

# **2016** *Tales*

GOLDEN BOOK HOTELS



Whoever has had the pleasure of spending a vacation in the "friendly" company of a good book knows the marvelous magic of losing track of the boundary between experience in first person and that acquired through reading.

Remembrance of a vacation in these cases transports us back to the book that gave it inspiration. Reading-matter that is fascinating and thought provoking renders us more sensitive, reflective, and ready to enjoy to the limit every detail of our stay away from home. Our journey also becomes an inner journey in this way.

The Golden Book Hotel Association is formed of a select group of companies operating in the tourist sector. These companies have chosen to promote their image by means of an elegant gesture: the gift of a book to their guests. The Association's members - be they hotels or country estates - share the view that Tourism largely signifies Culture, and that attention to detail is an expression of qualified hospitality.

#### www.goldenbookhotels.it



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Last autumn/winter, the members of our pool of authors each wrote an unpublished short story during their stays in various Golden Book Hotels: the suggested theme for the stories was the actual hotel providing hospitality, which set the stage or was even the protagonist of the stories.

The tales come to light in this collection right on 23 April 2016, the World Book and Copyright Day – also known as the Day of Books and Roses, and Saint George's day.

The aim of this Day – an event held under the patronage of UNESCO – is to encourage people to discover the pleasure of reading and value authors' contributions to the social and cultural advancement of humanity.

Golden Book Hotels want to make their own small contribution to this goal by being true to their mission of combining holiday time, relaxation and the pleasure of reading, while at the same time promoting the work of non-professional writers.

The collection which we are offering is our way sharing with you all the genuine literary passion of its authors, who we will continue to support with great pleasure on all the #23APRILE to come. Enjoy!

GBH - The President

Maus Pally



Vins Gallico, the finalist writer at the 2015 Strega award with his novel *Final Cut - l'amore non resiste* (Fandango libri), will be the special host of project #23APRILE.

The author has also published *Portami Rispetto* (Rizzoli 2010) and has worked as a publishing consultant and translator. Until 2015 he was head of the Fandango Incontro bookstore. Today he writes for II Fatto Quotidiano and Pagina99 and is a member of the steering committee of "Piccoli Maestri", a cultural association which promotes reading in schools.

#### **Foreword**

#### by Vins Gallico

Our lives are tangles: of numbers, places, impressions and stories. When I was a child April 23 was synonymous with adventure, as it was the day of the fight against the dragon. The city where I grew up had chosen Saint George as its patron saint, like many other port cities in the Mediterranean. Many churches displayed the image of this Turkish super-martyr, immortalised in fantasy hero poses as he drove his sword into the throat of a fire-breathing winged monster.

This is just a version of one of many pagan myths that crossed paths with Christianity.

Religions, like dreams and ideas, are tangles.

April 23 changed its meaning when I was a young kid and spring was in full bloom; I would wear short-sleeved shirts and my hormones were raging. The city festival of Saint George was on the 23rd and Liberation Day was just two days after that, meaning a longer holiday. A longer holiday meant free time, escape and a trip.

Back then my destinations were not hotels; I would sleep on acquaintances' couches, yoga mats borrowed from friends who had gone away to university; when I was lucky I would be given small storage rooms turned into guestrooms with loose and squeaky camp beds, layers of dust on the floor and cobwebs in the corners.

During my university days I happened to go to Barcelona (a feat I have come to repeat several times) and there I got to know yet another April 23. You met people in the streets carrying books and roses: Unesco had selected that day as World Book Day due to some strange connection with poets who were born and died on that date. Cata-

lan bookstores had taken up the habit of giving a rose to anyone who bought a book.

Playing up these coincidences and mixing the Julian and the Gregorian calendars it could be said that 23 April is the day Miguel de Cervantes and William Shakespeare died; but then again, Shakespeare was also born on 23 April, as was Vladimir Nabokov.

This was enough to celebrate this day as the day of literature and of those strange, absurd and marvellous objects we call books.

But what are books? It would be pointless for me to display my boundless digital prowess by copying and pasting dozens of definitions on the matter from Wikiquote.

To me – and I mean it sincerely, almost naively – a book is a window on a life (it can be another life, or it can be my own as seen from another standpoint).

Well, without that window my everyday life would be stale, filthy and stifling.

Sure, there are beautiful books – or marvellous views – and bad books, or blind windows blocked by a wall.

Obviously when I write of books and windows I mean hard copy and digital books.

Thus, as a window enthusiast (enthusiast with an addiction, I should say), I am pleased to present (that is how to say it, isn't it?) the collection of stories that you will find further along. This is big! You'll get a book that is a window full of many other tiny windows.

Indeed the stories in this collection come from different places and voices, and in some cases even from beyond Italian borders. Andrea Cattaneo will tell you about Milan and Lucia Sallustio, Roberta Minghetti and Lella Cervia about Tuscany, Ornella Fiorentini will write about Turin and Barbara Gramegna about Spain.

The stories are very diverse: some are raw, others are oeniric, social, culinary or artistic, but they are all about hotels or were written in one.

A couple of points should be made now.

The 20 selected stories are not the work of 20 authors. The same author can be featured with one or more of his or her stories. This is to say, for them writing is not a whim or merely a hobby. Indeed there is a certain amount of care in the wording of some, a skilled mastering in lexicon of others, and in the best stories (whose titles I won't reveal, even at gunpoint) the architecture is simply flawless.

The second point is the graphic quality of the collection: it outlines the map of a country with places offering hospitality and relaxation.

This is why the idea of the Golden Book Hotels is such a great one. It is a welcome gift, to each according to their favourite setting.

And then there's another element about this book, and it's a secret. I think it brings together different forms of solitude.

With time, as I left inflatable mattresses and couches behind – not only as a cultural choice but because my back was getting worse and the kick of the trip no longer made up for the fatigue and shortness of breath – in brief, when I began to saty at hotels, especially during festivals or when presenting a new book, the feeling I got was always strong.

There was estrangement and solitude, but also the feeling of being welcomed and free to let yourself go; in a hotel the self digs deeper into itself, as it breaks the forces of habit and no longer craves its daily order. It is the place where I, personally, feel the loneliest.

At the same time hotels are places where you can imagine being someone else, or someplace else. This journey is a shift of our identi-

ties, a mise en scene to get to know our own self better. This collection helped me understand that I am not crazy and alone.

If this relaxation and immersion is what you seek, if you desire a touch of melancholy and a few smiles, these stories are made for you. Other lives, other windows, other glances, other sophisticated tastes, other luxuries, other poverties, other escapes.

Because the walls that surround you have welcomed it all without judging. Only to make us live longer, wider, further, better.

Because maybe our lives are not just tangles.

Our lives are windows, but also rooms.

VG



www.satellitelibri.it





### The Places

Interactive Map







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## Courmayeur (Aosta)

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## 1

## Princess Virginia by Ornella Fiorentini

#### AUBERGE DE LA MAISON

As soon as the last visitor had followed the slim tour guide to the ground floor of Palazzo San Giacomo, Princess Virginia shut out the sun. At midday, it shone much too forcefully into the unusual square room in the noble wing where she had been twice before. She had come back to Grisa that Saturday in late June for the express purpose of saying goodbye to Venus. Like the goddess, she also had generous curves, firm breasts, blue eyes and a milk and pomegranate complexion that made her seem more like a seventeenth century painting than a flesh and blood woman. Her body recalled the harmony of a Jean-Baptiste Lully minuet performed at the court of the Sun King. Her long-time friend, the dumpy, dark, bespectacled Irma, had given Virginia the nickname princess not only for her looks, which showed no sign of fading, but also for the proud look that animated her face when she fought for the noble cause of protecting artistic treasures against the pigheadedness of local authorities.

They had shared a passion for art ever since they had been at high school together. Together with a handful of other supporters, they had founded Arte & Vita, a cultural association that had courageously launched an awareness campaign to raise the funds needed to restore Italy's ill-treated monuments to their ancient splendour. On Sundays, rucksack on back, wearing faded jeans and tennis shoes, they travelled side roads, those ignored by traffic, to find ruined castles, now home to lizards and rodents, crumbling watchtowers and country churches cracked by seismic shocks. They hunted for mouldy paintings and frescoes disfigured by graffiti. Virginia in particular, with her unshakeable faith, not in God but in Beauty - held to be the inexhaustible source of karmic evolution - never let herself become disheartened by difficulties when she came across a dulled image of an angel or a Virgin Mary with child at her breast, covered in the dust of centuries. She filled in the Discovery Card, a document she had created herself, which would be discussed with those who did restoration work, and then religiously filed by Irma in a folder. The tireless Virginia wrote biting articles for the local newspapers, protesting the neglect also of Palazzo San Giacomo. She had fired poison darts at the political classes, attracting their dislike, when she had found out that a disused sugar factory just a hundred and thirty-seven metres away was to become a polluting biomass power station.

Situated near the banks of the Lamone river, and once considered the little Versailles of Romagna, Palazzo San Giacomo now languished after being bombed during the

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last war and then plundered of its statues and daubed with paint. What remained of the original architectural structure and the noteworthy series of seventeenth century mythological frescoes should have been preserved as a testimony to consummate skill. So it was with good reason that Virginia feared that the noise and fine dust from the future biomass power station would have inflicted incurable damage not only on the monument, but also on this corner of Paradise where one could go for walks or bicycle rides in the shadow of history.

Venus, the goddess of beauty and love, could not allow man to be robbed of such a treasure. Irma, unlike her friend, was a practical forty year-old who had steeled herself against dreaming. Was it worth it in Italy? She believed that Princess Virginia would soon get herself into trouble. She worried about her safety. She warned her, advising prudence because sooner or later, the powers that be would shut her mouth if she carried on needling them. She had advised her to take a holiday far from that once-generous land that now seemed run through with a uncontrollable self-destructive vein. Albeit reluctantly, Princess Virginia had promised her that she would soon leave for the mountains, where she could stay fully-clothed. She would not have to exhibit her buttery, old-fashioned curves as she would have had to in a swimsuit. To avoid both the admiring cries of men involved in endless games of beach tennis and the sarcastic comments of the thin, tanned lizard-women of the Adriatic Riviera, Virginia never went to the beach. She was regularly criticized by her mother, however.

A simple, hot-tempered woman who had come down from the Forlí hills, she repeated the same old two questions, which her daughter knew by heart: "Why do you always have to do the opposite of what normal people do? How do you think you're going to find a husband if you stay shut up in the house on Sundays?"

That Saturday morning, standing at the kitchen stove, she had looked her daughter up and down as she sat drinking coffee. With the wary, crafty expression of someone who already envisions piles of money, she had put a third, crucial question: "What if... you and Irma opened a *piadina* stand between Palazzo San Giacomo and the new biomass power station?"

The hot coffee in Virginia's mouth had gone down the wrong way. She had rolled her eyes, which had gone from blue to grey and then as dark as a lake with no moon. A *piadina* stand, with the inevitable line of cars, motors running, parked illegally in the ancient garden, regurgitating hungry customers with radios clamped to their ears to hear the football match, ready to dash off towards Rimini, would have been the straw that broke the camel's back. Venus would never have forgiven it. "Enough!" shouted Virginia, who usually never lost her patience.

She jumped up and left the kitchen, slamming the door behind her.

"Auberge de La Maison, good morning. How may I help you?" a polite female voice with a slight French accent greeted her on the telephone.

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In an excited tone, Virginia had replied, "I'd like to spend some time relaxing in Valle d'Aosta. Yes, in Entrèves. But I expect the hotel is already fully booked".

There was a moment's silence, then the soft female voice had gone on, "Well, yes, it is, but we take pride in always satisfying new guests. Give me a little time to see if we can accommodate you at Auberge de La Maison. I'll call you back".

"Thank you," Virginia had murmured gratefully.

She felt drained. Perhaps Irma really was right. It was time to pack her bags and leave behind the same old places where you always met the same old people, but first she had to at least try to understand Venus's secret. Wherever she was portrayed, she appeared luminous and serene. Virginia also wanted to be so, but how could she escape the feeling of inadequacy that dogged her?

To make sure that the sun did not shine into the square room, she gently closed and shuttered the two windows overlooking the main entrance of Palazzo San Giacomo, built as a summer residence for Count Guido Carlo. She couldn't help noticing the orchards of flourishing fruit trees. The Grisa countryside was a veritable exultation of grass, flowers and ears of wheat. Rainbows of sensual colour also flashed from the silent wings of butterflies. From the river banks came the faint chirping of cicadas hidden away in the shade of the reeds.

Virginia's bad temper was the only discordant note. It did, however, blend with the chaotic, noisy, nearby

Adriatic Riviera, overhung with a muggy, grey pall. She felt suffocated at the thought of having to spend another summer there. On the other hand, she imagined herself immediately surrounded by limpid blue skies and clean air in spectacular Entrèves valley at the foot of Mont Blanc. She was going to attempt the climb to the top. Used to putting herself to the test, she would try, with the help of a mountain guide, to climb up to the most beautiful sky in Italy, artfully created by the good Lord. She had already bought climbing boots and a harness so she could drink her fill of blueness. The razor-sharp peaks of Val d'Aosta were waiting for her. She fervently hoped that the Auberge de La Maison would call her back. She waited until her eyes were used to the darkness of the square room. Anxiously, she looked up at the frescoed vault where Venus was portrayed among clouds and billowing pink veils, her hands reaching out to capture the sun's rays in a prism. "It's unusual iconography for a boudoir," the tour guide had said shortly before.

"The illusion created by the use of trompe-l'œil is brilliant," noted Virginia, captivated by the iridescent, mother-of-pearl flashes that came from the fake crystal. Trickles of artfully applied light-coloured paint ran along the goddess' arms and buxom bosom, making them as milky as opals. Princess Virginia felt proud, because her skin was the same colour. She loosened her plait. Her hair flowed freely over her shoulders, as golden as ripe wheat. Even her curls mirrored Venus's flowing locks. How had a German painter, arriving in

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Rome three centuries before, been able to paint Princess Virginia as a goddess without ever seeing her?

Cobwebs hung from the flaking shutters. They swayed in a draught of cold air that raised a cloud of dust. It enveloped Virginia like an unexpected little whirlwind, making her turn around just in time to see, from the corner of her eye, an elderly nobleman walking in the dim light of the marble corridor leading to the stairs. He wore a white wig, a blue, fitted coat with silver buttons, knee-length brown trousers, blue stockings and buckled leather shoes. He leant on a walking stick with a carved ivory knob. His waxy, angular face wore a bitter, dissatisfied grimace.

Virginia's heart leapt in her chest, but she did not let the strange apparition frighten her.

"He's the spitting image of his portrait in the Grisa museum." she thought.

She took a step back, which became a polite curtsey, and bowing her head slightly, she murmured, "Count Guido Carlo, my respects to you."

The nobleman's ghost came to a sudden halt. He raised the point of his walking stick slightly with the tired gesture of one who was used to walking in the corridor to while away eternity. In a deep voice he said, "I would prefer not to see you in the palace, Madam, you unnerve me."

"I? Why?" asked Virginia querulously, curtseying again.

"Your magnificent appearance is the same as that of the Roman princess with whom, alas, I became hope-

lessly infatuated in the year of our Lord, 1662. I ordered the painter Christoph Wörndle to immortalise her as Venus when her father arranged a marriage of pure convenience for her. My soul was so saddened that I was obliged to stay here to gaze upon her. I beg your pardon, Madam, but your presence disturbs me," the ghost replied gravely.

Virginia burst into tears. She could never have imagined her presence at Palazzo San Giacomo to be a nuisance! She curtsied for the third time, but when she raised her head, Count Guido Carlo had already disappeared. She ran to reopen the shutters, and the sun once more took possession of Venus's boudoir. She hurried towards the stairs and began running down at breakneck speed. Her head throbbing, she stopped only when her mobile rang. She dug into her bag to find it.

"Virginia," she barely whispered.

"Auberge de La Maison, good day to you! It's Alessandra. Do you know how lucky you are? Our best room, the one called The Princess Room, has just become available, the one with a view of the alpine meadow and the green majolica wood-burning stove. Up here it can still be useful in June," said the silvery voice from the day before.

"It's mine! I confirm the reservation. I need some time to get to Entrèves though, to drive five hundred and sixteen kilometres in my little car".

"We'll be expecting you. There's no hurry. Have a good trip."

Virginia sighed with relief. She dried her tears. She

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thought that if she kept her foot on the gas she would cross the threshold of the Auberge de La Maison at dinner time. She had a sweet tooth. She could already taste the dark chocolate, wild berries and whipped cream dessert the chef would have prepared to the delight of her palate, dulled by the fat and carbohydrate-free dishes that her mother cooked so she would lose weight. She promised herself at least two helpings to get the holiday off to a good start.

The next morning, Virginia opened her turquoise eyes in the Princess Room, and they lingered over the walnut dresser, its inviting colour as warm as a sip of cinnamon tea. She experienced a rare feeling of wellbeing. Sunlight filtered through the pale, half-open curtains. The warmth from the white eiderdown was delicious. She would linger in bed. She was in no hurry to have breakfast. Still full from the previous evening's lavish dinner, she was not hungry. Not just the dessert, but also the black bread and fontina cheese soup and the potato and mocetta ham salad had been delicious. A slight headache reminded her that perhaps she had exaggerated with the white wine. Served well-chilled, it had rolled down her throat delightfully. She had been consumed with anxiety about the long journey alone, and when she finally arrived at her destination, she had not denied herself an extra glass. Had they served her Blanc de Morgex or Chambave Muscat at the RosAlpina restaurant? She had not had time to read the label on the bottle that the waiter had left between her and

Victor, the alpine guide. Short, greying hair, a slim figure and a magnetic gaze, he had sat opposite her. He had given her admiring, sidelong glances without daring to say a word to her. From the cheerful talk of the other diners, Virginia had understood that Victor had accompanied them on excursions to the Torino Vecchio mountain refuge on the Col d'Entrèves. They talked of a false plain and then of crossing the real ridge where there was still snow. The green tablecloth on the long table went perfectly with the glowing orange candles. It was the first time Virginia had eaten in a room with wood-panelled walls decorated with paintings of fruit and flowers – still lifes where materiality and the sweetness of life triumphed.

"A very scenic crossing, wide open crevasses, but doable without crampons, if by chance you want to try tomorrow, Miss...?" Victor had finally burst out, going slightly red.

"Virginia" she had said, with the dazzling smile of a goddess.

"We start at ten sharp from the Auberge de La Maison" Victor had continued, pouring her another drop of white wine.

"Actually, I had thought of going to the Pré Saint Didier thermal baths..." Virginia had stalled, fiddling with the handle of her fork.

"Oh, I see" he had said, disappointed.

She could have kicked herself a moment later when Victor had got up from the table to follow an elderly couple to the bar. She had gone there too after a while

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to try the Valdostana coffee with grappa, orange punch, Génépy and cloves. Victor had shot her an amused look from the other side of the room.

Virginia stretched lazily. She glanced at her watch on the nightstand. It said nine o'clock. How long was it since she'd lazed in bed until that hour? The white telephone rang discreetly.

"Hello," said Virginia in surprise, lifting the receiver.

"Good morning. We are leaving at ten sharp for the excursion," said Victor's cheerful voice.

"Yes, yes, I remember... ten o'clock sharp. O.K., just time to have a shower and get dressed, then I'll be down," blurted Virginia, shooting up in bed in surprise.

"Are you sure you don't have to go to the spa to be reborn from the shell like Venus?" pressed Victor in a joking voice.

"Me, to the spa? No, I thought I'd take my time and go tomorrow or the day after tomorrow." replied Virginia, her bare feet on the parquet floor.

"I'll see you soon then. Excuse the question...but are you always so calm?" went on Victor gently.

"Almost always." Princess Virginia answered, surprising herself, and then hung up.

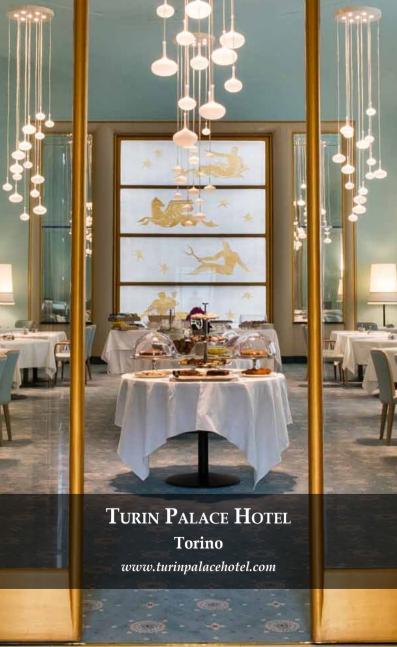
She went out onto the balcony. The sun kissed her lips and lingered over her tummy. Virginia smiled at it as if it were Victor. She went back into the room. Raising her hand raised in the air, she twirled around and danced a few steps of a minuet. Playfully, she curtsied to an imaginary partner. It was then, in the golden shaft of dust that entered from the balcony, that a stalwart aristocrat

appeared before her, a black beauty mark painted on his chin, wearing a fitted coat the colour of the moon. Virginia recognized the strong features of the young Count Guido Carlo, and started with fright. She would telephone Irma to make sure her latest, vehement article against the opening of the biomass power station had appeared in the newspaper. The gentleman gracefully held out a gift to her – a polychrome miniature of Palazzo San Giacomo. Virginia was jubilant. She tried in vain to take hold of it before the presence dissolved. The room was now flooded with sunlight. She was just in time to touch the cold edge of his silvery fitted coat. "Goodbye, Count Guido Carlo," she said.

