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*Rica to Usbek in ****

The other day I was in a company where I was having quite a good time. There were women of all ages there : one of eighty, one of sixty, and one of forty who had a niece who might have been twenty or twenty-two. A certain instinct led me to approach the latter, and she whispered in my ear : What do you say about my aunt, who at her age wants to have suitors, and still pretends to be pretty ? She is wrong, I said ; that is a role that only befits you. A moment later I found myself with her aunt, who said to me : What do you say about that woman who is at least sixty and today spent over an hour at her toilet ? She is wasting her time, I said, and it takes your charms to have to attend to that. I went to this unfortunate woman of sixty, and was pitying her inwardly, when she whispered into my ear : Is there anything so ridiculous ? Do you see that woman who is eighty years old and wears bright red ribbons ? She is trying to act young, and she succeeds, for that is close to childish. Oh god, I said to myself, will we forever sense only what is ridiculous in others ? It is perhaps a good thing, I then said, for us to take consolation in other people's foibles. However I was enjoying myself, and I said : we have sufficiently climbed ; let us descend now and begin with the old lady who is at the top. Madame, you two look so much alike, you and the woman with whom I was just speaking, that you might well be two sisters, and I don't think either of you is older than the other. Quite so, monsieur, she said, when one of us dies, the other will have reason to fear : I don't think there are two days' difference between us. Once I had trapped this decrepit woman, I went to the sixty-year-old. You must decide a wager I have made, madame : I bet that you and that lady, pointing to woman who was forty, were the same age. My word, she said, I don't think there are six months' difference. All good so far ; let us continue. I again descended, and went up to the woman of forty. Madame, be kind enough to tell me whether you jest when you say that young lady at the next table is your niece ? You are as young as she is ; there is even something wan about her face that certainly does not apply to yours, and the lively tones of your complexion... Hold on, she said : I am her aunt, but her mother was at least twenty-five years older than me. We had different mothers. I heard my late sister say that her daughter and I were born the same year. That is what I said, madame, and I was not wrong to be surprised.

My dear Usbek, women who feel themselves declining in advance by the loss of their attractiveness would like to retreat toward youth. Now why would they not try to fool others when they make every effort to fool themselves and evade the most unpleasant of all thoughts ?

Paris this 3rd day of the moon of Chalval 1713