.

Savonarola commissioned this chamber, currently the largest room in Europe. It was built to hold the five-hundred-strong Grand Council, part of the new Republic of Florence established under his authority. The vast walls are plain, not yet frescoed. Through the high windows a clear spring light floods into the room from the west.

The full council watch him walk on in silence. They are seated in neat rows, but standing behind them and around them are a substantial portion of the male population of Florence. Everyone is perfectly still and listening. It hasn't rained in Florence for a week and the men have walked dust from the street into the room. It

floats above them like a scum on a broth, swimming in the warm air, rising high.

Savonarola looks out at the gathered crowd and admits that God is not talking to him. He made it up.

He has been lying to them for years.

He admits that his prophecies were so accurate because he knew certain things in advance: anyone could see that Lorenzo de' Medici was desperately ill, that Pope Innocent VIII was obese and spectacularly debauched, that the King of Naples was very old. Accurately predicting their deaths was a cheap trick that he did to get power for himself. He didn't foresee the French Army invading Brescia six years before war was even declared, he just got lucky. He didn't foretell the coming of plague, famine and war to Florence. It was a coincidence that those things happened years after he said they would.

There is no mention of the Charles the Affable prophecy because that's impossible to explain.

The shocking announcement reverberates around the room, echoes over the heads of the gathered crowd. Some of them are here because they couldn't believe he was actually going to do this. They still cherish their belief in him, have given up so much for him; they needed to hear it themselves to really take it in. Others have always known he was a fraud and a liar and have been waiting years for him to own up. But even among them the mood isn't triumphant. Even they feel something die.

Savonarola hangs his head and sags with shame.

He is not speaking these words himself. They're being read out by one of his inquisitors from his confession, extracted under torture, written down by a scribe and signed by him. But he's standing there and he's not disputing it.

A fellow Dominican, Fra Domenico, was arrested with him and subjected to even more intense torture, but Domenico isn't in the hall confessing in front of everyone. He held fast: he still ecstatically and completely believes Savonarola was chosen and directed by God. But it's not a fair comparison because they are being asked different questions: Domenico is being asked if he still has faith in Savonarola. Savonarola is being asked if he still believes in himself.

Savonarola stands as the full confession is read in a loud braying baritone, his head slumping forward on his weak neck. His nose looks bigger because his face is drawn. His shoulders are small and sloped. They've all heard him speak: he's a famous preacher. They're familiar with the rhythms and cadences of his voice and know that the document doesn't sound like him. But it's signed by him and he's there, in front of them, owning it. There's no doubt it is his.

I lied.

I am no prophet.

I have not received messages from God.

I said these things to get power.

I lied to you.

I was vainglorious.

I was informed of sundry illnesses and so could foretell the deaths of certain powerful men.

I was told the French were coming.

I lied to you all.

Four pages of this. Four pages. At the end of the reading he is asked by officials if it is his own true confession.

He nods.

Not good enough. Say it.

It is my own true confession, he says.

Louder, for the people at the back of the room.

IT IS MY OWN TRUE CONFESSION.

His voice clatters to the high ceiling. It resonates from bare wall to bare wall until it dies away and is just a memory.

A pause.

Savonarola hears air sucked slowly in through teeth, sniffs, affirming grunts, despairing sighs. A Sniveller, one of his loyalists, sobs quietly at the back of the room. Savonarola's life is nothing but fractured fragments, connected, somehow. Bits of moments. This moment.

His withered arms are bound behind his back. His knees are swollen. Everything hurts. He looks up to the high windows and the light, at the dust motes swimming aimlessly in the warm air above their heads, and imagines that each speck is an iota of faith leaving a person in the room.

THREE FIRES

He is a preacher. His life's mission is to bring people to God, to faith.

He didn't think anything else could hurt him, but this blow lands so deep that it takes him back thirty years, to Ferrara and Laodamia Strozzi.

II

AN INCEL MISHEARING

Ferrara 1470

What a wonderful thing is love. What a glorious, febrile thing is young love. Immoderate and wild, uncontained and uncontainable, fathoms of thick cream that can be curdled in an instant by a single acid drop.

Laodamia Strozzi moves like a mist. Her skin is the colour of milk. She glides on tiny slippered feet through a landscape of marbled columns and red frescos.

Girolamo Savonarola is a brilliant young man. That's the consensus in the family. Born third of seven children, he's the stand-out, and today his glorious adult life begins: he has chosen her for his wife. He has come here to formally propose.

Girolamo is skinny and confident with a bright future and a magnificent Roman nose. He's wearing his best suit of clothes: brown velvet, neat with very little adornment. He wants to look adult and serious. They'll talk about this day for the rest of their lives and it's important that he gets it right. He hates all these ribbons

and velvets and fur trims that everyone is wearing these days. He's a serious person.

He steps up from the dusty street and knocks at the huge door. His breathing is shallow. There is an outbreak of plague in the poorer parts of the city, but he knows his hands are only sweating with excitement. He feels fine otherwise.

It is a warm day. The sun hits the front of the villa, and a breeze whips up dust from the street. Carts pass along the street behind him; the morning market is breaking up a couple of streets away, outside the ducal palazzo.