She looked at her plump feet, the unvarnished nails. She found them beautiful. She lightly touched her rounded arms. She caressed a fleshy, rosy roll. She slowly slipped off her nightgown in front of the mirror. She was speechless when she saw Venus's luminous prism reflected on her bare navel.







## 2

## Room with a misstep by Lorenzo Mattozzi

#### TURIN PALACE HOTEL

This time too I couldn't get to sleep, despite the fact that I was in the Turin Palace Hotel, an elegant and quiet recently renovated historic hotel.

It's something that always happens and I can't explain the reason why. Strangely enough, I never manage to sleep well the first night in a hotel. Over time I have adopted different strategies. Sometimes I try to write in bed, to jot down my thoughts about the day, but my laziness is such that if I leave the pen on the table I prefer to convince myself that my thoughts are not so singular and I find myself staring at the ceiling.

Sometimes what works best is to eat particularly greasy, unnatural food. For some strange reason, a hamburger and chips can slow down my organism to the point of making me fall asleep immediately.

That evening I couldn't settle. The journey had been long and boring. The usual delays and no particular reflections on the day. I would have liked to go to

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sleep immediately and end the evening early.

I decided that staying in my room and staring at the four walls would not have helped, so I went out and down to the lobby. It was already eleven o'clock and I was surprised to find a child alone there, sitting among the ochre settees in the entrance. I went into the bar, ordered a whiskey and sat down on one of the stools.

As I sipped my whiskey, I looked around the place ... the tall windows framed by snowy white curtains, the green damask velvet armchairs, the paintings in the lobby and finally the little girl on the ochre settee.

She was a pretty black child. Very fat to tell the truth. She was probably between seven and eight years old. Her hair was curly and frizzy but tidy. Overall, she was well dressed. She sat almost unmoving with a lost gaze. An MP3 player with headphones rested on her lap. Apart from the sleepy barman, the bar was deserted, as was the lobby, except for the doorman and the child.

I asked the barman – Excuse me, you don't know a place where I could get something hot to eat at this time, do you?

- There's an all-night fast-food place at the end of the road he said.
- Good, I think I'll go there then. Pardon my curiosity, but what is that little girl doing on her own in the lobby?
   I added.
- Her mother had to go out in a hurry and she asked us to keep an eye on her - he replied laconically.

It seemed strange and irresponsible to me for a mother

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to leave her daughter alone in a hotel with strangers, but I limited myself to thanking the barman for the information.

Finishing my whiskey, I decided to speak to the child, she would probably have a few things to tell me. As I approached her, I noticed that she didn't even give me so much as a glance.

I went over to the settees and asked: - Can I sit here on this settee. Do you mind?

Staring into space, the child answered: – No, please do, but when my mother comes you'll have to go.

- Oh, all right. When is your mother coming back?
- I don't know, but she said she'd be back soon.
- Have you been waiting long for her?
- I don't know, an hour maybe.

Up until that moment the child had not even turned around to speak to me, so I asked: – Do you want anything? A glass of juice, a cake?

- No thank you. Mummy always tells me not to eat when she's not here.

I'd often heard children told not to accept sweets from strangers, but not to eat when the parents weren't around seemed excessive to me. I was comforted by the fact that the child was so chubby ... her mother must normally be around a lot.

- Do you know where your mother has gone?
- No, she just told me it was urgent and I had to wait for her here.

I couldn't even manage to get her to turn her head towards me, so I decided to get up and leave her in peace.

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- I have to go now. It was a pleasure talking to you. I held out my hand to her, but she seemed not to notice, then she said to me Thank you, for me too. Goodbye. I went to the doorman and in a low voice said: Don't forget to keep an eye on the child, she's on her own without a book or a toy to play with ... I hope her mother comes back soon and realises that she is irresponsible.
- Don't worry. It's not the first time it's happened. We've known the lady for some time and when she comes to town it sometimes happens that she has urgent appointments and has to leave Camilla with us... out of the blue. This time she had to meet some clients for an unexpected working dinner. To deliver some documents, I believe.
- I understand, but it worries me to see a child sit so still and with that lost gaze.
- Excuse me, perhaps you didn't realise the child can't see.

My face changed expression rapidly at those words. My amazement and embarrassment were overwhelming. I tried hard to find something to say. – Oh, I'm sorry. I hadn't realised in fact.

Then I turned towards the child and looked at her again. Then my gaze went to the entrance and finally towards the outside. A taxi had just pulled up and an elegant woman, young and attractive, was getting out. She had blonde hair pulled back in a chignon, so the whole length of her delicate neck could be admired. Her face was marvellous, of pallid white and with no sign of age. She was long-limbed, dressed in an im-

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peccable, business-like manner. She was probably not much more than thirty.

I watched her as she paid the taxi driver, who didn't forget to give her the typical change reserved for beautiful women, a second, close look. The woman came into the lobby.

As she took those steps, I seemed to feel my heart beat with the same rhythm. I had never felt such a strong, immediate attraction.

As soon as she entered the lobby, the woman went towards the chubby little girl and said: - Camilla, I'm here! I'm back! - The child's expression immediately changed, showing a huge smile etched between her large cheeks, and her arms reached out to the air. Her mother hugged her and kissed her.

I found myself once more in a state of agitation. I believe it was because of the preconceived ideas that, wanted or not, cross our minds and make us see things according to a pre-established, noted order.

On the face of it, that young, refined, cool woman did not have much in common with that fat, black child, but evidently it is true that you can't judge a book by its cover.

The two exchanged a few words in low voices. I could not help observing the scene. Then the mother looked at me and beckoned me to come closer. I hesitated a little, then excitement quickly pushed me to join her. – Hello! – she said – Camilla told me that you kept her

- Hello! she said Camilla told me that you kept her company for a while, thank you.
- Don't mention it, it was my pleasure. I wanted to of-

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fer her something, but she told me she doesn't accept anything from strangers.

- No, actually I have forbidden her to eat between meals and when I am not around, because she's as fat as a little pig. I had given her dinner before I went out.
- Ah, I see.
- Mummy, I'm hungry interrupted Camilla.
- You see said her mother as soon as you talk about food, her appetite comes back. I don't know what I should do.
- Actually, I was going to the fast-food place down the road because when I can't sleep a bit of that food helps me. Why don't you join me. I would be happy to offer Camilla something and have some company.

The woman seemed to think it over for a moment. Then she turned to Camilla: – What do you say, Camilla? Would you like to? After all, I have to make up for leaving you on your own this evening.

- Yes, yees, let's go, Mummy!

With that we got up from the settees and left the hotel. Along the road, the woman held Camilla – who had her headphones on and was listening to music – by the hand.

The woman looked at me with a sweet expression. For a moment I seemed to catch her interest.

After a while she broke the silence and embarrassment.

- Do you know that when we are at home, every now and then Camilla goes out on her own and walks a kilometre to get to the nearest fast-food place. When it comes to food nothing can stop her! - then in a lower

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tone of voice she added – I always get angry with her... you know, she's not just a little girl, she's also sight-impaired. The people in the neighbourhood know her, but at times that's not enough to reassure me.

- I understand perfectly. But you have to admit that Camilla isn't lacking in courage.
- ...or appetite I'd say! She'd do anything for food. Last time I found her in the fast-food place after looking high and low for her and I yelled "Don't you realise that it's dangerous for a fat child like you to walk a kilometre just to eat junk food?! Not because of the distance, but for the cholesterol you're getting!" She laughed to herself.
- You're certainly very straight with Camilla about her looks... - I added timidly.
- Yes, when it comes to health I can't be delicate. I want to make Camilla understand that the fact that she's fat isn't a question of appearance but of substance. I'm not interested in looks, but the fact that at her age she isn't able to run.
- Well, it can't be easy for Camilla to do what other girls of her age do.
- Don't worry, it's not ability she's lacking, even if she can't see. And don't worry about using words that aren't very polite. If you want to call her blind I don't have any problem with it. I don't want Camilla to hear it, I don't want other people to label her in any way, but between adults we can talk normally she added in an ironic tone. Just think, once I found myself with a man who was so afraid of offending me about my fat, blind, black

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daughter that he preferred to avoid any word that could remotely have anything to do with her. That idiot once told me that he'd had a "corpulent" laugh after following his satellite navigator, because despite all the money he'd spent on his "coloured" Porsche, he found himself in a "hypo-sighted" alley – pathetic! – she concluded.

We finally arrived at the fast-food joint, went in and sat down at a table.

The lights were annoyingly bright in the place. The smell of frying oil was nauseating and the walls were decorated in sickly colours. Families with fat, noisy children were seated at the tables. I calmed down, it was exactly as I'd expected.

I ordered a hamburger for myself, a soft-drink for the child and chips for us all.

Camilla ate greedily, still listening to her music. While Camilla sucked on her straw, the woman said – Tell me something about yourself. What are you doing here? Are you on holiday or here for work?

- I'm here for work... like you, I understand. I'm a doctor and from tomorrow I start a two-day conference. And you?
- I'm a free-lance financial consultant and I'm often called at the last minute to solve urgent problems. But it's not easy having to look after Camilla.
- Forgive the personal question, but can't your husband take care of the child?
- No, I don't have a husband. And to answer your next question... yes, I adopted Camilla when she was just a year old.

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The answer regarding the husband caught me happily by surprise.

- You made a brave choice I told her, looking at her with a mixture of curiosity and admiration.
- Listen she added brusquely I'm sorry to break up the evening here, but it's already late for Camilla and I have to take her back to the hotel. If you're at the hotel tomorrow evening too perhaps we could have dinner together. What do you say?
- With pleasure. Don't worry, I'm dying to sleep too and I reckon that after this greasy sandwich I'll manage to sleep better. Thank you very much for your company.

I was happy and I couldn't believe that I'd have a second, real date with that fascinating woman.

So we went back to the hotel, chatting about this and that. Back in the lobby, the woman politely asked me to watch Camilla for a couple of minutes while she went to the bathroom.

I caressed Camilla's head and she took off the head-phones. It occurred to me only then that her mother and I had not introduced ourselves formally so I didn't even know her name! So I said to Camilla – Mummy's gone to the bathroom for a minute, she'll be straight back. Camilla, could you tell me what your mother's name is?

- Lucinda. Attractive? Or maybe not for you?

I didn't know whether she was referring to the name or to her mother, but I decided just to answer – Yes, very much. You're a very lucky little girl, your mother

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is an extraordinary person. Perhaps one day I'll adopt a pretty little girl like you!

- I'm adopted?!? cried Camilla appalled.
- Oh my God! I shouted don't tell me you didn't know?
- I'm adopted??!! Camilla kept repeating.

I couldn't believe what was happening, and hesitatingly I replied – Yes, Camilla please, don't shout... I'm sorry to be the one to break the news to you, but I thought it was obvious seeing that your mother is white and you're black.

- I'm black!?!?! - shouted Camilla even louder.

I felt faint. I saw Lucinda coming back from the bathroom. Right at that moment the doorman called me and said:

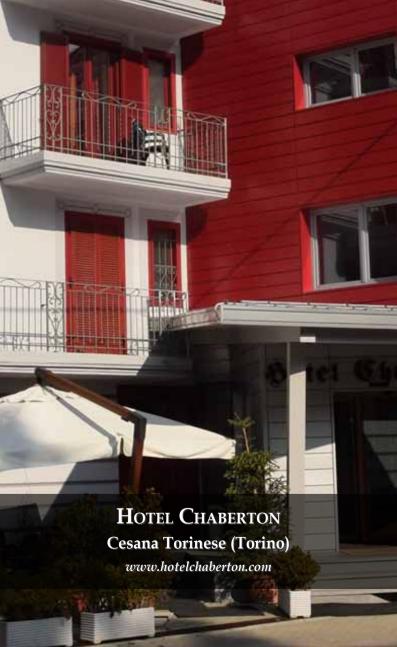
- There's a call from your husband, you can take it in the private room.

Without another word I rushed to the telephone, closed the door and trembling, picked up the receiver.

- Yes, Nicholas it's me.
- Hi Amanda, how are you? You can't sleep on the first night in a hotel as usual...







## 3

# Martino and the robin by Ornella Fiorentini

#### HOTEL CHARERTON

The robin was tired of living on a branch of this slightly crooked poplar with its delicate silver leaves that trembled, rustling in the gentle sea breeze as if they were afraid of falling even in mid-summer. He had to admit that in the south, further south than Mont Chaberton where his egg had hatched in the spring, the days were sultry and what was more, all the same. The robin became lost in thought. He sighed, remembering the fresh, deep green foliage of the majestic larch where he'd seen the blue sky for the first time. He felt a painful twinge in his breast, as if a rose thorn had pierced it. He realized that his heart had filled with nostalgia for that luxuriant wood. It stood on the slopes of Mont Chaberton, criss-crossed by limpid streams where marmots, roe deer, chamois and white hare had come to drink since time immemorial. Since his birth, however, the robin had revealed a fearless, adventurous nature. His parent's warm

nest felt too small, what with all those siblings jostling each other. He realized that his wings were growing stronger. When they had started to make his back itch, he'd chirped at the top of his voice that he felt ready to fly. His parents had agreed to let him try. Holding him tight between them, they'd risen slowly together, first onto the nest, then onto a branch of the larch. and finally they'd flown up over Mont Chaberton. His mother had trembled with fear, because the unpredictable wind reigned up there. At any moment a random gust could pick up that would have sucked the inexperienced robin into a vortex. There was a danger that he would lose direction and fall onto the bare rock. His father had been strict. His son had to learn to manage on his own. They had just flown over the highest point, the fort from where they usually admired the view of the valley together.

"Today is a big day for you", his parents had told their anxious son.

Before alighting on the cornice of the roof, they had released their hold. The robin had spread his wings. Uncertain at first, he had staggered for a second, blown by an impertinent gust of wind, but at his father's piercing chirp, he had puffed out his chest. After a while, his wings had begun to cut through the cobalt blue mountain air with confidence, following the movement of the wind that bore him up. Proud of himself, the robin had felt as if he were already grown up. Within a short time, he was already tracing all sorts of arabesques in the crystal clear sky. Keeping an eye

on him from the fort, were his parents, who had both sprouted a white feather on their heads. At sunset, the robin had returned to the nest to feed. His siblings, twittering in the nest, half-hidden by their parents' wings, had looked at him with ill-disguised envy. When would it be their turn to be praised for flying over Mont Chaberton?

The robin had pricked up its ears. He could hear the warble of a new great tit among the branches of the larch. It was chirping that to the south, over the mountains, valleys and plains, there was an enormous expanse of salt water. It was called the sea. It was wonderful to follow the daring seagulls over that turquoise surface, broken now and then by silver dolphins. You could perch on fishing boats and enter the white clouds that sailed as far as the horizon. When the great tit had described certain men who lived on the water in a giant nest called a ship, the robin had really become intrigued. He had felt an overpowering desire to leave. He would also migrate south to finally see the sky merge with the sea.

At twilight, other hushed chirps had started up among the larch needles. It was murmured that the blue of the sky would always shine in the eyes of those who had had the courage to take a chance. The robin was strong. He was not afraid of facing a long journey. He would feed on the tiny fish that swam to the shore. He thought they must be delicious, certainly tastier than earthworms.

It was very cold at night in Piedmont. From Mont Chaberton the moon appeared aloof and distant. The

robin had raised his head to look at the glittering stars. He was sure they were unreachable. As night fell, the great tit's last trill had caused a sensation in the larch, because it asserted that not only did the southern stars come close to Earth, but some of them even fell into the sea to make men's wishes come true.

The darkness covered the branches like a black cloak. In the nests all sound had died down. The robin couldn't fall asleep; he had to think about what to do. He had come to the conclusion that although he was naturally sociable, he wasn't really interested in the men and women who inhabited the valley. Happy to fly and not have to trudge up the path in heavy boots as they did, he didn't care about discovering what was hidden or seethed in their hearts. His parents had other children and maybe they would not have missed their first-born. The robin believed it was right to experience new things and live elsewhere. Autumn had arrived. From nearby villages, the smell of gathered chestnuts reached as far as the slopes of Mont Chaberton. The first snow would soon fall to whiten the moss and the path. It would be hard to find food. The robin didn't like to ask his parents to feed him, they had to look after his siblings. In a crack in the larch, his refuge for the night, he had tucked his head under his wing to rest as he waited for dawn. He had decided to migrate south, he felt almost like a daredevil.

"That boy dressed in blue is enterprising", he had thought, smoothing down the orange feathers on his breast on waking.

There was a man-cub under the larch. He was probably eight years old. Smiling face, fair hair and soft-footed, he'd watched him enter the wood alone. He also wore boots on his feet, but he walked slowly, respecting the silence that reigned.

From the bush he'd quickly flown to, the robin had watched the boy take some bread from his pocket. He had broken it up and scattered the crumbs around the larch, being careful to make sure they were clearly visible. The he had hidden himself behind a hollow treetrunk and waited for the frozen birds to come down and eat them. "Martino! Martino, where are you?" two distant voices had called unison, one low, the other high pitched.

The robin had recognized the parents call. They must have been worried because they didn't know where their son had got to.

"Martinooo!" echoed another thin voice that must have belonged to a girl.

Several sparrows had flown down from the branches onto the moss to peck at the breadcrumbs. Fearing to frighten them, Martino had not moved from behind the hollow tree. The biting wind had driven off the weak ray of sun that just entered the wood. The sky had darkened. Carefully watching the boy's every movement, the robin had noticed that he dawdled instead of returning to the path. He had picked up several orange pebbles that he turned over in his hands. He had put a handful in his pocket. Thinking that Martino's family must be really worried about him,

the robin had chirped at the top of his lungs "Go back immediately! Can't you see it's starting to snow?", but as the boy didn't understand the language of the creatures of Mont Chaberton, he had taken no notice. He had carried on playing with the orange pebbles, even when the bird landed on his shoulder to chirp "Martino, hurry!" once more. The boy had smiled at him and asked in a polite voice "Do you want to be my friend?"

"Yes! But you have to look for shelter" the robin had trilled.

"Even if I live in the mountains, I like the clear sea in Liguria. My sister and I learned to swim in Laigueglia. How many sandcastles we built together! I could take you with me when school is over, Martino had continued.

He had moved the robin gently from his shoulder with his forefinger. He had placed him on his reddish curls, which were as soft and warm as a nest. They smelt of a good child and the robin settled down happily. Large snowflakes had started to fall. Frightened by the sudden change in the weather, his parents, who were wandering along the path, shouted more loudly.

"Martino!"

"I have to go, but I'll come back to the wood. Will you be here?" the boy had whispered apologetically.

Reluctantly the robin had flown onto the back of the boy's slim hand and shaken the snow from his wings. "No. I have to migrate south, much further south than Liguria" he had trilled with all the breath in his body,

hoping that his friend would understand him this time. It hadn't been so, unfortunately, because Martino had added: "OK then, that's agreed. We'll meet again here" He had gently placed the robin on the bush. Then he had run towards the path.

"Wait a moment!" the robin had chirped futilely, regretting that he did not know how to speak men's language.

It was too late; Martino had disappeared among the oaks and beech trees. Only the prints of his little blue boots remained on the snow. When would they see each other again?

Sadly, the robin had fluffed the orange feathers on his breast. In stages he too would reach the sea to join the purple horizon that blended into the sky. Unwillingly, he had swallowed two nourishing worms to give him strength before taking off towards the south, heedless of the gusting wind and the snow falling from the hostile sky. The journey had lasted days and days. The robin had been hungry, but he had tenaciously kept on going until he had seen the plain disappear in an enormous expanse of clear water.

"The sea!" he had trilled, gathering his last bit of strength to finally reach the hot, crowded city where ships went in and out of the harbour.

The robin had felt exhausted. He had perched on the branch of that slightly crooked poplar. To calm his hunger he had had to make do with two reddish bugs with a sickening smell, certainly no comparison with the resinous insects on the larch. He had started to look around.

He had soon realized that the air was not as limpid as on his Mont Chaberton, to the contrary, it stank of fuel. The streets were chaotic, full of cars flashing by at great speed. Disappointed, he had noticed that there was never a moment's peace in the city. Car horns, the shouts of hawkers and the policeman's whistle endlessly assaulted the ears of the robin and the emaciated sparrows who had built a nest on the other poplars in the park. In the middle was a white stone fountain shaped liked a palm that sprayed yellowish water. Litter thrown by passers-by floated in the basin. The few goldfish stayed on the bottom.

The robin stopped to think that maybe his parents' round nest was no longer on the larch. He regretted having left so soon, but was proud of what he had had achieved. He would not give in easily. If he had flown back, he would have met his siblings who would have made fun of him. So he decided to stay near the harbour to watch the colourful ships, swarming with sailors, that came and left without pause.

He was not in a bad mood because that was not part of his cheerful nature, even if he was dying to hop over the dewy moss that covered the roots of the larch once more. He was impatient for August to arrive. From the conversations of the men and women sitting on the benches in the park, he had gathered that everyone was looking forward to going to the beach on the magical night of falling stars. Each of them had a wish to make that would come true if only they believed hard enough. The robin wanted to see Mont Chaberton

and the wood again. His wish smelt of pine cones and grass. He promised himself not to chirp it to the wind but keep it to himself. Like a precious secret that had to be kept in the casket of his little heart. It couldn't be much different to that of men, because it boiled with dissatisfaction.

The park was surrounded by a stunted laurel hedge that longed for water, but the rain fell rarely. The southern sky was tight-fisted with tears. The city smelt of dust. The wind brought sand that seeped into everything. The robin looked for blades of straw to make himself a round nest, round just like that of his parents. The high rim protected him from the sun, which had become scorching. It baked the metal of the cars parked outside the park gate. The city emptied of people, who went to the seaside by bicycle. It seemed that everyone was in a hurry to reach the beach. The robin decided to follow them. He realized that it must be August at last. He waited for sunset. When the first tremulous star of the evening appeared in the sky, he took off towards the sea. The salty air was damp. The beach bore the prints of dozens of bare feet that had sunk into the sand. The robin flew to a black rock that rose out of the sea, far from the clamour of the people who filled the only restaurant with lights on. The subdued swish of the waves quietened him. He looked up at the sky where the stars were hanging as always. He waited all night for at least one to fall into the sea so he could make his wish, but nothing happened. At dawn he saw the lights of the restaurant go off as the people

went home. The first ray of sun appeared to light up the sky and the eastern horizon. The wind came up, urging the robin to take wing, but he stayed unmoving on the black rock, at attention like a tin soldier. Saddened as he was, he didn't feel like going back to that slightly crooked poplar. All of a sudden he realized he was no longer alone. An elderly man had appeared at the water's edge, wearing a straw hat, dark glasses and a tobacco-coloured jacket. The hem of a pair of blue pyjama bottoms poked out from his trousers just above his bare ankles. He wore threadbare blue canvas shoes. His shoulders were slightly bent, but he held firmly to the handlebars of the rusty bicycle he was pushing. Over his shoulder he carried a black instrument case that bumped against his back with every step. The robin did not like the rattle of the flat-tyred wheels, but was attracted by the dark green of the frame. It reminded him of larch leaves. He wondered why that elderly man was tiring himself by pushing that wreck of a bicycle. The sand was washed by the waves, which had become restless. The wheels sank into it, forcing the man to lift the bicycle up every now and then in order to move on. He passed the black rock where the robin continued to stare at him. A wheel got hooked up on a dry bush a little way away. The old man tried unsuccessfully to free it. Swearing, he let the bicycle fall. With a frightened expression, he turned around to make sure no one was following him. With a screech that sounded like a lament, the bicycle crumpled in on itself. The

old man turned round suddenly, looking over his shoulder again.

"That man is running away" guessed the robin.

As he flew from the black rock to a white shell to keep an eye on the man, a red and blue ship appeared on the sea. It had just sailed out of the harbour and sounded its horn in greeting. A purple and orange striped flag flew from the deck.

"It looks like they're leaving on a long voyage", thought the robin as he watched the sailors busy lashing great wooden crates to the deck.

The old man jumped when he saw the name on the side of the ship. With shaky steps he approached the waterline. Cupping his hands around his mouth, he shouted loudly: "Giovanni! You promised to take me with you! I won't get in your way. I'll play the violin to cheer the crew up. You're the ship's captain. Please, give the orders to return to the harbour. Wait for me, my son!"

He took his violin from the black case and began to play. He twirled round on the beach in a slow, clumsy dance that looked like a waltz, hoping that Giovanni would recognize him from a distance. But the red and blue ship blew its horn in greeting one last time before it headed for the open sea. No-one on board, least of all the captain, had noticed the old man, who tore off his dark glasses and burst into tears. The robin's heart ached. Perhaps his parents had cried too when he had left Mont Chaberton. He looked at the straw hat. It had a wide brim, and in the round part that covered

the head there were little holes to let the air In. Turned upside down it would be a perfect nest for the summer. Cool for living on the beach, where the air was pleasant, and not in the city. The robin could perch on the brim for hours to admire the seagulls and the waves.

The sun had come out, but grey clouds wandered across the sky waiting to blot it out. A gust of wind whipped the hat off the old man's head. The robin was amazed to see he didn't run after it. He didn't care about losing that treasure, which blew onto the yellow roof of a wooden hut and then became entangled face down in the dry thorn bushes on the dunes.

The man quickly started to undress, throwing the violin onto the sand in a fit of anger. He took off his tobacco-coloured jacket and trousers. Wearing just his threadbare blue pyjamas, he trudged into the water.

"Wait for me, my son" he shouted once more in the direction of the red and blue ship that was now just a small, almost minuscule dot on the horizon.

He dived into the sea and started swimming with weary strokes. After a few metres, the old man stopped. He started coughing. His body shook. He raised his hands to the sky before disappearing under the water.

"The sea must be too salty" the robin chirped desperately to a passing wasp.

He received no reply from the insect, just a pitying glance. Why feel such pity for men?

The robin rose swiftly in flight. He reached the place where the old man had disappeared. He saw a solitary

oxygen bubble appear on the surface. After a few seconds, the ripped arm of the blue pajamas appeared.

Feeling low, the robin returned slowly to the shore. From the black rock he flew onto a dune. He landed on the soft straw hat, which welcomed him like his parents' round nest. It smelt of washing soap. Through the little holes he saw two men in uniform come running. He recognized them. They controlled the traffic on the other side of the park hedge with their whistles. A woman wearing a white cap on her head followed them. "How come you didn't realize straight away that Pietro had run away from the hospital?" one of the policemen asked her sharply.

Mortified, the nurse bent her head, but answered with a cry:

"I've got too many patients to look after on the ward! Everyone knows that when they're old they become like children. Pietro was convinced that his son would take him with him on the ship."

The other policeman found the abandoned bicycle. He shouted:

"Pietro ran away from the hospital on this piece of junk. He can't be very far. Let's look for him over there!"

He pointed out the brick building of the sailing club to his colleague and the nurse, who followed him. It was a few hundred metres from the dune.

The robin folded his wings. He felt as tired as if he had suddenly grown old. Pietro and his parents must also have felt so weak. He needed to rest for a long time before migrating north to return to his Mont Chaber-

ton. Martino was waiting for him in the wood. He had not played enough with the man-cub when they had met. He had to make up for lost time. Without doubt, his siblings would come flying to meet him. He would chirp merrily that he loved the southern sea, but preferred to live with them on Mont Chaberton. He settled his legs and wings on the warm straw of the hat. It smelt of a good man. The robin fell asleep.

He woke when drops of rain started to patter insistently on the brim. He flew over the deserted beach. He saw that there were a lot of footprints at the water's edge, but of shoes and not bare feet.

"A lot of men came along here. They were surely looking for Pietro. They didn't realize that he disappeared in the sea" thought the robin, who found a scrap of blue pyjama under a piece of rotting wood.

With surprise he saw that the red and blue ship was returning to the harbour. The purple and orange striped flag no longer flew from the deck. The sailors, who walked with their heads bowed, had lowered it.

"Giovanni is the captain of the ship. Perhaps he regrets not having taken his father with him" chirped the robin to another passing wasp, who glanced at him with pity.

The rain had become heavier. There was not a living soul as far as the eye could see. The robin felt that the moment had come to migrate north. He pecked at some seaweed, the only food he had managed to find. It would have to do him for the whole journey. He flew back to the straw hat he would never ever

leave. He would take it with him to Mont Chaberton where it would become his nest. Pleased with himself, he noted that his wings had grown. They would be able to carry the weight. His beak was strong. The point went into one of the little holes in the straw like a hook. The robin took off northwards, heedless of the heavy tears from the sky that made Pietro's hat heavier

The journey lasted days and days. Even though he was thirsty, the robin never opened his beak for fear of losing the hat. He flew confidently over plains, towns and rivers. When he spotted the first mountains he breathed a sigh of relief. The air had become clear and fine. Then cold. It penetrated his feathers, which had become thicker.

"Mont Chaberton! That down there is the fort where I learned to fly!" rejoiced the robin as Pietro's hat tickled his orange breast.

The sun shone on the snow-capped peak.

"What if my parents are admiring the valley? I'll fly up to the roof of the fort!" he thought hopefully.

Despite the strong crosswind that flapped Pietro's hat left and right, he managed to reach the cornice. When he landed, he sorrowfully realized that he was the only robin up there. He felt fragile. In that moment, a white feather sprouted on his head. The robin flew slowly down to the wood, his beak holding tightly onto Pietro's hat, which he would show his siblings like a trophy. What other robin had brought one from the south? He soon spotted the majestic larch of his

infancy and saw there were a lot of nests in it. Chicks cheeped, fussed over by their parents. He did not recognize anyone. He looked for his parents' round nest but could not find it. There was an oblong one in its place. A grey tit poked its head out with an enquiring look. The robin laid Pietro's hat on the snow-laden branch and sighed.

"There's no room for another nest on this branch" the grey tit said firmly.

I have no intention of staying here. Have you seen my siblings by any chance?" the robin asked her dejectedly."

"They went to an oak tree. I don't remember which one", the grey tit answered. "Why have you got sky blue eyes?" she went on suspiciously.

"Because they've become the colour of the sky and the sea."

"You're a strange robin. It would be better not to mix with you."

The grey tit dived back into the oblong nest and disappeared.

The robin felt a lump in his throat. He thought a long time must have passed since he had flown south. Soon night would fall. The freezing, endless Mont Chamberton kind. The moon would appear more aloof and distant than ever. And the stars? Unreachable. He was tired and hungry. Where would he be able to find even a worm if the moss was covered in snow? All he could do was take Pietro's hat and look for shelter. He went down a few branches. He found the old crack in the

trunk of the larch. Carefully, he managed to wriggle into it, but it was a tight fit. There was only room for him. There was no room to put Pietro's hat and make it into a nest. He grasped it in his beak and went further down. He recognized the bush Martino had placed him on when they had said goodbye. He missed him. Perhaps the boy had forgotten him, or he had already become an adolescent, no longer interested in playing with orange stones or a bird in the woods. He shivered with cold. He set Pietro's hat on the bushes. He slid down to the bottom, where there was not even a blade of straw to keep him warm. He crossed his wings on his breast, but his eyelids did not close over the blue eyes, which remained obstinately open because his stomach was completely empty. He would die of starvation if he did not find some food immediately, but he was too weak to fly. Lying on his side, he chirped a feeble cry for help, which his parents and sibling would have run to answer if he had still had them. Not a leaf stirred, but after a while he heard muffled footsteps coming closer. They weren't those of a wolf. Even if they were light, they seemed to be those of a human. Who would have the courage to come into a wood as black as pitch? The robin's heart started beating wildly. He tried to stand up but he couldn't. He raised his blue eyes to the moon, which seemed to be smiling. A star broke away from the sky. It fell slowly to earth, leaving a golden trail in its wake. "A real falling star at last! I wish I could see Martino again..." the robin made his wish fervently, his wings crossed.

Little flashes of light touched the larch and the bush. The falling star lit up Pietro's hat before falling onto the snow. It went out with a noise like a musical note so sweet that the robin was moved. He had never in his life heard such a melody from any nightingale. "Will my wish come true?" he trilled faintly.

The muffled footsteps reached the bush. A turquoise light enveloped Pietro's hat. One, two, three crusty breadcrumbs fell Inside. The robin pecked them up. One, two, three drops of violet-scented dew fell into the robin's parched beak, and he drank it down thirstily. Refreshed, he stood up and emitted a lively trill. He flew onto the brim of Pietro's hat.

"Martino!" he cried in surprise.

"The wishes of the pure in heart always come true" said the boy, smiling.

The robin flew around him happily. He went to perch on his forefinger, which shone gold, just like the falling star. Martino's serene face, his big, tender eyes, and his whole body, which was dressed in blue, shone like a jewel. The robin saw that he was barefoot.

"Don't you have your blue boots for walking in the snow?" he asked curiously.

"I don't need them any more" answered Martino, who also spoke the language of the woods.

The robin noticed that two little white wings had sprouted from his shoulder-blades. "Can you fly too?" "When I have to help someone in trouble."

"Do you mean you flew here?"

"Yes. I love Mont Chaberton and I often come back to

see my parents. Another little girl has been born in our family. They live in the village in a big brick nest. They give hospitality to those looking for clean air and peace and quiet."

"Did you leave for the south too after I'd gone?" asked the robin.

Martino stroked the feathers on his back.

"No. I fell asleep for ever because I was very ill. When I woke up I was in a new country with a turquoise sky, streets overflowing with bright flowers and happy children. We go to a very special school. There are no books nor blackboards, nor even pencils."

The robin scratched his head with the end of his wing. That school in the far-off country where Martino now lived puzzled him.

"Are there teachers?"

"Not even those. There's just a harmony teacher. He's like a kindly grandfather."

"Doesn't he teach music?"

"No. That's a subject that comes after. First we learn the rules of harmony so we can teach them to men who make war on each other. They haven't yet learned that love must reign over the Earth.

"And that's the harmony teacher's wish?"

"Yes, we help him make it come true."

"What's his name?"

"Pietro. He told me you have his straw hat."

The robin jumped onto Martino's forefinger. A tear trickled from his blue eyes.

"It's true" he trilled, pointing with his wing to the nest.

"Count on me to make Pietro's wish come true" added the robin jumping onto Martino's coppery curls.

They were soft, with a scent of violets. He would gladly have fallen asleep there, but the dawn and then sunrise knocked at the doors of the sky, which became red then orange. The birds in the larch began to sing loudly when they saw the sun appear. They could feel it was the last day of winter. Spring would have finally melted the ice in the stream and the snow that covered the moss.

"Let's go to the path" said Martino.

"Why?" trilled the robin, who would have preferred to stay in Pietro's hat.

"A very sad man will come towards us. I am invisible to him. You will have to do everything on your own" Martino answered.

He placed the bird in Pietro's hat, took it in his golden hands and began walking, almost flying. In the blink of an eye, they found themselves in a clearing. It overlooked the path that wound up the slopes of Mont Chaberton from the village of Cesana. Martino placed Pietro's hat at the bottom of a felled tree and went to sit to one side on a rock. The robin flew to the edge of the path. He saw a man trudging uphill in shiny new boots, wearing a stiff captain's hat and carrying a black instrument case over his shoulder. As he gradually came nearer, the robin realized that he looked like Pietro. He looked around warily, as if he was used to assessing danger and giving orders. The robin noticed that sewn on the sleeve of the straggly-bearded man's

navy blue jacket was a little purple and orange striped flag.

"It's the same as that big one that flew from the deck of the blue and red ship..." the astonished robin thought. "Giovanni!" he trilled playfully.

Unused to the mountain, the captain was panting when he reached the clearing. He did not even glance at the robin, but sat down near Pietro's hat. He turned it over in his hands with a pained expression. It was damaged. He realized it had become the nest of the bird that was flitting around him non-stop as if it knew him, when he saw a few greenish-grey feathers in the bottom.

"My father had a straw hat too" he murmured to himself.

He took the black case from his shoulder and put it on his knee. He opened it and took out a violin. Like Pietro, Giovanni could play it. He picked up the bow, and the robin scampered along it, singing comic notes at the top of his voice. Giovanni looked at him and laughed. After a long time he laughed whole-heartedly.

"I don't remember the last time I practised" he said shyly, because he was afraid he had forgotten the music.

The robin flew onto his shoulder to encourage him. And then onto the captain's cap. He sang the harmony of the universe; the purity of spring water, the clearness of the sky, the love of parents for a child, the bright colours of butterflies, the tender green of grass, the starry night, the fragrance of a rose and the sweetness of an angel. Giovanni's face darkened. A bitter grimace twisted his

mouth. He remembered he had not cried when the two policemen had handed him Pietro's violin. The nurse had apologized. They would have liked to have given him his straw hat too, but unfortunately it had almost certainly blown away. The bicycle was broken. It might as well be thrown away. As the nurse spoke, Giovanni decided to disembark from the red and blue ship he could no longer be captain of. He felt guilty for having lied to his father, for having recklessly promised that he would have taken him with him. He needed a breath of fresh air, new scenery, and to leave the harbour behind him. He had shaken hands with his crew and wished them good luck. He, too, was in need of it. He would go to the mountains, even if he had never been there. Shattered, with a suitcase full of useless nautical maps, he had arrived in Cesana. Martino's parents had given him a room In their hotel, and suggested he climb Mont Chaberton, because the unspoilt nature of the woods was good for the soul. Giovanni had asked himself "Will I find the peace I'm looking for?" He had nothing to lose. He had to at least try.

He began to pluck the strings of the violin, then to play a waltz that Piertro had composed for people to dance to on feast days. The robin flew and flew gracefully around the rock where Martino was sitting, watching him happily in silence. Giovanni stood up. He felt like dancing. Following the bird's flight, he spun around and around again. Slowly, as he had seen Pietro do in the piazza on Sundays. With every step of the waltz, a tear ran down his straggly beard. He saw himself

once more as a young lad alongside his father, both wearing white shirts to go to church. His father had hugged him tightly when he had told him he wanted to go to sea. Giovanni would never abandon Pietro's violin. He would take it with him wherever he went. When the last note of the waltz had faded into the clear air, one, two, three violets bloomed between Martino's fingers.

The robin flew onto Giovanni's shoulder. "It's spring at last" he trilled.





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### 4

# In dust by Veronica Borgo

### ROYAL SPORTING HOTEL

I've never seen such a beautiful woman before, but what fascinates, and at the same time destroys me, is that I am at least as beautiful as she is and I'm no less a woman than she is.

She didn't ask for anything special, just a red Martini, yet walking towards her with the tray I felt as if my fingers were touching heaven.

"Thank you," was all she said, leaving vibrations in the air, as if she had spoken to a lover for the first time, with a sound as soft as a flower, as elastic as her lips. For interminable seconds, I stared morbidly at the red curve of her mouth as she opened it to laugh. Dammed woman! You're drinking my soul with those eyes, I can't control my hands. Ah, dammed woman, really! What are you doing with that mocking grin?

Number twenty-six: her table and the hotel room. And I laugh at myself. She's forgotten her lipstick on the table's ochre yellow tablecloth. I hold it in my hands and

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smell the perfume emerge from the hard, closed tube as I spontaneously bring it near to my face, to feel it alive. I know her name, the rest doesn't matter. I don't want to think of her life away from Portovenere, of her lovers and winter clothes. She's here in this hotel now, and I must have her.

I wore her lipstick this evening, putting it on with delicate fastidiousness in front of the encrusted mirror on the ground floor. Looking at myself in the half-light, I seemed to have her same eyes, with the same black eyelashes and the same grim confidence in their expression. She has my red on her face and she's sitting with her back to me, so that from the bar I can see only the glow of silk on her back.

This evening I can't face comparison with her, I don't have the nerve to serve her table. Aperitifs for the customers at table seventeen. She watches me sulkily with a cigarette between her slim fingers and a cloud of smoke. She has had to bend slightly forward and is no longer facing her guests. I don't want to turn around, but I feel her gaze run over the apron I wear to serve at table. My breathing becomes unsteady, shaky. I take the orders. I pray she has the decency to ignore me. I take a deep breath. I'm shredding my notepad with my fingers and I almost feel her against me...her hands on my hips and her face resting on my shoulder, her mouth close to mine. Yet she is just smiling with her head tilted. She moves it imperceptibly, following the line of my body in movement. She laughs. Oh God, how she laughs. How she laughs, to the astonishment of her

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companions. Have I provoked her merriment? I, who can barely move among the tables, despite being so used to it. How is she transforming my life? Her beauty has bewitched me like those old lechers who drool from every pore if they just catch a glimpse of her looks. I've never desired a man as much. Never. I've never sighed in this way for look, a thought, a kiss.

She is still smoking, and fills all the space around her with her luminous presence, while sweat pearls my cheeks.

Knowing that it is only three hours until the end of my umpteenth working day gives me an irreplaceable relief, if only because sleep will bring down the curtain on her swelling curves and her flesh.

"Cigarette?"

"Excuse me?"

She gives me an irresistible smile. Every time, before she reveals all her sweetness, she makes a little grimace with her mouth. Then it explodes. She seems to deny herself, because of some inhibition brought by the wind or the years, as if a knife wound has to correspond with every smile.

"I asked you if you'd like a cigarette by any chance". I stared into her eyes for a second.

"Yes, sure".

She holds out a match, the effects of the just-passed impulse still on her face.

"What time do you finish this evening?" she asks, concentrating on my face.

In the warm light of the lamps that illuminate her skin, this time it's my gaze that lingers on her, sliding

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for a moment over the perfection of her features. "Late".