He lives in the villa next door to Laodamia, across a narrow alley. He and Laodamia see each other through open windows and at Mass. She's almost as devout as he is. Sometimes, when she is walking back from Communion with her lids lowered and her hands clasped in contemplation, her glance darts up to find his. Their gaze locks. Sometimes, after a service, he rushes back to watch from the window as she arrives home and stands on these very steps that he is standing on now.

After today their families will meet. There will be visits, chaperones, rooms of silent aunties and announcements, and the families will attend Mass together on feast days. This will go on until they are old enough and Girolamo is a qualified doctor. Then a ceremony. Then a home and life and a wedding bed. They are from similar houses, similar backgrounds. It's a good match.

Giro's grandfather, Dr Michele Savonarola, was court

physician to the ruling family in Ferrara. Michele didn't like his only son, Niccolò, and favoured his grandson Girolamo instead. Michele took him to his side and tutored the small, intense boy. He could see that he was special, clever, better than the others and destined for greatness. Michele was a professor in two universities and published books on topics as diverse as midwifery and history. He was a public intellectual, a polymath. He was exactly what we now think of as a Renaissance man, but he rejected all this new thinking, was fervently anti-humanist and anti-classicist. He told Girolamo to trust the word of the Bible over the Church, believe his faith over the evidence of his eyes.

Michele died four years ago and left his fortune to Girolamo's father. He was right about Niccolò, who is neither special nor clever. He tries to invest the inheritance, even dabbles in usury, which is a mortal sin, but he doesn't get security for the loans and loses all of it. He's a disappointment.

Girolamo's mother is a Mantuan aristocrat who married for money. She's counting on Giro to save them from penury: what little money they have left will be spent on Girolamo's education so that he can be a doctor like Michele. He will open doors for the rest of them.

Precarious status is just one of the things Girolamo has in common with Laodamia. She is the daughter of a rich family perpetually on the brink of disgrace. The Strozzi are bankers, usurers – activities for the desperate, looking to get rich quick. The Strozzi were

rivals with the Medici family back in Florence but lost a power struggle and were exiled to Ferrara. But this is not the worst of Laodamia's shames. She's illegitimate, a stain on her soul that she cannot shake off with prayer or devotions. Everyone knows. She's shunned by many as a walking embodiment of sin.

But Girolamo doesn't care. He can overlook the sin to see the girl. He loves her.

From inside the villa footsteps are coming towards him. The insert door opens, a small tradesman's door cut into the large formal door. A matron he has never seen before stands there. She's wearing an apron with a stain on the hem, has an old, puckered burn scar across her forehead and white hairs on her chin. He has made it clear what he is calling for, as a suitor for Laodamia Strozzi's hand. So, it would be more proper for the full door to be opened and for him to be greeted by a prominent member of the family.

Savonarola is a little bit confused by this breach of protocol, but the Strozzi's are not from here. Customs are different in Florence. Or perhaps plague has touched the family, and everyone is ill, but they're letting him in because they don't want to draw attention. Then another more melancholy possibility occurs to him: the Strozzi's despise this illegitimate daughter. A high-ranking family member will not be sent to welcome her suitor. Laodamia will not be treated as shop-soiled in their house, he resolves. He will not allow this.

The matron looks at his prominent nose, has been told that the person calling has this nose, is using it to identify him. Her eyes flick left. She knows he's come from the Savonarola family home next door.

He's alert for signs of fever, smells for sage – a sure sign that a house is suffering – but he sees nothing.

She stands back to let him in. Girolamo steps into the hall.

The matron nods him to a wooden bench, turns her back on him and walks away. Girolamo sits dutifully, setting his gift on his knees. He has brought a small present of silk ribbon in a green box. He chose something modest, to show that he's not materialistic, but Laodamia will know that. As an illegitimate girl her dowry is very minor. He wants her to know that he doesn't care. His mind is on more important things. He loves her.

He is left waiting, listening and sniffing, still looking for signs of illness in the house: piles of bloody sick sheets, shuttered rooms. The hallway is tall and narrow, a room that servants pass through on their way to other rooms, but straight ahead is an open arch to the central courtyard and three balconies, one above the other. It's quiet in the open courtyard, but nothing makes him think they're ill. From the kitchens on the top floor a sweet, soft smell of roasting onion filters down. Life is going on.

It isn't plague, he's sure. It doesn't mean that. Laodamia deserves better than this. This should be a joyful day.

He commits the sights and sensations to memory as he drums his toes inside his shoes. This is a special day. They'll tell their grandchildren about today.

Through the wall next to him he hears steps, leather-soled shoes on a tiled floor. Servants wear felted shoes to keep the place peaceful, but the wearer of these shoes is happy to fill the house with noise. A householder. He hears them on his left, passing, he thinks, from room to room until they stop beyond closed double doors next to him. A pause. Someone whispers. A woman. Urgent orders. A reproach. Someone whispers an apology and then the doors open.

A young maid appears in the doorway, bows to Savonarola and motions to him to come into the room. He stands up, experiencing the moment through several time frames: from the distant future as a wistful old man, from the present as an ardent lover, from two minutes from now when it is over. This is the moment just before he spoke to Laodamia for the very first time. Laodamia, his wife of so many years. Girolamo takes a step towards his fate, holding the gift out in front of him as he follows the maid through the door.