"It doesn't matter. I'll wait for you in my room. Number twenty-six. Will you come?". I grab the snack dishes from the bar and frantically start filling them with crisps and the shiver that runs through me makes me drop a pottery cup on the ground.

She doesn't seem surprised, she doesn't move.

"Will you come?" she asks again. I swallow.

Her look becomes harder, penetrating.

"I'll come".

She turns around at the same moment I bend down to pick up the pieces. I lean my forehead against the bar counter. A drop of sweat runs down my back to settle between my buttocks, while far off I hear the sound of her heels on the floor.

I want her.

Lifts haven't yet been installed in the hotel, and by now all the staff are used to going up and down the stairs under their own steam. Me included. It's different for the guests; they don't spend the best part of a year here, on these four floors. But perhaps walking up and down would be good for the great number of flabby arses that sway around here. She, though, has a fantastic arse.

Room number twenty-six is on the third floor. Up to now, as far as this door covered in green cloth that separates her from me, up to now... I haven't yet thought. I don't know what instinct, what feeling, fear, illusion, revolt, has brought me to her and I don't know what guides my hand to turn the door handle.

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From the lights of the corridor I'm drawn into the half-darkness of a room open to the sea. A trail of moonlight gradually colours the water up to the terrace that lies a few steps away from me. She is there, unmoving on a lacquered chair. A white curtain half hides her, lifting rhythmically with every gust of wind, while she seems to be looking far off, perhaps beyond the horizon, beyond memories.

I slowly come closer. My breath trembles, frightened, in the warm air that surrounds it, shaken by continual sobs, while my legs advance firmly, pretending a confidence they don't have, as if every meaning of the night and tomorrow depended on them. If she turned around now, she would feel the material of my shirt on her cheek. I have no words in my throat or ideas in my head, no plan. I feel so near to death as to be the mistress of another skin.

And there are no more fears.

With a spontaneous movement, more of the soul than of the hands, I draw her to my breast, grasping her neck between my hands. She is extraordinarily beautiful.

"I was afraid you wouldn't come".

"I'm here".

Then there is only silence, caresses and her face and the sea.

Behind me, the room is no different to all the other rooms in the hotel: a double bed takes up most of the space, flanked by two walnut night-tables. A desk against the wall to the right and the bathroom. I'm not sleepy and it is as if I never had been.

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Cigarette ends, all mine, overflow from the plate in the middle of the bed. I believe I smoked a whole packet during the night. I can usually control myself, but I'm afraid this time something different happened.

She's sleeping next to me, face down in the pillow, and her whole body breathes and cradles itself, true to her nature and her calling.

It's seven o'clock. I start work at this time every day. The corridors are as silent and deserted as my heart every time I become aware of the sterility of the years spent behind the counter of a bar, experiencing life through that of the others, sitting there laughing with their aperitifs, their holidays and a job they loved in the past.

I've been to bed with a lot of the hotel's guests. There's one who comes back every year, in May, to make love to me. And then he leaves. And he's not the first, either to come back or to go.

She will do the same thing too: one sunny morning she'll gather up her four suitcases, pay the bill and leave by car or some other way. For now, all of this is more certain than death, as much as the sun, the only one who doesn't betray me, not even absent-mindedly. She is a bit like it, because without fail she comes down the stairs at eight o'clock for coffee. It's the same today. "Hello," and she holds out a packet of the umpteenth Marlboros.

"How much longer are you staying in Portovenere?" I ask her, dragging not very convincingly on the cigarette filter.

She opens her mouth, her lips trembling as she tries to

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formulate a sound, but she remains silent. She shakes her head.

"I don't know".

I want to touch her, but it's not possible here. But was it maybe... possible ... last night? By what right? Nature also has its rights – and dismay takes possession of my thoughts – or are they perhaps only habits without any foundation? Are my instincts a celebration or destruction of life – perhaps this – but what power does the word "love" have? Universal; how can it be fettered? "Do you have a day off?"

Her voice interrupts me, half way between evil and imagination; an impulse to death and blind terror. "Tomorrow".

"Do you already have plans?"

"No, nothing".

"Well then..."

I interrupt her, "Yes, I understand".

I want to shout now.

What I feel goes beyond the follies I am not responsible for. It's not danger, anti-conventionality, provocation. It is desire. The highest and purest. I have no arms to fight the charge. I am impotent before the sea that reflects my image in its waters. Dead as I address the mirror of my spirit.

She smiles as she comes towards me, her beach-bag clutched in her left hand and a cigarette in the other. She doesn't think of the risks. She's not afraid.

"Do you feel like going to the beach?"
I nod.

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While she arranges the mat and her things on the sand, I clearly recognize all her curves, veiled by her dress. She then sits down, without speaking, and leans towards me.

"What's wrong? You haven't said a word all day!" and she laughs.

And in a flash, the same laugh dies in her throat. She begins to caress her arm gently with three fingers, with the same slowness as the shining tears gather in her eyes.

"I like things in movement," she says, "things that change. Like the sea. Or the rain. You know, I could watch it falling from the sky for hours...perhaps I've wasted a lot of time. Watching it. Just watching it, do you know what I mean?"

She breathes deeply and her lips seem to take part in the same action. "Looking at you is lovely too. Sometimes I have feelings that are so strong and complete that I could die at that moment without any regret." She falls silent.

"It's only happened to me once, in America".

"For a man?"

"No!" and this time it's me who laughs, "never for a man. I was in the Grand Canyon".

She looks at me as if she understands, and then she quickly dives into the water. I watch her from the water's edge, rubbing on sun oil, without asking myself anything. I would like to. But I already know I wouldn't know where to find the answers.

A few icy drops falling suddenly onto my leg rouse me. She's playfully wringing out her hair onto me.

#### IN DUST

She looks at me. "Come on, it's lovely swimming".

"A lot of things are lovely for you, aren't they?"

"Yes, I've learnt to see them. You should do the same".

"No, I don't think I could manage".

"You will manage. What do you want to do now? Shall we have lunch?"

I am so confused – or are my ideas already very clear? – that without answering, I impulsively start gathering up the things around me. More pebbles and handfuls of sand find their way into my bag than anything else, and in the rush I also lose a gold earring. I start to feel strange, out of place.

She doesn't seem to notice anything. She just asks me if I like piadine, the local filled flatbread.

The street vendor who makes them is not far, just a few metres away between the beach and the sunny street, with its constant flow of cars and sun umbrellas. It's hot. If that weren't enough, the piadina is scalding, sticky and dripping with cheese. She amazes me. And watching her is painful. Also because I can't be the only one doing so. She turns around, cheerful.

"Do you want to taste a bit of mine?" she asks, waving the piadina under my nose. And immediately after, she looks at me sadly, as she had been sad for a few moments on the shore.

I don't understand her.

"Do you remember yesterday? You asked me how long I was going to stay here..."

I nod. "Now I know. I'm sorry. I'm leaving tomorrow morning, for work, you understand, don't you?"

#### **VERONICA BORGO**

She's speaking again: she says she'll come back. I swallow with difficulty. God knows how much I'd like to strangle myself.

But it's she who has the more upset face.

An instant and I see her disappear like a spirit of the night, without a hug, a kiss...lost from sight among the bustle of riff-raff and jalopies, over-made up old women under the summer heat and disobedient children, men hidden behind sunglasses and slim young girls. Lost, like dust and corks that the wind takes away with it. Seaweed and starfish, knocked about by the waves. Dreams and crumpled children's fans. Words.

I'm really tired. In turn, I lose myself among the crowd, alone.

My thoughts take flight, far from me, alone.

I don't know if she'll come back. I know she's packing her bags ready to leave. It's strange, today there's a storm in the air. I don't know if she'll have winged or heavy feet. I know that how she goes is of no importance.

"There are no sins of love, raged a poet in his later years, there are only sins against love". She has already taken everything.







# 5

# Snow in the air by Andrea Cattaneo

# HOTEL SPADARI AL DUOMO

His arms wrapped around the steering wheel of his car, Adriano was dreaming. In his dream Milan was silent and completely covered in snow. The Cathedral was a white, pointed outline, slender icicles hung from the cast iron lampposts and enormous piles of snow lay where cars had been. There she stood, in the midst of all that whiteness – a milk-coloured figure with long, wind-tossed black hair. Immobile, with an indecipherable expression, she was speaking to him, but as hard as he tried, Adriano was unable to hear anything.

"It's a beautiful sight," he said, "shame about this annoying knocking."

"What are you doing, sleeping?" the Hotel Spadari employee demanded from the other side of the window. "Who?"

"You".

"For a start," explained Adriano as he got out of the car, "I wasn't sleeping, I was thinking".

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"Listen, Miss Ryusaki has been waiting for you in the lobby for an hour. Go inside!"

"I'm going, I'm going". Some people liked Adriano's straightforward ways, but most Milanese simply considered him boorish. Adriano was often loud-mouthed, but he was unable to refuse anyone a favour. It had also happened with the Count, who had foisted that "quick, well-paid little job" on him. A Japanese tourist staying at the Hotel Spadari had needed a driver for the entire length of her stay. It was fashion week – the Count had explained – and he would probably just have to accompany her to the shows and the down-town boutiques. In other words, it was a big rip-off.

The Hotel Spadari was warm and welcoming, ideal on a gloomy day like today. Adriano, completely ill at ease in such a sophisticated setting, looked around bewildered. A desk clerk pointed towards the lobby where a young girl in a spring dress was sitting in silence, staring at the hotel's spectacular fireplace.

"Miss Ryusaki?" asked Adriano enunciating the words clearly. She nodded; she had an incredibly luminous complexion, like a porcelain doll. "Do you speak Italian?" "Some," she said, shaking her long hair out of her eyes. "Are you my guide?"

"Yes, my name's Adriano Magnani. Where shall I take you?" She's out of my reach, thought Adriano, admiring her and setting his mind at rest.

"Please, let's go to the car," she answered as she gathered up a milk-coloured coat that was too light for Milan's climate.

#### SNOW IN THE AIR

"Won't you be cold?" Miss Ryusaki did not answer, waited for Adriano to go ahead and open the door for her and climbed into the car.

"Are you from Milan?"

"Yes, my family has lived here for generations".

"Do you like Milan?"

"I used to, now it gets on my nerves".

"Why?"

"I don't like today's Milanese any more, they're selfcentered, arrogant and spoiled. There are only a few exceptions left".

"You're funny".

"Pardon?"

"You look like a monkey," said Miss Ryusaki, covering her mouth to hide a giggle. Adriano certainly didn't stand out for his looks, he was awkward and his features were anything but lovely. As a result of boxing matches when he was young, his bottom lip stuck out more than it should, flurries of punches had left his nose misshapen and there was just a little dishevelled hair left on his head.

"Very kind of you," he shot back, already irritated. "Now it would be a good idea if you told me where I should take you".

"I'm sorry," she replied, "I didn't mean to offend you. You're funny and that's why you're beautiful. Let's go to the Brera Pinacoteca please". Adriano wondered why she was making fun of him, then he shrugged his shoulders and drove off without saying anything more. The journey to the art gallery took ages, time enough

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for Adriano to feel totally confused. Beautiful? Had he understood properly? The girl was definitely joking; he'd never heard anything like it in his entire life, especially not from such a fascinating woman. Miss Ryusaki was shy, or perhaps just very reserved, the fact was that during the whole journey she just gazed out of the window.

She asked him to go with her on her tour. Adriano protested mildly and then followed her. Lining up at the ticket office they made a strange impression; the other visitors cast sidelong glances at that shambling giant and the black-haired, almond-eyed girl who seemed made of porcelain. The girl at the ticket desk stared at then as if they'd popped out of a fairytale, and smiled at Adriano. This greatly annoyed Miss Ryusaki, who became even more taciturn.

In the ninth room she cleared her throat, "That woman looked at you".

"How could she have given me the tickets otherwise?" asked Adriano, who hadn't failed to notice her more intimate tone.

"Don't deny it, you liked her". He was speechless, he could only utter sounds without sense, she had embarrassed him. She turned her back on him and carried on with the tour. A jealous scene for me, thought Adriano, inconceivable! Who could be jealous of someone like me?

He caught up with her in the tenth room and saw her speaking in Japanese to a painting by Carlo Carrà. He approached her carefully: she was aware of his pres-

#### SNOW IN THE AIR

ence but ignored him, then she bowed to the picture. A steadily darkening sky could be glimpsed from the windows of the art gallery, which were rattling in the strong wind. When they got outside it was already snowing. Adriano pulled his overcoat closely around him, while Miss Ryusaki took deep breaths.

Back in the car, she beat him to it, "Now let's go to the Triennale".

"You're not interested in fashion at all".

She didn't reply, staring at the swirls of snow on the back window. Adriano started the engine and drove off, turning on the car radio to break the heavy atmosphere that had formed. That year's winter, said the radio announcers, had been dreadful and the Milanese had had enough of it. The light turned red and Adriano stopped in the queue.

"I'm a yuki-onna," said Miss Ryusaki in a whisper.
"Pardon?"

"I said I'm a yuki-onna," she repeated sulkily.

"That's nothing to be ashamed of. Everyone is different".

She stared at him with a questioning look, then burst out laughing. "You don't know what a yuki-onna is, do you? Are you married, Adriano?"

"Who, me?" he asked amused, "Have you taken a good look at me? Who would want to marry such an ugly man!" The light turned green, followed by an explosion of hooting as the cars struggled to get going again in the snow that had already started to pile up.

"I'd be a good wife," she whispered.

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"What?" he shouted, trying to make himself heard over the noise of the crazed traffic. She let it drop, then turned to look out of the window again.

With the excuse of wanting to practice the language, she insisted on getting the tickets herself. Adriano watched her as she stared threateningly at the poor ticket clerk, then came back to get him at the entrance to the Triennale and dragged him through the rooms of the permanent Italian design exhibition.

"Here we are at last. This is Algol 11, much more than a simple television. Isn't it nice?" she asked, pointing to a strange television set.

"My father had one the same, when it packed up he threw it away".

"You're strange, you Italians," she said, "you're surrounded by beautiful things and you don't care about them until a foreigner comes and makes you notice them".

"Do you often come to Italy Miss Ryusaki?"

"Every year for some years now". Plucking up her courage, she added in a tiny voice, "My name is Nari, please call me that". Adriano went all colours, nodded and then moved away with the excuse of going to the bathroom. He was a headstrong type who never ran away even when he should, but that mysterious girl, so kind to him, made him waver. Why?

From a distance he watched her talk to Algol 11: an uninterrupted conversation and then a ceremonious bow. Adriano had no doubt she was thanking the television - she seemed satisfied, as if she had obtained something, but what exactly?

#### SNOW IN THE AIR

She noticed him and ran over, "Now we must go to the Sant'Ambrogio Basilica".

Adriano didn't ask for explanations, he just took her there in as short a time as possible. On the road, in the unbearable silence that descended every time they moved from one part of the city to another, he wondered what mystery lay behind Nari's monologues. Was it so important to find out? Perhaps he wanted to convince himself at all costs that she was simply crazy; in that way everything would be explained, even that fact that she found him beautiful.

When they reached the basilica, Nari stopped for a moment to admire the massive structure and then charged across the courtyard with its four-sided portico – evidently she was in a great hurry. She went into the church, and Adriano had to run to keep up with her. He saw that she was looking upwards from the bottom of the column with the famous bronze serpent; she was talking to the statue. He hung back, more and more curious, watching the same dialogue he had seen in Brera and at the Triennale. After the ritual bow, she approached him smiling "What's up? Have I got something on my face?"

"You talked to a painting, a television and a bronze statue," he said calmly.

"What do you mean? You're from Milan and you don't recognize your city's *genii loci?*"

"I know my neighbours in Via Novara and my friends in Via Pioppette in Milan: only live people in other words"

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"Despite the fact that the Milanese have made you suffer so much, you still consider them the only living things in this city, its most important thing. It's just as I thought, Adriano, you're beautiful. Don't worry, now we'll go to a person who's alive and kicking." she said bitterly.

"A person who's alive and kicking?" What Nari had said was true; the Milanese certainly hadn't treated him kindly and he – because of his short fuse – had never been able to make really lasting relationships. In the end, fate and life's misunderstandings had convinced him – not without regrets – that it was better to be alone; at least you avoid a lot of disappointment that way.

"I," she said, "would never leave you alone, though. I would keep you with me always. Let's go to Lambrate railway station".

Adriano, who felt his eyes filling, took the car keys from his trouser pocket and started walking. Naris had to run to keep up with him. She reached him and took him by the arm: the girl's body was chilled. She would catch a cold going around like that, he thought, slipping off his jacket and putting it round her shoulders. They were filming an advertisement for a bank in the underpass at Lambrate station. Adriano tried to explain to the security guard on the set that Nari wanted to speak with a member of the troupe, but the area was closed. He explained the problem to Miss Ryusaki and before he could finish what he was saying a gust of wind whisked through the tunnel, turning over the

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lights and the set. The director came towards them ranting.

"Why have you come to disturb me?" he asked Nari, pointing a finger at her. Adriano felt his hands itch; she began to speak in Japanese.

"Are you joking?" asked the director, his face darkening. "And what did they say?"

Smiling, she answered.

"Satisfying the obsessions of one like you is irresponsible, they must have gone crazy. And shouldn't we defend the city?"

Nari started to laugh, then replied calmly.

"What you say is true," insisted the director, "but we can't oppose change; it's man who wants it. You, rather, should stop this obsessive demand that everything stays the way you like it, you're the same old self-ish person". The director gave Adriano a nasty look. "You're doing everything for him, aren't you?". Nari blushed; the director studied them for a moment, "I can't stop her".

The director said to Adriano, "I'm in the minority; the others are on her side. Do you realize she'll destroy everything for you?"

"There's no need to raise your voice," replied Adriano menacingly, "I can't stand rudeness".

"Very well," announced the director as he moved angrily away, "Do what you want, dammed crazies, destroy everything".

Adriano had lost his temper and was about to follow him, but Nari held him back. She bowed towards the

# ANDREA CATTANEO

director and asked Adriano to take her back to the Hotel Spadari. In the car neither of them said a word. Lost in thought, Adriano took a wrong turn and found himself in Piazza Duomo: it had started snowing again. A show connected with fashion week was in progress; the freezing models came from Piazzale Cordusio and ran across Via Mengoni. The traffic was held up by an army of policemen.

"Your friend the director must be crazy," began Adriano, unbelievably jealous of Nari's familiarity with the director, "according to him, you want to destroy Milan, it's incredible". Nari didn't answer. "Perhaps you're hiding an atomic bomb under your coat! That guy sure talks a lot of nonsense".

"It's all true" she replied. "I'll bury this city under the snow, I'll freeze everything and above all, I'll freeze you. Then you'll never leave me again".

Adriano turned towards her: she wasn't joking, and before he could say anything, she had got out of the car and was crossing the piazza at a run. She stopped in front of the great doors of the Cathedral. Adriano ran after her, knocking down a policeman with a punch when he tried to stop him. Nari raised her arms to the sky; a strong wind swept the piazza. Adriano clung to a lamppost, a boy flew past him and crashed into the plinth of the statue of Vittorio Emanuele II. The cries of the tourists thrown to the ground could hardly be heard, the whistle of the wind was too loud. Nari stood as still as if she were anchored to the ground. A horrendous vortex of grey and white clouds had formed in the

#### SNOW IN THE AIR

sky, covering the entire city. Seeking refuge, the models ran towards the underground, helped by passers-by and the police, but the job was simply impossible.

Nari's coat was hampering her movement so she took it off; Adriano saw it fly away like a flag torn from its pole. She'll get a cold, he thought, buffeted by the wind before hitting his head against the lamppost. First the blood blurred his sight, then he lost consciousness. The snow fell as thick as a wall.

When he came round it had all been over for some time. Milan, completely covered in snow, was immersed in an unreal silence. Adriano stood up, his head throbbing. The Cathedral had become an enormous mountain of snow, a cold, distant sun shone in the clear sky. In the midst of all that white was Nari, with her long black hair tossed by the wind. She was amazed to see him still alive and was uncertain what to do.

"Will you stay with me forever, Adriano?" she asked with tears in her eyes. He smiled at her.

"It's a beautiful sight," said Adriano, "it's a shame about this annoying knocking".





# 6

# Do it all over again by Roberta Minghetti

# HOTEL GRAN DUCA DI YORK

200 grams dark chocolate 4 eggs 175 grams butter 200 grams sugar 1 envelope vanilla 1 spoon potato flour

Making a chocolate cake relaxes me, the smell substitutes the air and sticks to the skin like summer sun. It's almost one in the morning when I wrap the now-cold cake in layers of tinfoil and plastic bags. On the floor of the living room is an open suitcase with a small space waiting to receive the precious package. I close the suitcase and go to bed. We're leaving tomorrow.

#### 4.00 pm

The train's slow progress has always relaxed Angelo.

#### ROBERTA MINGHETTI

I feel it as he sleeps with his head lightly resting on my shoulder; I turn to gaze out of the window; everything speeds by - trees, roads, people waiting, railway crossings, fields.

When I was small, my brother and I invented a game to pass the time during car journeys. We pretended to take mental photographs of the scenery, and the one who remembered most details was the winner. Once we argued for hours about the colour of a lady's bicycle, but in the end I won by convincing him that it was red with a mauve saddle and basket. Now I look out and try to play by myself, but I'm no longer as quick and precise and what I get is just a succession of visual perceptions, a mixture of lights and colours like a parade of Impressionist paintings.

I smile thinking of home. I wonder if Sofia and Marco are still angry. My children were not very happy with the idea of this journey "at our age" and "in our condition".

"Our age": that's what all young people always call old age, and I like this definition. I like it because it means having grown old with someone at my side and that the time has finally come to experience new places and destinations put off for too long.

"Our condition": Angelo's sight is no longer a sense to be relied on, but thanks to that, the other four senses have become incomparable in helping me appreciate smells, tastes, noises and textures that I would never have noticed on my own, and anyway my eyes have been enough for both of us for years now. Certainly

# DO IT ALL OVER AGAIN

my daughter is also referring to the gap of sixty-seven seconds between me and the rest of the world – that's the delay with which I've been able to hear sounds since I was born. It's never been a problem for Angelo to count to sixty-seven before getting my answer though, and not even strangers take much notice of this strangeness of mine, especially now I have the excuse of age.

The train noisily begins to slow down and the seat shakes me about – we're entering the tunnel that will take us to the platforms in Milan's main station.

We've arrived.

I gently move Angelo's head from my shoulder and support it with my hand until he wakes up. The other passengers begin to crowd into the corridor, dragging bulky luggage. They aggressively push past each other, risking losing their balance to gain a place further up the queue to get off.

We wait.

We wait for the train to stop moving and allow us to stand steadily on our feet to reach up for our suitcase. I take my bag, and with my arm through Angelo's, walk along platform 8.

Our suitcase runs proudly on its wheels as if it had been waiting for this parade for ages, and it offers no resistance when expert hands place it in the boot of a taxi and we are asked in a hurriedly polite tone.

"Good evening, where can I take you?"

"Good evening, Hotel Gran Duca di York in Via Moneta, please".

#### ROBERTA MINGHETTI

### 6.10рм

Before going in, I linger for a few moments on the pavement; the façade before me is elegant and discreetly illuminated. I greet the hotel with an understanding nod, as if we knew each other, and taking a deep breath I take Angelo by the arm and enter the lobby like a princess invited to the palace. The room they give us in reception is on the second floor. As soon as we reach it, I throw myself on the bed, wrinkling the beige eiderdown that had been elegantly spread there like cream decorating a cake. The bed responds to this unexpected impact with a small noise that immediately draws Angelo's attention. He stops and his face takes on an expression of amazement, as if after all these years he was still surprised by my childish games. Jokingly I tell him "Hey, what luck, my nightdress goes perfectly with this room - it's small, comfortable, romantic, scented and striped!" and he gives in and laughs.

It seems a lifetime since I last came to Milan. I was about to graduate in architecture from Florence University, and I'd come to visit the Triennale di Milano with some of my fellow students and a professor. The same professor I'd continued to see also after I'd graduated, the same one who promised to bring me here again for a special visit, just the two of us, as soon as I'd found a job, as soon as our first child was old enough to be left with her grandparents, as soon as the second child had started nursery school full time, or as soon

#### DO IT ALL OVER AGAIN

as...as soon as. In the end I stopped waiting and I decided the the right time had come. I bought myself a striped nightdress, I persuaded my daughter to help me book a nice hotel right in the centre of Milan on the internet, I packed a suitcase for two and I added my chocolate cake.

Now Professor Angelo and I are on a mattress of sleep in an 18th century building, at the centre of a cobweb of artistic sites, suspended in time.

#### 8.00am

As I sleep I hear noises; I try to blend them with the others in my dream, I'd like to amalgamate real sounds with those in my mind and carry on sleeping, but inexorably I slip into wakefulness. Without opening my eyes I try to pinpoint the noise that is waking me – it's water running in the shower, Angelo must be up already. In a moment he'll come out of the bathroom and begin urging me to get up; I don't like waking up in a hurry, especially without him beside me. Our different ways of waking have often been the cause of morning bad-temper, but for years now I just let myself be wakened by his noise and put my infallible mental relaxation method into practice – repeating my mantra of ingredients from memory:

200 grams dark chocolate 4 eggs 175 grams butter 200 grams sugar

#### ROBERTA MINGHETTI

1 envelope vanilla1 spoon potato flour

And then the desire to see him come out of the bathroom to wish him good morning always gets the better of the need for sleep and silence.

"Good morning Mr. Mole".

"Good morning my young lady..." he leans over the bed and gives me a kiss, "and today too, you're even more beautiful than yesterday."

"Oh Mr. M., your eyes are my saving grace".

On the ground floor, the breakfast room welcomes us with a delicious buffet loaded with tasty sweet things and colourful vitamins, while the walls greet us with elegance, holding scepters of light. We seat ourselves at a table and cover it with fruit, bread, butter, jam, coffee and orange juice. I bite avidly into my morning energy seated comfortably on a white chair that affectionately hugs my back, and smile at the thought that today Angelo, precise person that he is, will have to entrust himself to my sketchy ability to work out maps and itineraries. Now he's looking at me and soon he'll ask me a question:

"So, my young lady, what have you planned for our tour of Milan?"

1, 2, 3,...64, 65, 66, 67.

Punctually, after a wait of sixty-seven seconds, I reply, "I've worked out a detailed route, all you have to do is leave the hotel, take me by the arm and let yourself be guided".

# DO IT ALL OVER AGAIN

He plays along and gives me a satisfied smile.

Our walk soon brings us to Piazza Duomo; our gentle pace giving us plenty of time to admire the sharply pointed Cathedral, while my gaze flies up to the tallest spire to greet the statue of the Virgin Mary.

We savour Corso Vittorio Emanuele at a slow pace, breathing in the atmosphere. Angelo smells the odour of the colours used by the painters seated along the avenue. If he listens hard enough he can distinguish between the dialects spoken by the people passing by, he picks up the sound of pushchair wheels, the hiss of the shops' automatic doors as they open and close. I take his hand and stop to stare at our reflection in the windows of a department store; he's tall, broad shouldered and slightly stooped, the lenses of his glasses bouncing flashes of light off the store window. My skin is fresh and serene, my large eyes as shiny and dark as my hair and my raincoat hugs my waist saucily. For a moment I let go of Angelo's hand and the image changes - my skin shows the ravages of time, my coat falls distractedly over angular hips, the bones stand out clearly on the hand clutching my bag and my smile is framed by thin lips in a face crowned by wiry, grey hair. I urgently clutch my Mr. Mole's arm; he smells of softness and strength, of the living room couch and of dreams started in an embrace. Before setting off again, I hold him tightly and once again see the reflection of a girl clinging to her art teacher.

We make the journey back, from Piazza San Babila to Piazza Duomo, on the underground red line to conserve

#### ROBERTA MINGHETTI

our energy and be on form for the surprise I've planned for Mr. M. – the Goya exhibition at Palazzo Reale.

Angelo doesn't need sight to admire the colours that illuminate the rooms. He closes his eyes and listens to the masterpieces, breathing in their magic like a chef who can appreciate the harmony of doses and flavours just by walking into a kitchen eyes closed and inhaling. "Thank you my young lady", he whispers in my ear. 1, 2, 3,...64, 65, 66, 67.

(1, 2, 3,...04, 03, 00, 07.

"You're welcome, professor".

### 7.15<sub>PM</sub>

I'm keeping something very special in our second-floor room where Angelo is now resting, but it's not yet time to go and get it. Like Mary in Burnett's "Secret Garden", I sit in the hotel loggia, a lovely flower-filled corner where I can leaf through my album of memories in peace, up-dating it with all the day's emotions.

It is almost dinner time when I decide to go and wake Angelo.

"Good evening, Mr. M., did you have a good rest? Why don't you go and wait for me downstairs, there's a little green sitting room near the lifts; I'll be down right away".

He gets up and leaves the room and I calculate the time needed for him to get downstairs and settle himself comfortably on the green couch to his right – my entrance must be perfect.

After about ten minutes I take the cake I'd brought in the suitcase out of the mini-bar and leave.

# DO IT ALL OVER AGAIN

The lift deposits me on the ground floor; I approach the couch, cross in front of Angelo, and placing a flaming brown cake on the round table before him, sing "Happy birthday Mr. M., happy birthday to you".

From the couch opposite I enjoy his astonished expression, as if after so many years he was still surprised by my childish games.

Without a word, he bends over the candle formed by two digits full of curves and blows out the flame flickering on the number 88. I watch him as his lips begin to form a sentence:

"If we were to meet in another life and another time, would you do it all over again with me?"

While I wait for the sound of this sentence to reach me, I look over Angelo's head and notice a fresco showing two young people looking at each other as if they were trying to keep their relationship hidden, as if they were a student and her art teacher.

I smile.

...64, 65, 66, 67.





# 7

# A lake in a book by Barbara Piazza

HOTEL BELVEDERE

"The bells of the lake
Have the sound
Of soft bronze,
When the water is calm
And the wave pours forth
The far-off echo
Of an ancient voice,
Transparency of a dark abyss,
Submerged stories, repeated
To the constant sound
Of the bells of the lake."

The light-coloured cover with gilded edges bore its name. A simple title: "Poems". He opened the pages. From the bench the sound of the water could be heard lapping against the wall of the pier. The small dot finally took on a shape. The ferry docked exactly on time. From Varenna, Bellagio Point blurred into the

image of the centre of the lake.

He fumbled in his pocket for the ticket that he had distractedly shoved into his trousers. His hand drew out an old black and white photo. The edges were worn. Claudio smiled from the third row in his black smock. That was in primary school. Who knew if he would find him. Lake Lario wore the colours of the clear days, freshened by the Tivano, which blew from the north. Soon summer would be here: the shores would soon fill up with tourists. He watched the waves made by the gusts ruffle the water: he was in for a rough crossing, but he was used to the swell. As a boy he had taken on all kinds of bad weather in his rowing boat. Rocking on the water would take him back to his roots. Watching the clouds sailing to the south, he realised that the sun would only last as long as the wind blew. Dark clouds were building up over the mountains like far-off thoughts. The weather could change without warning. Only an expert eye could read the changes, but about the people who had once animated that shore, he no longer knew anything. The arrival of the ferry made his heart beat faster. His roots were planted among the waves, under the dark, imperturbable surface of the lake. From the ferry, Varenna appeared like a fishermen's village: coloured houses rose from the water towards the sky. On the lake the perspective was completely renewed. It was possible to capture every smallest detail.

Mario was no longer of an age for great enterprises. He would leave the crossings to posterity, but his spirit was still that of a young boy.

#### A LAKE IN A BOOK

"All the merit of boats and rowing" he always told his friends. The lake had taught him about life's challenges and the ability to never give up. When the *Breva* blew hard and the oars went against the current, you had to push and sweat. You couldn't let it beat you. No engine; just the strength of his arms. The oars would go on turning among the waves until he won.

"A will to win and perseverance!" he always said.

He had often thought about the lake, but it had not stopped him making his fortune elsewhere. The memory of the scenery had reawakened the poetry. The step from thought to writing was a short one.

The journey was taking him back to the golden years of his memory.

"I'm going" he'd said to Claudio one day. His friend had looked at him with nostalgia. He already knew that he would really do it.

"There's nothing better than our lake. Perhaps one day you'll discover it by yourself. Then you'll feel the need to return".

They had parted with a promise to meet again, before the years had taken their toll. A gleam trembled in their eyes. And yet they never let themselves be taken by surprise.

A really long time had passed. Maybe the promise would not be kept.

The ferry's hooter announced their arrival. The yellow house with the hydrangeas jutted out at the end of the town. There was no longer anyone to meet him. It had been sold some years after his departure. His heart skipped a beat. He heard his mother's voice calling him

#### BARBARA PIAZZA

loudly from the window. Her pale face smiled from behind the light blue curtain.

Rows of oleanders decorated the lake shore. Some tourists were climbing the stairway flanked by artisans' workshops.

The Hotel Belvedere was situated higher up on the hill, just above the town. It was a climb up from the landing stage. From there you could see all of Lake Lario. A taxi took him to the entrance. He would leave his walk until later, walking back down the way he'd come. Now he had to tidy himself up. There were a lot of things to rediscover. The ghosts of his mind were regaining their form. He saw his old companions follow him on their bicycles along the slope.

"Are we going fishing today?"

"Let's meet on the point around three o'clock. They got some whitefish opposite Pescallo yesterday".

He reached the Hotel.

"I'm Mr. Taruselli".

"Welcome, Sir. I hope you like Bellagio."

"I know Bellagio like my old boat. I used to live here once."

"Welcome back, Sir."

"Please make it a room with a lake view. I want to admire the scenery."

"Don't worry. Room 18 has an excellent view."

He went up to the room. The yellow walls made the room bright. An antique bed made him feel right at home. The wind had died down, but he knew it would start blowing again when the sun went down. The tem-

# A LAKE IN A BOOK

perature had become milder. He placed his suitcase on the chair and looked out of the window. Some boats were coming back into the harbour. The lighter for Menaggio crossed the centre of the lake.

"I'd forgotten how lovely it was". He stayed there until dusk. The pale light of the moon was reflected in the water. The sky was still clear. The curtain fluttered. A hiss made far-off waves rise. Clear colours impressed themselves in the roots, unrolling the ribbon. He took the book he'd left on the bedside table. He caressed the pages. Old friendships, stories, huge gardens of thoughts. The lake had crossed its borders. And he rediscovered its face. He read aloud:

"Along the avenue of plane trees,
Towards the chapel overlooking Loppia harbour,
Runs an ancient path,
where the house shows itself to the waters of the Lario.
Pictures of a lake transport again, far away.
And the orangery, with fruits bursting with scented juice,
Appears among the statues of women in the garden.
Rhododendrons and azaleas,
Ancient trees scattered along the slopes
And the Japanese pond,
With its romantic spirit,
Where Liszt composed,
Among the fallen leaves,
Musical splendour
At Villa Melzi".

#### BARBARA PIAZZA

He remained silent. Soon he would go back to the Villa. Perhaps Claudio would wait for him at Loppia harbour, with his wind-blown hair, pipe in his mouth, his lined skin and the sun on his face. Perhaps they would go for a sail as if they had never been parted. He looked at his watch. He went down to the dining room. Outside, the lake sparkled with stars. From the shores the first lights reflected in its surface danced. The clarity of the dark would bring the wind and its music again. Waves and gusts would invade the silence of the night. He would sleep In the hotel, like a tourist, but at home, above the lake.

Tomorrow perhaps he would see Claudio. He was a keeper at the gardens: he always had time for fishing and for his friends. Perhaps he would not recognise him.

"I'll pay for a ticket, like a tourist. I'll put on an act, then he'll recognise me. Yes, he'll recognise me because there's something special between us. We'll have kept our promise."

The hotels sparkled in the night. The lake collected all their reflections. Friendship would keep him company until the morning, which arrived in the midst of dreams. With slow steps he walked towards the lido. Something told him he would find him on the jetty. He crossed the avenue of plane trees and the chapel. The harbour enclosed the boats of the past. A man was getting his drag net ready.

He would go fishing. Mario slowly drew closer. His heart was bursting.

#### A LAKE IN A BOOK

"Claudio! How's it going today?" he cried with a croaky voice. Claudio turned round. He put his net down on the wall.

"I was waiting for you, you old rascal! The boat's ready. How about going fishing?"

Bellagio held the soft silence of morning. There was a great coming and going in the hotels. Later the lake shore would reawaken.

Claudio got the equipment ready and put the oars in the boat.

"It's about time you decided to come back!"

A ferry greeted the first passengers waiting to embark. A seagull spotted a fish and dived straight into the water. Chubs splashed around looking for bleak. The wind died down. It had blown over the ocean. Villa Melzi sipped its coffee with the style of an "old time lady".

"They're biting! Get the net! It's a big one."

"Don't let it get away!"

"But will they cook whitefish at the Belvedere?"

New York moved restlessly outside the window. The hotel room with its neutral colours brought him back to his work. The conference would begin in a few hours. The lake still moved up and down in his hands. He closed the book. The whitefish were still on the plate.

"Bon appetite!" he said to himself.

"To the whitefish", he heard the reply.

The Hotel Belvedere showed the last details. The view

#### BARBARA PIAZZA

was truly wonderful. Two men were still having lunch on the terrace, but outside was New York.

Mario placed the book on the night-table. He had to interrupt his journey. On the first page was a dedication: "To Claudio, my best friend and to the poetry that leads back to everything", then he went out with his briefcase in his hand and his heart elsewhere.







## 8

### Goodbye Maria by Laura Giassi

#### ALBERGO ACCADEMIA

This morning the gravel road I am driving along to reach Trento is almost impossible. Innumerable holes have become deeper because of the rain which fell during the last days and my van is constantly bumping. The air coming in from the ajar window is very fresh and the landscape is no less than fantastic: every time I see them, the powerful Dolomites I've known since I was a child are a source of feelings I cannot describe. I've driven this road twice a week for approximately twenty years.

It all began when one morning I decided to go picking mushrooms, even though the sky outside my bedroom window was not promising at all.

I began to walk along the path when a sudden cry made me start. I immediately started running toward the place where I thought the cry of pain came from and I found a young man lying on the ground, who kept rubbing his foot.

#### LAURA GIASSI

I took him to the hospital and, after having made sure that he was all right, I went back to my hut.

After one week the very same young man knocked at my door and only a few hours later I had found a job.

It's incredible, if I think about it... that afternoon the young man told me that on the day of the accident he was looking for mushrooms. He was the owner of a hotel/restaurant in the centre of Trento and, since he wished to improve the quality of the cuisine, he had decided to collect the fruits of the land; but he hadn't considered the unexpected events which may occur in a thick under brush...

So he decided I could bring everything I could find to his hotel and, since I was an unemployed farmer with no family, I accepted.

So here I am after twenty years, unloading fresh milk, home-made cheese and butter, fresh eggs, fruits, vegetables and – of course – delicious mushrooms from my van.

The Accademia hotel is hosted in an ancient house, the architectural features of which have been enhanced by a recent restoration.

There are forty rooms, all equipped with the most comfortable facilities, and two suites; there is a conference hall, a bar, a wine bar, and a room reserved for business meetings. The area I prefer is the inner courtyard, which was turned into a garden, with chairs and tables where you can have breakfast or dinner with candles underneath a large horse-chestnut tree.

"Thank you, Enrico, you are always right on time!

#### GOODBYE MARIA

Marco... Marcooo... can anybody tell me where Marco is hiding? Marco?" Marta, the cook, is shouting.

"May I help you, Marta?"

"Thank you, Enrico, you're adorable... room 204", she swiftly hands me a steaming tray and disappears among large pots in the kitchen.

Well then, room 204... I walk along the long red carpet decorating the entrance hall of the hotel and step into the lift.

I resolutely knock on the door and I hear a woman's voice coming from inside and inviting me to come in and leave the breakfast on the table next to the bed.

The room is very beautiful and cosy, but what I really adore is the ceiling, of which one can see the wooden beams; it is the typical room of an Alpine hotel: warm and well furbished.

"Thank you for the breakfast!", a voice behind my back makes me start, a woman is staring at me with an amused expression; she's wearing a white robe, her wet hair sticks to her skin and frames her face and an adorable white musk perfume permeates the whole room.

"I am sorry... I... I apologise for intruding, I had stopped to look at the room..." I am trying to hide my embarrassment although my red cheeks reflected in the mirror near the door are a giveaway; I apologise again and say goodbye to the most beautiful and charming woman I have ever seen.

Today I really don't feel like going back to my hut, so I decide to help Maria, hoping to collect information on the mysterious woman.

#### LAURA GIASSI

She is the companion of a very old lady who owns a large company in Milan; her name is Maria and during her stay she is almost always on her own, since the old lady is often busy with the customers of her company, with whom she has business dinners, meetings or cocktails. Maria is in charge of a number of tasks and she is indispensible for driving, since the old lady has no driving license.

Marta says that the old lady is very despotic and arrogant, which is typical of rich people, and is lucky that she has met such a sweet, patient and kind person as Maria.

I decide not to go back home and I go to the room that the hotel owner always leaves free for me. During the Winter, the weather often prevents me from travelling, so I stop by for a few days and supply a number of services in exchange for the hospitality.

It was a very busy evening: I helped waiting on the tables in the inner courtyard, the dining room and the reserved room where a meeting was being held.

Each time I entered the room reserved for business meetings my eyes searched for Maria, but there was no sign of her during the whole evening. Now I am exhausted, dining under this magnificent horse-chestnut and gazing at the starred sky.

"Good evening, do you mind if I sit here with you?" I immediately recognise Maria's voice, I jump up from my chair, remove my inseparable green cloth hat and bow to accept her company.

"My goodness, what a gentleman! Thank you for your

#### GOODBYE MARIA

courtesy, but I am a simple woman, I would only like to chat a little bit, if you don't mind..."

Her green eyes make my heart skip a beat every time she looks at me but, after a moment of embarrassment, sitting before a wonderful dessert and a slowly burning candle, we tell each other about our lives.