Laodamia is sitting in a large chair in the middle of a huge white room, her hands on the rests, fingers ringless, wrists covered. She wears grey, trimmed with red; not too showy, which he likes.

This is the first time he has looked straight at her. Her eyes are green and lined with blonde lashes. Her eyebrows are so pale they're hardly visible. Her nose is

an arrow, her lips a russet bud. She may have been biting them to make them more alluring. He has heard of girls doing that.

The tall woman serving as chaperone is a relative but not a prominent one. She stands behind Laodamia's chair, her hand touching her blessed shoulder as if it is nothing. Laodamia holds her knees together, ankles together, eyes down. A small smile plays on her lips.

She is extraordinarily symmetrical. She is order.

He tells them what they know already: his name, his lineage, that he lives next door and is a student at the university, will be studying to be a physician like his grandfather, Dr Michele Savonarola, who served the House of Este and was a professor at Padua and Ferrara. He explains that he has brought Laodamia this modest gift. He steps forward and offers the box to her. She looks at it appreciatively, at him, and then turns her cheek to her chaperone to ask if she should take it. The chaperone steps forward, takes the box on her behalf and steps away.

What does that mean? Will she give it to Laodamia later? Is he talking too much? Should they speak now? He doesn't know.

Giro takes a breath and delivers the eloquent speech he has been practising: I have watched you, Miss Laodamia, at Mass. I know you are devout and a daily Communicant. I have inquired about you and your reputation, and I am impressed. I will one day be a famous doctor. I hope

you will find this agreeable: I am proposing a union, a future marriage and, with your permission, will begin our courtship.

He finishes. He thinks it went quite well and he's glad it's over. He was nervous.

Laodamia clears her throat. She settles her feet flat on the floor, the tips of her silver slippers peeking out from under the heavy red hem.

'Girolamo Savonarola, I have been told that you were asking about me and my attendance at Mass. But there is something you do not know . . .'

Her voice is higher than he expected, mellifluous, soft and girlish, the accent pure Tuscan, though she was raised right here in Ferrara where the accent is more guttural. She stops, seems to smile and, looking down, leans forward just a little, squeezing the armrests of the chair.

'To me, you are nothing,' she says. 'You are not of my class. Your father is a feckless idiot. You have no money, and I would never stoop to marry you. I find you ridiculous.'

That's not what she says. No girl would say these things; girls, especially young girls, need to believe that they are good people. But this is what he hears her say. This is what he tells his biographer she said.

They all look at him, the maid, the chaperone, the girl. They're laughing at him.

He burns.

Shaking, Savonarola blurts out that she is a bastard

and no one else would want her. He was doing her a favour. He felt sorry for her.

Then he leaves, tripping over a flagstone in the hall. He turns the handle on the insert and pushes at the full door. It will not open. He can't get out. He's almost crying. He bangs the door with a weak fist. The hairy-chinned matron with the scar hears him banging frantically and comes to help him get out. As he steps into the street her hot hand slides across his shoulder, and she mutters that she's sorry for what just happened. The creature pities him.

He runs home.

Failure had never occurred to him. He's Girolamo. He is the stand-out. He can't take it in. She's a bastard from a family of usurers. He runs upstairs and hides in a room on the far side of the house, away from her, in a room with no windows. He stands in the dark, panting and sweating and trying to stop crying.

He can't accept it. He can't. He'd crash the moon into the earth before he accepts this.

Later, Savonarola will deny ever being attracted to anyone. The temptations of the flesh have never touched him. God has spared him the need for love. He does admit to being beguiled by Laodamia, but only briefly and because his older brother blurted it out to his first biographer. He said Girolamo mooned around after her, watched her through the window and tried to serenade her with his lute; that he proposed and how he was never, ever the same after she rejected

him. Later, after his brother dies, Savonarola denies it happened.

His family notice the weight loss, sleeplessness and profound melancholia. They notice that he turns left now when he goes out, to avoid crossing in front of the Strozzi villa. He walks the long way to university classes. He attends Mass at different times and becomes obsessed with the Church, with corruption in the Church, what needs to change in the Church.

His mother is worried. Girolamo is their only prospect now, their long-term proposition. Without him, they will end up destitute. If his mother knew what was said in the next-door villa, she'd start a feud with the Strozzi's, obsess about them and spread gossip and rumours, nasty stories, wishing them ill. So he tells no one.

Girolamo turns to a common vent for foiled grandiosity: poetry.

His themes are dark. Sadness. Despair. Disgust at the obvious corruption of the Church. Everyone can see it, but no one speaks out. Everyone is afraid. The Vatican sells redemption and positions and is full of sodomites. He's got a thing about sodomites. He writes of his disgust at the open corruption and wickedness played out in front of everyone.

Happy are those who by rapine live, he writes.

Teenage angst is hardly unique to 1470. Girolamo might have fallen in love with someone else, gotten over it eventually, but for the civil war.

Even for Italy, the brutality in Ferrara is shocking.