I spend the most beautiful week of my life in the Accademia hotel.

Maria and I become inseparable.

Yesterday was one of the most unforgettable days: since the "millionaire" (this is the nickname we attributed to Maria's "boss" as a joke) had given her a day off, we organised a trip: he are heading for Venice.

Of course we had to stop in romantic Verona, since it is only 40 miles away from Trento; we strolled around the charming city centre and stopped to visit the statue of Romeo and Juliet and the Arena.

After an abundant lunch, we left again and spent the rest of the day in St. Mark's square, riding in a gondola during the charming evening, under the fascinating oil-lamps illuminating splendid Venice.

At the end of the day we were exhausted and I really believe that Maria appreciated the trip since she gave me the sweetest kiss before closing the door of the hotel room behind her back.

Now I am looking at her while she is tasting her strawberry milkshake in the Cathedral square in Trento, after having visited Buonconsiglio castle.

This evening we are very silent: we know this is our last evening together...

#### LAURA GIASSI

Maria will leave tomorrow and my heart starts trembling if I only think about it...

"Enrico..." Maria has turned to me and is looking at me with her wonderful green eyes, surrounded by thin wrinkles that make her glances mature and melancholic "...this is our last evening... These days spent with you really made me feel fine..." she moves a curl of hair with her hand, I am about to interrupt her but she softly puts her hand on my lips. "...don't say a word, Enrico... listen to me... tomorrow you will not come to say farewell to me because this is not going to be a farewell, we shall meet again, every year I will come back to the Accademia hotel, always on 17th February and we shall meet and love each other. We are too old to give up our lives, I would never agree to leaving my city and my job and you would never give up what you have created in the course of the years, I would never let you do it, but we cannot relinquish our love. As soon as I got to Trento and after I visited the hotel, I understood immediately that there was something special in this place, something magical about it... I shall never forget it because a piece of my heart belongs here... I promise I will be back and wait for you..."

It is noon and I am loading the last boxes into my van to transport foodstuffs over the next days.

I look around and gaze in the distance at the wonderful square and powerful Cathedral, the people walking in the streets of Trento and... the entrance of the Accademia hotel; I've come here for twenty years but today I am looking at this place with different eyes, and all

#### GOODBYE MARIA

of a sudden I hear Marta – the cook – shouting, and she takes me abruptly back to reality, which makes me smile...

Maria is right, I would have never given up all this: my home in the Alps, my animals, Marta's shouting. I think this is really the place where I would like to meet Maria every time I wish; and if in our case "every time" means one week per year, all I have to do is wait...

I start the engine of my van and, while I'm looking in the rear-view mirror at two women getting into a very elegant black car, I think: "Goodbye, Maria".





## 9

### A world apart by Barbara Gramegna

#### BOUTIOUE HOTEL ZENANA

After the February 1917 revolution, Tsar Nicholas II was arrested and deported to Tobolsk, a town in Siberia, and then to Ekaterinburg in the Urals.

In the summer of 1918, Russia was plunged into full-scale civil war.

The White army, loyal to the Tsar, surrounded Ekaterinburg and tried to create the conditions to free Nicholas.

The Bolsheviks so decided to kill the Tsar and his family in the cellars of the house belonging to the merchant Ipatiev.

The bodies of Nicholas II, the Tsarina Alexandra Feodorovna and their children – Maria, Anastasia, Alexei, Olga and Tatiana – were taken to the woods close to the city, but the threat of the White army forced the Bolsheviks to do things in a hurry and to get rid of them not far from the road. Because of the long delay before the discovery was made, the mystery and the idea that one

#### BARBARA GRAMEGNA

of them, perhaps Anastasia, could have survived, was deliberately fuelled.

However, the story still remains very mysterious.

Films have been made and books written about it, and the memory continues to be revived.

Nicholas and Alexander must have had strange presentiments when they chose Anastasia as the name for their, by all accounts, most mischievous and impertinent little daughter. Anastasia means "resurrection".

For a moment I find the idea unsettling as the room I am occupying is named for her, just as the Hotel Zenana's other eight rooms have a girl's name Zenobia, Lakshimi, Giselle, Audrey, Samblana, Elena, Coco and Modjadji.

I lie down in search of the rest I am never able to find. These days, I always wish I was somewhere else, because now everyone's life makes them wish that, but then when you actually are somewhere else, you miss your everyday habits, and so I flounder a bit not having the usual things to do.

I leave a little window open.

A gust of wind makes me shiver, but then I have the sensation of someone covering my shoulders in a protective way, like when we are small.

How I miss someone doing it.

I'm in a cocoon: silence, but chatter, warm but cool.

I seem to be awake though, I also hear my voice saying:

- What is it?

#### A WORLD APART

A young man in livery with something in his hand answers me:

- Madam, look here! - and he places some sheets of paper held together by a wooden rod on the bed, then opens the curtains to let in the light of the sunset that gilds the still snow-capped peaks.

I'm not particularly enamoured of the mountains, and when I come it's always for a specific reason.

I let the duvet that I thought someone had just covered me with drop from my shoulders, and see these sheets of transparent red material with a word written in Cyrillic letters: 'IIIBыбзик'.

I can't say that I know Russian, but I manage to read it thanks to Anatoly.

Anatoly arrived in Italy quite a long time ago, in the care of his mother's sister. He was the first foreign child at my school.

He had a very pale, almost transparent, complexion, sad, shimmering eyes, very straight, fine hair and a few freckles around his nose.

He said nothing, for months he didn't speak, to the extent that we thought he was dumb. He wrote, though, on little notes and since the teacher knew I was curious, she put him next to me. We were in fifth grade.

I learned his alphabet; it was like a game for me, like those alphabets that children invent so that adults or other children can't understand them.

No-one understood what he wrote, not even me, but I still took those notes home and kept them in a little

#### BARBARA GRAMEGNA

trunk, the ones they used to sell sweets in.

Among these notes there was one in particular with a single word: 'Швыбзик'.

I hear the floorboard creak, almost everything is made of wood here; wooden floor, alcoves, little verandas and rooms that you discover a little by little as you venture further into the bowels of Zenana.

Zenana is home, a woman's home, your home if you want it to be.

I continue to feel presences.

In this torpid state, a tingle of fear also runs through me.

I flick quickly through the sheets of paper that were left on my bed, or at least that how it seems, and again I read the name Anastasia.

A shiver runs through me: I should also have been called that if it hadn't been for one of my grandmother's somewhat "Bolshevik" sisters, who persuaded my mother to change her mind.

Every room here has its own personality, and the one I am in definitely has a very strong one.

I didn't think I had dozed off, but instead I've given in to sleep for two and a half hours.

I've found the repose that escapes me even at night during the frenzy of the week.

But there is no young man in livery in the room, nor anything on the bed, or anyone in the hall. I convince myself that I have entered into contact with my other worlds that this world apart has opened for me.

#### A WORLD APART

Too many coincidences. They called Anastasia 'Shvibzik'- 'Швыбзик' when she was small.

There are certainly spirits at Zenana, good ones, because everything is good: the scent in every room, the verbena cream that caresses you after a shower, the smells that come from the kitchen. At Zenana you don't find what you imagine there should be here, but you find what you don't know you need – to belong to the world.

Entering the suites is a spatial-temporal journey, where colours, furnishings and objects chosen with care provide you with a thousand different "incipits" for as many stories.

In my suit I found the one for mine, or rather Anatoly's.

When someone is suffering, telling other people the reason for their sufferance is to make their skin even thinner, so I promised myself not to do it.

But stories have to be told at Zenana.

Anatoly's father was in prison in Novosibirsk for manslaughter, the result of one of many vodka-fuelled nights. His mother, desperate and unable to take care of him, handed him over to her sister, who thanks to a catalogue of men looking for "serious friendship leading to marriage" managed to come to Italy, bringing her already twelve year old daughter and her little nephew with her.

This bit of gossip was passed round as soon as he came to school, but it got mixed up with all the changes that gossip usually undergoes, until one fine day it became

#### **BARBARA GRAMEGNA**

lost in a stream of banalities relating to being the only foreign child and, if only for this, "undoubtedly traumatized".

So almost nothing was ever expected of him, and at the end of the year he was handed over to the next school with a few comments that didn't give him much chance of improvement, but which took into account the difficulties of the case.

I heard nothing more about him until one day, two years ago, sitting in the Cafe Demel in Vienna, a note on the tray of my Wiener Melange, which I though was my bill, make me freeze in my tracks: 'Hallo, IIIBBIGGIKI'

Taken aback, I looked around, trying to find among the various men seated at tables in the room, something of the boy of thirty years ago, a man with pale skin and fine blond hair who was just waiting for me to look up. But no-one reminded me of him, not in the least, not even if I factored in baldness, a moustache or a few additional kilos.

I went to the bathroom, hoping to maybe run across him, with no luck.

In a state of considerable agitation, as if I had met a ghost, and after hanging around for over an hour, I gave up and left.

Viennese coffee houses are places where nothing you see is anything compared with what they hide. Enormous pastry workshops, kitchens, offices often connecting with other rooms that lead onto another street and where, as occurs in the movie "The Third Man",

#### A WORLD APART

you could also happen to believe you saw something, but nothing and no-one confirms it.

I had almost convinced myself that I had dreamt the note when a tall, muscular man with very prominent cheekbones and pale skin covered with a few days' worth of fine, blonde beard, came out of a service entrance and came towards me smiling and greeting me in German.

"Schön, dich wiederzusehen, liebe kleine Shvibzik" – "How lovely to see you again, dear little Shvibzik".

We are in the heart of the Eastern Dolomites, where the mountains are so close they lead everyone to think of Mother Earth.

Declaring them a World Heritage Site has meant putting them at everyone's disposal and making us feel part of their history.

Who would have thought that here was once a sea? At the seaside we hear the swish of the waves and let ourselves be lulled. Here too, we let ourselves be lulled. We let ourselves go where we feel good, and where what surrounds us feels like ours. That's how it is at Zenana, a world apart to become part of the world, and now I know why I stopped here before going on to Vienna.





# Padova

www.toscanelli.com

### 10

# The headhunter by Francesco Manzo

HOTEL MAJESTIC TOSCANELLI

I

My name is Anna Esposito and I'm a headhunter. In the sense that I meet the demand for high-level personnel with supply.

Companies looking for managers to hire for important company restructuring missions or researchers able to get new innovative projects off the ground; managers tired of or disappointed by their current work environments and looking for new jobs: this is the type of client that contacts me.

I sell dreams.

It can be the dream of the elderly president of a company in crisis, who's looking for someone to bring it to new splendor, freeing it from the weight of debt and excess personnel, both accumulated in better years. Or the desire of a manager, after being defeated dur-

ing internal political maneuvers, to explore new ter-

ritory for action and to test his strength on other battlefields.

Headhunter is, after all, an inappropriate term, let's say that I try to satisfy the dreams of those who want another chance.

Mine is an art being constantly refined by experience.

There's nothing casual about the matches I make, even if I don't know whether they'll really work out. They probably won't work out any more than most things in our lives.

Like many of my colleagues, I've accumulated a vast database that I draw upon to select a first group of potential candidates able to satisfy a client's request.

But I would never send a candidate to a customer without first examining him personally.

The parties in play must resonate when I bring them together.

Dreams and needs must coincide.

That's why they pay me well.

And that's why I travel a lot and why I'm here today in this Padua hotel.

II

I've always liked the atmosphere of this hotel. I travel for work very often, and I love to use the same hotels in each place I visit. It limits the feeling of confusion due to the constant change of environments, I think.

But the Toscanelli is particular, also because it's tied to

#### THE HEADHUNTER

the memory of an event that taught me not to take myself too seriously.

I'm a creature of habit. I often schedule interviews with candidates for the morning, and I arrive in the area the evening before, so as to be rested and ready for meetings the next day.

When business calls me to the Northeast, I organize my plans in order to stop at the Toscanelli. In the evening, after a walk through the old streets in the town center and dinner in one of the many restaurants near the hotel, I can relax or work. It's very important for me to be prepared well for each interview. I know how to read between the lines of résumés, always ridiculously written in third person, where one tries to describe what should be his own life successes within the confines of a model for the "perfect" document. And I try to surprise the candidate by opening the interview with a question or topic that gets past his defenses.

In this way I manage to keep control of the situation and to quickly evaluate the caliber of the person I have before me. Above all I avoid letting the candidate, almost always a man, establish a dominant relationship with the woman in front of him.

In the end (and I myself am surprised) I manage to pigeon-hole the candidate into a few possible profiles. There aren't any heroes or prince charmings in the world I frequent. At worst there are a lot of egoistic warriors, often ready to clash with their surroundings. And some opportunists.

I'll find a place for many of them. There's always some-

one to provide a battlefield for whoever wants to wage war.

But that will hardly make their punishment lighter in the long run.

Ш

It was a May about ten years ago.

I was at the beginning of my career, and I was working in a well-known personnel search agency. I still couldn't believe that my boss had entrusted me with such an important account; in our group there were people certainly more qualified than I for a mission of such importance. This fact should have made me think, but naturally I attributed it to the perception my boss, the corpulent Doctor Bortoli, had of my abilities.

Our customer was an important Venetian company, built piece by piece around the figure of an engineer named Galan, a self-made entrepreneur who was on the verge of retirement without having ready any valid generational replacements.

I arrived at the company in the morning with an appointment made by my boss, who had told me to speak directly with the engineer's personal assistant, a certain Ms Grimaldi.

After a very brief wait I was received directly by Galan. He was seated at the conference table in his office with another person, also elderly, who was introduced to me as Mister Alisi, the company's head of accounting.

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Mister Galan was over eighty years old, and the weight of work and responsibility certainly could be seen in his physical bearing and in his face, which appeared very tired but preserved an innate kindness.

"I'm sorry you couldn't be welcomed by my assistant Ms Grimaldi, who has other commitments outside the firm today – began the engineer after the usual civilities – also because she was the one to propose contacting you to find a solution to our problems. But I'll try to explain our situation in a few words.

In forty years this company has exceeded all the expectations I had when I founded it. We were a small group of partners who had left a local electro technology laboratory and were financed by relatives and friends".

It was a story that he must have told many times, but it was obvious how deeply it involved him.

"We've passed from success to success, and in these years we've seen – he looked at the accountant, who had an absorbed and condescending air – our sales, number of employees and importance on the market grow. But as time has passed the ownership situation has become complicated; almost all the founding partners' shares have passed to their families. To avoid tension, we've refrained from involving family members in the direct management of the company. After all, I don't see any candidates among them suitable for guiding a company of this size one day. For example, my son is a musician."

He added a phrase with a tone of pride and, at the same time, frustration.

"Therefore we find ourselves today with a need to identify a successor who can ensure the survival and growth of this company in the years to come."

He looked at me as though assuring himself that I'd understood. It seemed to me that, deep down inside, he doubted that the solution to such a complicated problem could come from me, an elegant, young, pretty girl, but nonetheless only a girl. But he continued,

"This is why we finally decided to contact your agency. We want you to select us a good manager who could continue my work in the coming years". He sighed, and standing up to signal the end of our meeting he added, "Our accountant Mister Alisi will escort you on a tour of the company, so you can have a look at all the things we do and how we operate. I'm sure this will help you propose a suitable solution for us".

With the air of someone freed from a burden that had worried him for too long, he stood up and escorted the accountant and me to the door.

Alisi guided me through the different sections of the factory, where employees in white laboratory coats were assembling control boards for complex machinery. Our movements were followed by looks that were polite and at the same time curious, if not truly alarmed. During the tour of the plant we had a coffee in a cozy room used for employee functions, and I tried with indirect questions to establish a less formal relationship with him and to get additional information about the atmosphere and working environment.

I began by asking him why they had not cultivated

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generational replacements within the company over the years. He looked at me as though trying to weigh whether or not he could trust me, and he seemed to conclude that there was no great risk at any rate.

"You see, Miss, Galan is a smart person from both a technical and a financial point of view; he had moments of great intuition that brought the company the success it enjoys today. But he was always a centralizer and he never permitted the growth of a managerial class within the company. Over the years the best people left, looking for positions that would guarantee real professional growth and a career."

I took a sip of my coffee and asked him, "What do you think will happen in the coming months if we find you the manager you really need? Presumably he'll go away too if he isn't given the necessary space...".

Looking at me a little sadly he smiled, and placing his hand on my wrist he told me in a confidential tone, "Miss, it won't be like that. I'm going to tell you what everyone has known for some time. Unfortunately, Galan is seriously ill and we don't know how much longer he'll be able to work with us."

He sighed and then he continued, "You will have noticed how curiously the employees were watching you. We're all from around here, we know each other well and we've worked together for years. Everyone's asking what will happen in the coming months. Many will want to settle accounts; in fact, like all companies, we have our internal conflicts. Some are waiting for a management replacement because they think it will finally

put an end to the influence Ms Grimaldi has over Galan, and as a consequence over the entire company." I gave him a questioning look, as though he were saying something too complicated and I couldn't grasp his message – something, after all, not very far from reality. He was moved by my naïvety. He looked around, then getting closer to me and lowering his voice further he told me.

"Everyone knows that Ms Grimaldi was Galan's lover for several years. It's a situation, you'll understand, that we can't accept morally; but we don't have a choice. The only consolation is that soon this too will end."

I said good-bye to him in the early afternoon after a brief lunch at the factory cafeteria.

The accountant's additional confidences, almost all of them maliciously centering on the role and activities of Ms Grimaldi inside and outside the company, did nothing but lead me to feel female solidarity with that woman, whom it seemed everyone wished a good riddance from the company's fate, as soon as Mister Galan left the helm of the firm.

#### IV

A month later I was at the Toscanelli again.

I had arrived in Padua at five in the afternoon. The hotel staff had received me with the usual kindness, accompanied by a touch of warmth normally reserved for regular clients.

#### THE HEADHUNTER

I had taken a shower after a good five-hour trip from Rome.

It was very important to relax because the following day promised to be very tiring.

For the next morning we had scheduled a final round of interviews for the five candidates included in the "short list" of most suitable candidates. My boss had helped and guided me through all the selection stages; the agreement with Mister Galan was that we would propose a single name, along with a report explaining the reasons for our choice in detail.

I took my usual evening walk in the old ghetto, passing through Piazza della Frutta and Piazza dell'Erba, which were crowded, as can happen on a summer evening. After a spritzer I continued my walk. Going back toward the hotel, I stopped at the Osteria dei Fabbri, where I opted for the less caloric grilled vegetables although I wanted a plate of bigoli with anchovies.

It's a good thing for my figure that Venetian companies aren't the only ones looking for qualified personnel.

Back at the hotel, I looked at the clock and thought it was still too early to retire to my room. After a car trip, there's nothing worse than giving into tiredness prematurely and falling asleep early, only to wake up in the middle of the night. On these occasions, I prefer to spend a half-hour at the hotel's American bar. You can socialize with the hotel staff and maybe distract yourself a bit by observing some daily life situation offered courtesy of the hotel guests.

I sat at a side table in the cocktail room and ordered a

glass of prosecco.

A few meters from me, another table was occupied by a couple.

I concentrated on observing them, inventing a story that saw them as protagonists. The woman was decidedly pretty, blond, thin and long-limbed, with tapered feet and hands, Nordic eyes. She wasn't over thirty-five. She smiled at him constantly, and he observed her as one does at the beginning of a romance. Her partner was at least ten years older, with graying hair and beard. He was wearing a cream-colored linen suit, and he had the air of having just removed his tie. He was smiling too, but he had a more absorbed expression, sometimes absent or preoccupied.

It was evident that she was trying to amuse or distract him. The man was going along with the game. They were both drinking white wine. I had fun trying to understand whether they were married or partners, or actually an occasional couple. After a bit of observation I decided that they knew each other well, but I wasn't certain whether they were together permanently or whether they were still in a courting phase, even if advanced.

After a half-hour of fixed conversation, sometimes even high-spirited, they walked away in the direction of the staircase leading to the rooms, he with his arm around her waist.

My opportunity for entertainment gone, I decided it was time to go to sleep.

V

The following morning at nine-thirty, I was ready for the meeting with the first candidate, who turned out to be an engineer named Parisi from Milan, according to the list I had prepared with the corpulent Doctor Bortoli.

I had reserved the hotel conference room for the whole day. It was very large, but they had prepared a side table that made it rather cozy, even for only two or three people.

Without having ever met him, I knew Mister Parisi's résumé perfectly down to the last detail, and I could recite from memory that he was forty-seven years old, had studied at the Turin Polytechnic, was currently managing director of one of our customer's competitors, loved jogging and had been divorced for two years.

His list of hobbies was even easier to memorize because, for some reason, all résumé writers seem to cultivate the same pastimes.

What I didn't know was that Parisi would have graying hair, wear a cream-colored linen suit, and be the same person I had observed with his companion the previous evening.

After a moment of embarrassment on my part – moreover, unmotivated since the couple hadn't noticed me – we began the interview.

Mister Parisi was certainly qualified to take over the

role that Galan needed to assign.

At the end of a day of interviews, like Parisi, in my opinion, at least two other candidates could be considered suitable.

I gathered my notes and prepared to discuss the situation with my boss, who would join me at the hotel that very evening. The plan was to draft the report the following morning and go to Galan's in the afternoon with the name of the selected candidate.

My boss, Doctor Bortoli, is one of the main directors of our headhunting agency, and normally he makes a move only for really important clients; he's a pleasant man, certainly not long-limbed, nearly fifty years old – or at least so they say in the office – but certainly very conscious of his own importance, to the point of vanity. He arrived in Padua a bit late, but we had time to meet over my notes at the Osteria dei Fabbri with a plate of cuttlefish in its own ink for him and the usual grilled vegetables for me.

He listened attentively to the profiles of the three candidates who had convinced me the most, as well as the pros and cons that I had drawn up for each one of them.

After tasting the last fork of cuttlefish and having finished sipping his prosecco, he looked at me and said, "Good, Anna, you've done excellent work. You have definitely selected the three best candidates. I appreciate your analytic approach. But at this point we have to make a choice, and in this phase what plays the most important role is definitely the intuition that

#### THE HEADHUNTER

comes with experience".

After a pause for effect, he continued, "Personally I feel that, without a doubt, Mister Parisi would be the man for us, and I am sure this choice will convince Galan as well. I think that you too will agree". Without giving me a chance to respond, he added, "Tomorrow morning prepare a report to this effect, so that we'll be ready for the meeting with Galan in the afternoon."

#### VI

With the report favoring Mister Parisi, we arrived at the meeting with Galan.

Also present at the meeting was Mister Alisi, who was clearly in favor of any positive conclusion of the matter. The discussion was brief. It was clear that the old engineer wanted to make a quick decision at that point; and, after all, our handling of the case, selection process and final presentation had been very professional and competent.

It was decided that there would be a meeting between Galan and Parisi the following week in order to proceed with an agreement and hiring, the terms of which were already generally agreed between the parties.

Galan's face showed a tinge of pain due to the irreversible turn his life was now taking, while it was clear that Alisi was relieved.

At that moment Galan's secretary knocked at the door, and an elegant blond girl joined the meeting. Her face

was familiar to me, and after a moment's hesitation I recognized her, without a doubt, as the woman I'd seen with Mister Parisi two evenings before.

She moved with self-confidence, shaking the hands of everyone present, all of whom seemed to know her very well. Interpreting my questioning look, Alisi intervened, "Excuse me, Anna. You are perhaps the only person among those present who hasn't already had the fortune of meeting Ms Grimaldi, personal assistant to Mister Galan"

#### VII

Ten years after these events, having grown professionally, and unfortunately in age, I still remember this story with a mix of pleasure and embarrassment.

Ms Grimaldi had brilliantly managed generational replacement and had maintained, if one may say, control of the company. It had required an ability for strategy and planning that placed her above many managers that I meet daily. I preferred not to investigate how she had got even the corpulent Doctor Bortoli on her side.

I'm defined by work as a headhunter, but for some time I've known that every day on the street I can meet excellent headhunters, moved by necessity or vocation.

And when I'm totally absorbed by some complex mediation, where I'm trying to best marry the needs of

#### THE HEADHUNTER

supply with those of demand, I can't help but think that we often believe ourselves to be directing events, when we are only unwitting actors, not even conscious of reciting a script written by someone else.





# Fiume Veneto (Pordenone)

www.lultimomulino.com

### 11

# *Just five minutes*by Grazia Gironella

HOTEL RELAIS L'ULTIMO MULINO

Today is a special day.

I think this as I run my eyes over the table, where everything is already ready for breakfast. Alone in the deserted room, volunteer for a routine that gives my colleagues an extra half hour's sleep, I enjoy the privilege of experiencing the beginning of a new day in total peace. The coming day is all here, encased in these few minutes poised between the day and the night.

Something urges me to get ready more quickly than usual. With a slight shiver between the nape of my neck and my shoulder-blades, I throw open the window to sniff the air, then go downstairs to the still-dark garden. Beneath the purplish sky, the murmur of the river is quieter than usual in the silence; the irises are silhouetted rigidly against the stone of the wall.

I'll keep my eyes open. In the meanwhile, I make one last check of the tables already laid the night before. «Good morning, Lorenzo. Is everything alright?»

#### GRAZIA GIRONELLA

Anita, innate elegance and sweetness, looks around with a careful eye while her fingers rearrange a stray lock that has escaped the severity of her hairdo.

«We're ready, as always.» It's my ritual reply.

«Good, good. Don't forget the fruit arrangements for tomorrow's buffet.»

«Yes ma'am!»

With a grimace, Anita disappears towards the reception desk.

Within the space of an hour, Mr. Hartmann and his wife, the Japanese family and the cellist with dreamy eyes come down to breakfast. I dispense cappuccino and tea, croissants and smiles, and little almond cakes for the children with almond eyes.

I like seeing the effects of a good night's sleep and the atmosphere of the *Relais* in the relaxed faces of the guests. "You rejuvenate souls here!" an enthusiastic guest remarked some time ago; a good definition that still makes me smile.

I begin to organize tomorrow's buffet, but find it hard to concentrate; between one oversight and another, I find myself going backwards and forwards between the millstone room and the restaurant like a bloodhound on an unreliable trail.

It is almost eleven o'clock when a hefty figure crosses the bridge. Outside, the dead calm has broken and the leafy branches of the lime-trees sway briskly in the wind. Anita's face breaks into a wide smile as she goes to meet the new arrival, holding out her hands.

«Doctor Mareschi! What an unexpected pleasure!»

## JUST FIVE MINUTES

Dr. Mareschi and his wife are among the hotel's most frequent guests, and are certainly the most appreciated by all of us. You don't often meet people as educated, modest and affable as they are. The guest places his overcoat and bag on a chair and shakes our hands warmly.

«I missed this garden. Is our room free?»

«It's just been vacated, I'll have it made ready immediately. But for the next few days...»

«I think that tonight will be enough, thank you.»

«Good.» Anita's perplexed glance slides over to the door. "Can I offer you some mallow tea while you wait? I know Mrs. Mareschi enjoys it.»

A shadow crosses the guest's face. "Sadly, my wife died two weeks ago. An incurable disease, diagnosed too late."

I don't know what to say. Is there anything to say in these circumstances? I read a pain as solid as stone and just as heavy behind his eyes.

«Still, I'd appreciate the tea, Anita. I'll get on with some correspondence while I wait.»

«Yes, of course.» Anita hesitates. Her eyes are bright with tears. «Your loss is a great sorrow for all of us.» «Thank you.»

He sits at the table and takes paper and envelopes from his bag. I go to the kitchen to make the tea, and remember Mrs. Mareschi, the obvious harmony between the couple in every moment, when they sat at a table in the garden playing cards or reading, and their conspiratorial laughs punctuating the murmur

## GRAZIA GIRONELLA

of the river. A life spent together, no children. It can't be easy for him.

When I go back into the lounge, Dr. Mareschi is busy writing. As I leave the tea on the table, I can't help reading the first lines that issued from his pen: "Dear Irene, you must know that up to the last I hoped to avoid this moment. I tried to resist, you know..."

Disturbed and embarrassed by my intrusion, I move away to begin preparations for lunch. Irene is an old friend of the doctor and his wife's and lives in the same building as them. It's strange that he should be writing her a letter.

The fresh wind has rounded up big dark clouds overhead. The first drops are falling when a taxi draws up in front of the gate, and a woman and a little girl get out, crossing the bridge almost at a run. The door lets in a dusty gust and the rumble of distant thunder, and then them, framed against a leaden sky with windblown hair, strange Furies, daughters of the storm.

The young woman – about twenty-five years old, well-groomed despite the hurried make-up – drags the child, listless and dishevelled as if she'd been suddenly snatched from home, towards the reception desk. I honestly wouldn't know if what she's wearing is a track suit or pyjamas.

- «Do you have a room? Just for tonight, please.»
- «Yes, we have a double that's vacant.»
- «And how much does it cost? No, it doesn't matter, it's alright.» She peers out of the window, smiling nervously. «Can we go up straight away?» «Just five minutes. I

## JUST FIVE MINUTES

need your documents. Can I offer you something in the meantime? For the little girl?»

«No, nothing thank you.»

The child tugs her arm. «But I'm hungry, Mummy!» «Later, darling, later. Come, let's sit here. Mummy has to make a phone call.»

They sit down at the most secluded table, next to the *fogolâr*; but it's impossible not to overhear the call in the silent lounge.

«Ivan? I'm near Pordenone, at a hotel. No, I couldn't have stood it another day. I'm here now, with Barbara. Will you come here or shall we come to your place?» Silence, her eyes widen in disbelief. «You're not serious... you said... You know I could never leave her, never! Ivan I beg you... how could you think that... Ivan!»

A smothered sob; the mobile phone drops onto the table

I pretend to fiddle with the curtains as it starts to pour down outside. The rain streaks the windows, but I see only the young woman's tears, her fingers tearing at her hair in despair.

«Mummy, I'm hungry! I want some biscuits.»

«I haven't got anything, darling, be a good girl for just a minute.» Her voice trembles.

«When are we going home, Mummy? Is Daddy coming to fetch us?»

I dash into the kitchen, passing Anita who is watching the scene from the door. In record time I'm back in the lounge with a glass of pear juice and a sandwich.

## GRAZIA GIRONELLA

«I took the liberty of bringing something for the little girl, if you don't mind.»

The woman mutters a "thank you", her gaze glued to the screen of her mobile. I bend over the little girl. "When you've finished eating and drinking, I'll bring you some paper and coloured pencils if you like.»

The child stares gravely at me, then nods her head and takes the sandwich.

«Hi, Alessia. No, not so well...» A few casual remarks, then "I have a favour to ask you. What? No, I'm at a hotel with Barbara. I was wondering if you could put us up...just for a few days... No, no, no, please don't hang up, I don't know where...»

Silence. The young woman stares at the table.

Dr. Mareschi has paused several times to observe the turmoil with a furrowed brow. Having received his key, he gathers up his things and hurries towards his room. One of the pages gets caught on the edge of his sleeve and slips under the table. Unaware, he goes upstairs.

I could point out the loss to him. Instead, I go to throw open the window in front of the last millstone.

A violent gust of wind swirls into the lounge, lifts the tablecloths, whips the curtains...and makes the just-dropped sheet of paper fly. It slides, turns, glides and finally lands gracefully on the table where the stranger sits with her daughter. I see her pick the paper up and wave it in the air as if to signal that she had found it; but her eyes fall on those lines and remain glued to them. A puzzled look crosses her face.

I spot Dr. Mareschi on the stairs. «I believe I've lost a

## **JUST FIVE MINUTES**

document. Did you happen to find it, Lorenzo?»

The stranger approaches him hesitantly. «This...perhaps this is your...document?»

Mareschi reddens, almost snatching the paper from her hand. «Indeed. Thank you» he says brusquely. He is turning to go back upstairs when she places a timed hand on his arm.

«Would... would you like to have some tea with us? I... we... would be glad.»

They face up to each other for a moment, two strangers made too intimate by chance. I see the "No" begin to form behind his lips and struggle unsuccessfully to come out.

«I think some tea... would be alright. Just five minutes, after all.»

She nods. «Just five minutes.»

They sit down at the table where Barbara is licking Nutella from her sticky fingers.

I take a breath. What are five minutes? Little or nothing. Sometimes, if you're lucky, they can be enough.

Outside, it has stopped raining. A ray of bright light shines from between the broken clouds. It's time to think about lunch if I don't want to be fired.

Going back into the restaurant dining room I pass Anita again, and this time she stops me with a gesture. «Lorenzo... we've... worked together for a long time, haven't we?»

«Quite a long time, yes.»

«You know I've always appreciated your way of working, but I wonder...is the line between satisfying the

## GRAZIA GIRONELLA

guests' needs and interfering in their lives clear to you?»

I clear my throat, feeling ill at ease. "I think so.»

Anita looks at me seriously for a long time, then she smiles brightly. «Sometimes you give me the shivers — but you're an angel, honestly you are.»

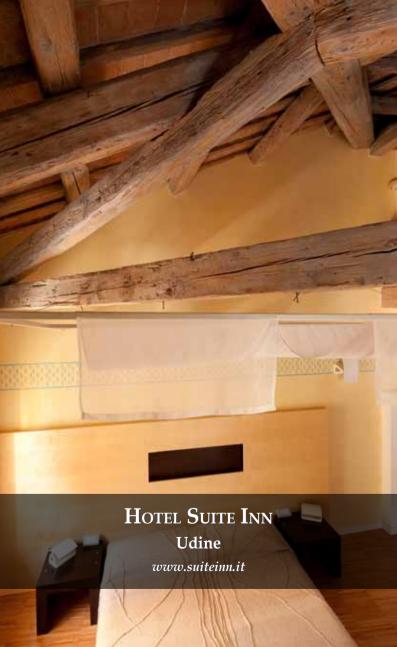
She moves off, shaking her head.

Angel.

I know it's a compliment, for humans...but I must learn to be more discreet.







## 12

# The strange case of Anna L. Nation by Carlo Favot

## HOTEL SUITE INN

Anna's annual holiday was practically a ritual, a firmly entrenched custom to which she adhered whatever the cost, a valuable escape from her routine. This was the one week each year that Anna could call her own, when she could relax and reflect, or basically do nothing at all. She considered these few days a personal lifeline that saved her from being swept away by everyday worries.

Seven days in the last week of May. Every May, every year and for the last twenty years.

Anna would generally be defined as a 'normal' person; she led a regular life and had an ordinary job working as a sales rep of office supplies, ranging from furniture such as cabinets and desks, down to smaller items like files, desktop staplers and pencils. In a nutshell, things that are useful and functional, and that she was proud to present as she is herself a practical and down-to-earth person.

Anna lives on the outskirts of Milan, in the town of Sgobba Camisa, not far from her company's headquarters and although her work keeps her rather busy, her existence is relatively quiet. Church on Sundays and strolls in the municipal park when she has some free time: ice cream in the summer and pizza in winter.

Anna's origins actually belie her surname, as they can be traced back to a mixture of countries rather than a single nation. Her father was an American who met her mother in Puglia and then settled in the South of Italy. Yet the blood of a variety of Puglia's ethnic minorities runs through her veins. Anna however lost contact with any relatives when she moved northwards to find work and she was forced to rely upon her own resources. She did marry, but the union was not a great success and she soon found herself alone again.

Her husband Giuseppe had also moved to Milan from the South of Italy, attracted by the bright lights and sophistication of the city and the hope of making some easy money. He wanted to escape his hometown where everyone called him *Peppino*, and he would always be considered a 'baby'.

For a while it seemed that the couple would be happy together, but they soon realized they were not suited. Their separation was made smoother by the fact that they had no children. So Anna found herself alone again, single and quite happy to be so. She was not interested in casual relationships, or even on the lookout for the right man, but she was still convinced of the "Power of Love" as celebrated by Celine Dion in one

of Anna's favourite songs. But living alone had made her rather inflexible and fussy, and she was extremely methodical both at work and at home.

Despite the strict control she had exercised for over twenty years Anna's one luxury remained her week's break, when she could indulge herself and feel free to do whatever she fancied. She could forget her busy work agenda and her carefully pressed shirts, and the one plate she washed up after dinner each evening before preparing for bed. For just one week each spring, she escaped from the constraints of Milan to her refuge in Friuli, her holiday at the Morpheus Hotel. Every year, and in the same week each year.

On her arrival at the hotel she requested the same room each time, though superstitiously she never booked in advance. If, by chance, it was occupied she would take another one on the same floor and on the same side so she could look out over practically the same view.

She had chosen this time of year because it evoked some of her happiest memories. The moment when she had left her village in Puglia to travel to Milan, as well as the time Giuseppe had gone down on his knees to propose. May was also the month when Padre Pio, a saint that held a special place in Anna's heart, had been born.

Anna had chosen this destination north of Udine for her holiday after a business trip when she fell in love with the area. Her heart had been captured by the picturesque setting, framed as it is by mountains, and the area's tranquillity, in stark contrast with the chaotic atmosphere of cities such as her adoptive home, Milan. But there was more to it than that; over the years she had discovered that Friuli could boast many understated attractions, based not on passing fashions but strong traditions. The people there still know how to appreciate the simpler joys in life, and this in many ways reminded her of her hometown. She also loved that special Mitteleuropa atmosphere, deriving from the town's position just a stone's throw from the foothills of Slovenia and the Alpe-Adria motorway that places Carinthia within easy reach.

So this year too, as the last week of May drew closer, Anna prepared to honour her tradition and set about preparing her suitcase.

Actually, this did not present much of a challenge as she always had a bag ready and a list of things needed for any trip away. Moreover, part of her wardrobe was set aside for the more casual clothes she used only for her annual holiday. In just a few minutes her bag was carefully packed.

She rose early on Monday morning, put her case in the car and set off with a light heart. The journey progressed smoothly for the first few miles, though the traffic was heavier between Montecchio and the A13 motorway exit for Bologna, but it was cleared again as she approached the Mestre bypass. Before she knew it, she had reached the tollgate at Udine Nord. Just a few more miles and she was at the turn off towards the driveway that would lead to her hotel.

Immediately, she noticed that something was not quite

## THE STRANGE CASE OF ANNA L. NATION

right; the view jarred as she approached. She was overcome by the strangest sensation, as though the area was foreign to her, as though she had never actually been there before.

She drove further and turned onto the private road that led to the hotel entrance.

The entrance?

Actually, there was no trace of any entrance. No, there was no entrance. Precisely, there was no entrance because there was no hotel. Anna was faced with a view over absolutely nothing. Empty countryside and uncultivated fields stretched before her. There were no buildings, no outhouses and no hotel. Indeed, a closer look revealed that there were no signs of its presence now or in the past. Nothing at all. It was as though the hotel had never existed.

How was that possible?

Anna was sure she was in the right place; she'd driven there each year for twenty years and there was no doubt in her mind that this was the right location. Her certainty was backed up by a glance at the miles she had clocked since leaving home; they corresponded exactly. Of course, she always checked the total before setting out on any journey. And yet... there was no sign of the Morpheus Hotel.

What could the explanation be?

Perhaps the owner, who had always loved nature, had decided to knock down the buildings and fulfil his dream of turning the site into a nature reserve, replanting native species. Or, perhaps he had chosen to sell up

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and enjoy his retirement in some tropical paradise. He would not be the only one to want a foretaste of paradise before leaving this life.

On the other hand, he might have decided to demolish all traces of the former buildings and flatten the area to make some money by building a landing strip for light aircraft. It was quite possible as the passion for aviation was deeply rooted in Friuli, and the aerobatic demonstration team of the Italian Aeronautica Militare, the legendary Frecce Tricolori, could frequently be seen flying across these skies.

Could it be that the hotel had been sold lock, stock and barrel to some descendant of the Grimm brothers who had decided to take it apart brick by brick and reassemble it in Germany to provide a suitable setting for a modern version of the famous fairy tale "Sleeping Beauty"? The name of the original hotel would be especially fitting.

Whatever the reason, though, the most important question for Anna was, "What now?"

It was late and she was too tired to get back in the car and drive all the way home. Plus, she felt completely bewildered. She was confused, disoriented and desperate to find a logical explanation. She climbed back into her car and decided to look for somewhere to spend the night. She could continue her search the following day. No doubt about it. She wanted to get to the bottom of this story, and she was certainly not the type of woman who gave up easily.

She headed back towards Udine. As she approached the

#### THE STRANGE CASE OF ANNA L. NATION

historic centre her attention was caught by some gaily fluttering flags on the front of a building that stood out from its anonymous surroundings. As chance would have it, this was a hotel: the Suite Inn. Anna didn't think twice; she indicated and drew in.

Still clearly shaken, she pushed into the lobby and shot a series of questions at the receptionist. She made no attempt to exchange greetings or pleasantries, though she would normally have strongly disapproved of such behaviour. She had to know what had happened to the Morpheus Hotel, and she had to know it now. The lady at the reception politely replied that she had no idea; in fact, she had never heard of a hotel of that name.

Anna's mood plummeted, but she recovered enough to request to see a room.

Just any room?

It was not that simple.

Unlike most hotels, at the Suite Inn each rooms differs from the others. The receptionist wanted Anna to choose the one most suited to her tastes. Because all the rooms shared certain characteristics, but each was individually styled and possessed its own identity and personality. 'Each room is made unique by its colour scheme, the location of the bathroom and the effects of the lighting as well as the furnishings,' the receptionist explained. 'Because we recognise that all our guests are different.'

Given Anna's character, it was clear what her response would be: 'I want to see them all,' she stated.

'All of them?'

'Well, only the rooms that are free,' Anna conceded. So Anna was taken on a sort of tour by the hotel owner, Giuliana. As they moved from room to room Anna's mood improved, she felt almost light-hearted and jokingly commented, 'If each room is different, they must each have a different type of key?'

'No,' Giuliana replied patiently, adopting the same amused tone, 'each room has the latest generation of electronic cards for access, and they all look exactly the same.'

'Really?' exclaimed Anna, impressed.

'Yes, the only thing that changes is their access code.' Surprising herself, Anna gave a hearty laugh. She was not used to feeling at her ease in this way; normally she was decidedly diffident in her interactions with strangers.

Not only that, but she liked what she saw and she decided this was a place where she would be happy to stay. Together the two women made their way back to the reception. But as she was about to receive her room key (or rather, *pass*), the registration procedure blocked. The credit card Anna had produced was invalid.

'No problem,' reassured Chiara, who was assisting Giuliana at the check-in. 'You are welcome to pay with any other system.'

Anna was once again spooked, irrationally panicked. She had always been scrupulously precise when handling her finances, practically manic. She could not believe that such a thing would happen to her. Beads of sweat stood out on her forehead and she anxious-

## THE STRANGE CASE OF ANNA L. NATION

ly started to bite her nails; something she had never done before. The colour had drained from her face and her nervousness was apparent. For a moment, she remained immobile, and then she slipped on her jacket and made for the exit. Just as she was leaving she turned and gave a slight wave 'goodbye', making some attempt at good manners before hurrying out.

'I have to get home,' she exclaimed aloud, 'I must sort this out as soon as possible.'

She got into her car and accelerated away, driving back to Sgobba Camisa without stopping a moment to rest. By the time she put the key in her door, it was night.

She was exhausted, but ignored her body that was crying out for respite, instead she seated herself in front of the computer to start a crazed search. But whatever keywords she tapped onto the screen, even the most absurd, there were no results for the Morpheus Hotel. No website, no references, no registration with the Chamber of Commerce. Nothing even on Facebook or Tripadvisor. She even tried Street View, to take a look at the area as it had been two years earlier when the panorama of Italian streets had been updated, but there was no trace of the hotel.

Dawn was trailing light across the sky and the night was over. Still Anna felt unable to sleep. She showered and started prowling around the house in the search for clues that would testify to her previous visits. She was certain they would turn up. She had carefully preserved all the receipts and invoices of her expenses for at least ten years. But despite her increasingly frantic

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search, she found nothing to prove she had been visiting the Morpheus Hotel for the last twenty years.

The folders in her study contained a mass of receipts for motorway tolls, but none showed she had ever taken the exit at Udine Nord.

Anna knew she had kept detailed diaries of her time away, but her cleaning-lady had mistakenly thrown them all away; one of the reasons she'd had to fire her. Anna rifled through her contact numbers; it was an acceptable time to call her clients, yet none of them answered. Not only that, but all the numbers were registered as 'non-existent'.

She decided to call Michela, one of the few friends she had made in Milan, and together they tried to reconsider the facts. But as they talked it became unnervingly clear that everything Michela knew about Anna's stays in Friuli were based on the stories Anna had told her; she had no direct evidence that these things had actually happened – Anna could actually have made them all up.

At this point Anna toyed with the idea of making a call to her ex-husband. However, their relationship had perhaps deteriorated too far, and Anna feared her questions would just attract the disdain that had met any observations she made in the closing months of their cohabitation.

That afternoon Anna drove to the headquarters of the firm for which she worked; there, at least, she was sure she would find the evidence she needed. Yet when she drew up in front of the gates, it was obvious from the state of disrepair that the building had been abandoned for many years.

Anna was shocked, but she would not give in so easily. Her next move was to visit her bank; she had been a faithful client for years and she demanded to speak to the manager. The man who appeared was a complete stranger. He carefully explained that it was bank policy to ensure a continuous turnover of staff; the previous manager had therefore moved to another branch. 'However' he added reassuringly, 'I will be more than happy to assist you in managing your account.' Saying this, he took a seat at his computer and tapped in her details. He then picked up the phone and exchanged a few words, obviously upset. He went back to the computer and his expression cleared. 'Now I understand,' he exclaimed. 'Your credit card is invalid because you have no account here with us. The account number does not appear because it does not exist. You are not one of our current customers, and from the records I can find, you never have been.'

It is not hard to imagine Anna's feelings on hearing these words. She left the bank. Her face was drawn and her eyes appeared glazed. She wandered the streets aimlessly, stumbling as she walked the crowded pavements. Where could she turn? What certainties could she grasp? She had no proof that she had actually lived the life she recalled. She was overwhelmed by a sense of emptiness.

'Now' she thought, 'I really deserve that holiday.' She needed to take a step back so she could retain her grip

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on reality and calm her nerves. She decided to return home and go back to Udine where her life had started unravelling. The answer lay there. This time she was more prudent and she checked on internet before leaving. She did not need another shock.

'Yes! Thank goodness' she cried. The Hotel Suite was there.

She flipped through the gallery of photos. It was all exactly as she remembered. She recognised the friendly faces of Giuliana, Chiara and Elvia. She had met them, they had talked together and they had shaken hands.

'At last, some proof!'

She felt once again the warmth of their welcome and the special atmosphere marked by a particular feminine touch. She had noted how handy the location would be, situated as it was so close to the centre of Udine. She was already looking forward to tasting the *frico* served at the nearby 'osteria' that they had recommended. Her precipitous flight had meant she'd missed out on treating herself.

'What about my credit card?' she remembered.

That could be easily resolved. Anna had a small safe in her home where she kept her chequebook, cash card and some cash for exceptional needs. This situation was exceptional.

Her suitcase was ready. She scooped it up and prepared to leave the house. Before closing the door, she had a last thought, maybe an excess of caution prompted by her recent surprises. She checked her identity card. Fortunately. A quick glance and she noticed it was about to

## THE STRANGE CASE OF ANNA L. NATION

expire. This time she wanted to avoid any unnecessary risks, so she went back inside and called the Municipal offices to ask about renewing it.

The town clerk was courteous, but her response left Anna stunned.

'I'm sorry, madam. We have no record for Anna Nation.'

'That's impossible!' insisted Anna, 'Please try again.' She waited impatiently, her heart racing, the sound of typing reaching her across space as she pressed the phone to her ear.

The clerk came back to her, 'No, nothing. I've checked all our archives. Unless...perhaps you have a second name?'

'Oh yes, of course,' Anna stammered, 'Lucy.' 'So that's A-N-N-A-L-U-C-Y-N-A-T-I-O-N.'. There was a pause. 'Actually, that doesn't exist.'

P. S. When questioned, Elvia, Giuliana and Chiara from the Suite Inn Hotel in Udine confirmed that they had never this woman; in fact, they were sure they had never seen A-N-N-A-L-U-C-Y-N-A-T-I-O-N.





## 13

# The wedding anniversary by Ludovica Mazzuccato

## HOTEL ANNINZIATA

My room has a view over the Este castle; its wise silhouette, engraved in the almost Medieval paleness of the moon, seduces and attracts the viewers' eyes.

My thoughts find shelter between its arms made of stone and moss each time everyday life declares war against me. This evening I've run away from you and I'll spend the night in this hotel; I'll be hardly able to close my eyes; even though the bed is comfortable and the sheets smell of sun and air, I am not used to fall asleep without hearing your breath against my ear, but I had no choice: I need to spend some time on my own to understand what is going wrong between us.

I wish I could look more like a modern Lucrezia Borgia and be so daring as to open the rich mini-bar and get really drunk, but I am so sensitive that I picked this hotel because of its name, "Annunziata", just like my grandmother's.

When I was a child and I had a problem, I just needed to run to grandma Annunziata who, in her white and red cheq-

## LUDOVICA MAZZUCCATO

uered apron, would wipe my tears and give me wise advice while stirring the pots on the cast-iron oven.

At about this time of the day, seven years ago, our first love night was about to begin... I remember that the key to the room looked drunk because our hands were shaking in excitement...

After having survived a storm of nostalgia, Sandra decided to deceive her love sickness by going on with her work, since she had brought her lap top with her and the WI-FI connection was available.

She opened her HP wearily and she immediately realised she was unable to forget the troubles that forced her to spend the night out and – above all – away from Marco.

Her stare became lost among the folds in the curtains, while the colourful note of a late busker was knocking at the ajar window.

The supporters of do-it-yourself psychology would probably define it as the seventh-year crisis, but her marriage was too important for Sandra to accept such an apathetic diagnosis.

The real problem was that there was no particular reason, simply there was no enthusiasm left in sharing their daily lives, making projects for the future. An intruding mother-in-law and little hope of having a baby. The bombshell had exploded on that very morning: Marco forgot that it was their wedding anniversary and didn't even try to find a justification.

During the day, Sandra had expected in vain to receive a bunch of flowers accompanied by a card bearing his

#### THE WEDDING ANNIVERSARY

apologies; she was going back home half angry, half hopeful, when she received a text message on her mobile. While pressing the buttons to read it, Sandra felt almost excited, but all her illusions were shattered by less than 60 characters: Marco told her very formally that he was to have dinner out with a client.

She was so disappointed that she could not find the energy to reply, she got out of the house immediately, walked for a long time and, upon reaching the city centre, decided to spend the night out.

Marco had called her repeatedly, but she left the phone ring and showed no mercy even after she had received several worried text messages from him.

One more message: you are worried... you are afraid that something might have happened to me. Never mind, your mummy will always iron your shirts, there is no doubt about that.

Now it is your turn to experience what pain feels like. I realise that I am behaving like a teenager, but you've always claimed you adored my spontaneity. I hope a short separation might help us remember how important we are to each other. Rather, you need to remember I am no decoration!

Together with a soft and clean-smelling robe, Sandra had worn a mask of sarcasm. Actually, the picture of Marco worrying because he received no news from her haunted her and she was afraid that their relationship would really break up.

She lay on the bed which seemed too large without him. This was not how she had imagined their seventh wedding anniversary.

## LUDOVICA MAZZUCCATO

Her mobile started receiving calls also from friends and relatives, but Sandra did not answer, she didn't feel like giving explanations; moreover, her ego was flattered by Marco's reaction.

She thought she could get some sleep, wake up early, afford a Beauty & Wellness treatment, have a nice American breakfast and go back home to straighten things out. At least, this was what she kept repeating to soothe a thin desperation that clutched her temples. She turned to the bedside lamp to switched it off, when she saw an elegantly bound booklet lying on the table: Goethe's "Elective affinities".

She picked it up, let her fingers open it randomly and read that page like an oracle: *just like lime tends to combine with all acids, some human beings develop important relationships of happy unhappiness as naturally; a feeling exceeding love, the spiritual need for searching, attracting, swallowing each other to go back to the starting point just like the water cycle.* 

Suddenly, everything looked simple and clear, as if those words were sown around her heart, as if they were a wise piece of advice given by grandma Annunziata: she should not despair because that was LOVE! Arm-wrestling is useless here, I can't wait until tomorrow morning.

She got dressed quickly and walked down the stairs frantically to the reception, where the hotel staff, instead of treating her like a lunatic, gave her one of the hotel's rental bicycles for free; Sandra rushed off home. Cobblestones zipped under the wheels.

#### THE WEDDING ANNIVERSARY

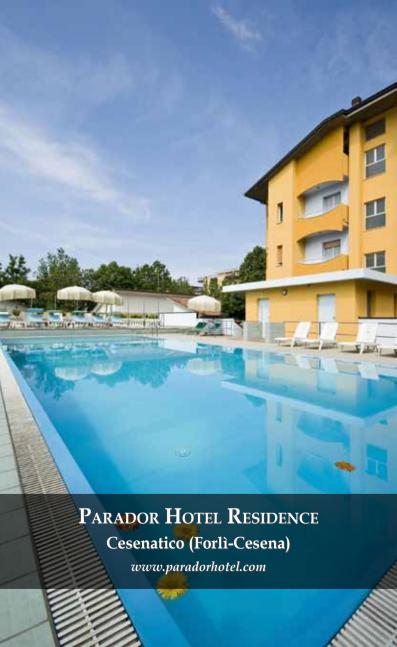
A hug was enough to make everything clear, and a kiss to meet again, particularly when Sandra realised that Marco had prepared a special dinner, including candles, and that the story of the client was just a joke to surprise her even more. Routine had deformed their interaction, the way they communicated their love.

The room at the Annunziata hotel is booked for the whole night. It is only two o'clock...

Nothing more was added, but Marco had understood perfectly. They rode the bike back to the hotel, Sandra sitting at the back, the late Summer wind blowing through her hair, and she felt like the queen of Este Castle, which overlooked their ride.

They celebrated an unforgettable anniversary and, while dawn was making the curtain sincere, Sandra embraced Marco and felt a strange feeling at the bottom of her belly. She smiled as she started to think that if it was to be a girl, she would call her Annunziata, and everybody would guess it was because of her grandmother but she would know it was after the hotel where she had rediscovered the meaning of love, often distorted by habit.





## 14

# A rainy day by Alberto Arnaudo

## PARADOR HOTEL RESIDENCE

We'd got up ready for another day on the beach – as much sun and sea as we liked!

But even as we were having breakfast in the dining room we realized that was not going to be so.

The sky, at first just hazy, was slowly invaded by armies of lowering, grey clouds. The sea, already crouching so still, seemed to shrink beneath the menacing sky, taking on the same shade of grey, until they merged on the horizon in a single curtain of water.

A driving rain began to hammer the surface of the sea and the timid little barely-formed waves were suffocated by the downpour.

At a stroke, the cheerful colours of the beach were transformed into a leaden landscape. And we were confined to the hotel, the Parador Hotel in Valverde di Cesenatico.

Crestfallen, we got up from the table and moving reluctantly, some of us went towards the covered terrace,

## ALBERTO ARNAUDO

some to the bar and some back to their bedrooms to change. Time stretched unexpectedly before us in an unknown dimension, the normal references for a day at the seaside were lost.

I sat down at a small table on the covered terrace, while in front of me the rain pelted down, lashing the flowers and bushes in the garden.

To give myself something to do, I opened my notebook and began to write.

"What are you doing?"

The child had approached without my noticing. I looked at him – he was dark and small, untidy curls framing two lively eyes.

"I'm writing" I told him.

He looked at me very seriously, "Are you a writer?" he asked.

"No, not really" I smiled, "I just enjoy writing..."

Just as he had appeared, the boy left without warning. Through the door I saw a woman of a certain age, dressed with studied elegance, who was watching me. Out of courtesy, I nodded to her. I wasn't sure if I had already seen her the previous evening, but then I'm not much of a one for faces.

Apparently encouraged by my nod, or maybe just bored and looking for company, the woman came over and sat down at the other side of the table.

"Have you stayed in this hotel before?" she asked point-blank.

I told her I hadn't, taking in the lines on her tanned face, the heavy but elegant make-up, the impeccable

## A RAINY DAY

permed hair, the jewels on her ears and fingers and the red lacquered nails that stood out against the white arms of the chair.

"Oh, I know everything about it" she said immediately, looking round with a severe expression. "About the hotel – and the guests of course..."

Pointing to my notebook she said "For someone who loves writing, there's enough to fill pages and pages with romances and affairs".

I nodded, a little amused and slightly alarmed. I wasn't at all sure if that would be the best way to spend the morning, but the woman didn't give me any choice.

"Do you know what the hotel was before? No? It was a heliotherapy holiday camp".

I gave a look of surprise.

"It doesn't seem like it now because they renovated it well... But the first owners made a nice profit from the holiday camp thing!"

She shook her head with an air of disdain.

"Bought for next to nothing, renovated at the government's expense, what do you expect... And then they sold it for a fortune! Do you know, do you know how many others did the same thing along the coast? Oh, heaps..."

"And that, of course" she went on "is where the first choice of guests came from. You're new here aren't you? You already told me. Well then, you don't know anyone here. Look, look at them".

She pointed with ill-concealed discretion at a family of three – the father, dark, still young and well-built, the

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mother very obviously South American and an adolescent daughter, a self-conscious brunette beauty.

"You can't even imagine the relationship between them, nor why for more than twenty years... well, not the girl of course, she's nowhere near twenty. Anyway, the other two have been coming here on holiday fore more than twenty years".

I certainly could not imagine, in the same way the connection between the renovation of the heliotherapy summer camp and the type of hotel guest escaped me – were they the children of the children who had gone to summer camp? Or what?

"They aren't parents and daughter as you might think, even if as you can see, the girl doesn't look like either of them, and that might already lead you to deduce that they're not what they seem..."

I was ashamed to admit I hadn't deduced it, while the woman launched into a complicated story of emigration for political reasons and murky tales of adultery, betrayal and masked adoptions from which it became apparent that those three not only were not a family, but in the strictest sense, could not even be considered to be related. "And I don't even want to think" she concluded "what that poor girl's fate will be..." I was watching the girl as she walked away under the umbrella with her two... her two "companions"? headed for some shop to plunder, when the woman drew my attention to another guest.

"And him? Do you see him?"

An elderly gentleman wearing an elegant travelling

## A RAINY DAY

suit had looked out onto the terrace, searching his pockets for a cigarette as he looked glumly at the pouring rain.

"Well, he's a retired civil servant. A very particular pension too... er".

Without the slightest encouragement from me, the woman began to speak excitedly in a low voice, "because here, you know, even the walls have ears!" A civil servant yes, but with very particular duties, implicated in mysterious government plots, and then nonchalantly changing sides, a professional double-dealer in other words, but at the cost of losing his family no less than twice and being left utterly alone in his old age.

"Oh yes, there's justice in the end for scoundrels" added the woman with a severe, satisfied air.

A middle-aged couple, both short, sturdily built and with an air of importance despite the slippers on their feet, came half-way out onto the terrace.

"Ah, them..." murmured my guide. "Just think, they have one son who's a judge and the other in jail!"

With the air of savoring a tasty morsel, the woman got to work, telling me the sad story of the two brothers and the two parents so painfully divided between suffering and pride.

But even as she showed herself to be very well-informed about our fellow countrymen, the woman was no less knowledgeable about the Parador Hotel's regular foreign guests.

So I saw paraded before my eyes the family of German shopkeepers who acted like celebrities, but took

## ALBERTO ARNAUDO

sausages and beer up to their room and left rubbish everywhere, or, on the other hand, that modest little old Englishman, so retiring, with a timid smile always on his lips, who had been a famous professor of medicine who, with the same subdued good manners, had struck terror into his students with the harshness and severity he showed during exams.

Or the well-built Turkish (Turkish?) lady with the haughty, refined air, who was no less than the ex-madam of a brothel, who had advanced her career with the age-old story of an advantageous marriage only to be unexpectedly widowed, but now in possession of a more than conspicuous inheritance. For almost all of the people that appeared, the woman had a story, an anecdote or some episode relating to previous stays to tell.

At a certain point, taking advantage of a pause, I tried to ask my companion something about herself.

"How many years have you been coming here on holiday madam?"

She looked at me as if caught off-guard, as if she hadn't expected such a question.

"Me? Uhm... I almost can't remember".

She appeared thoughtful for a moment. Then, instead of simply answering the question – I should have expected it – she began to tell me the story of her life.

"It was my poor husband who chose this place you know. Just think..."

"Mother, have you found another victim? Good morning. Please excuse her, my mother is a great chatterbox!"

## A RAINY DAY

The speaker was a friendly-looking young woman with wavy black hair and wearing a floral dress, who came over to the table and stood next to the woman.

"No, not at all" I answered hurriedly. "Your mother has helped me pass these boring hours by telling me some things about the hotel guests. It seems she knows nearly everyone's story..."

The woman laughed in amusement.

"Mother!" she exclaimed "Have you been doing it again?!"

The woman gave her daughter a withering look.

I didn't understand, but preferred to keep a prudent silence.

"Do excuse her" said the daughter turning to me "Mother is made like that. She has a special talent for inventing stories. If she had wanted to, there's no doubt she could have been a writer. We only arrived here yesterday evening and we don't know anyone yet. So everything mother has been saying is pure invention! I hope you haven't taken it amiss. In any case," she added becoming serious "I apologize for her. Come, Mother, let's go back to our room".

After seeming at a loss for a moment, the woman once more became mistress of the situation.

"Just a moment..." she said to her daughter.

She reached out her hand towards my notebook.

"May I?" she asked, appropriating my pen at the same time.

She quickly wrote something on a piece of paper, covered it and handed it to me folded in two, winking slyly.

## ALBERTO ARNAUDO

She then got up, said goodbye politely and left with the young woman.

When they had both disappeared inside the hotel, I opened the piece of paper.

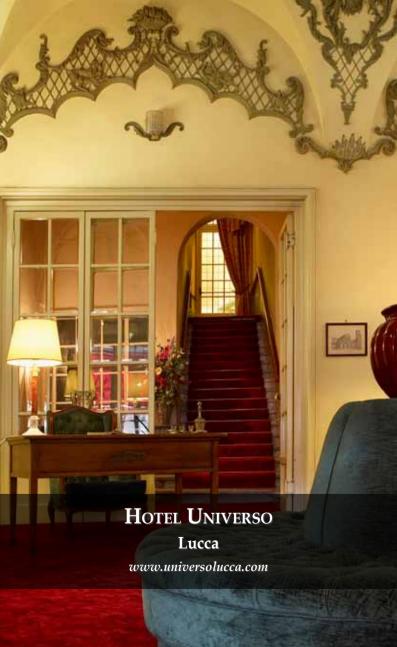
Written in a hasty scribble were these words:

"You don't really believe she's my daughter, do you?" I raised my eyes, surprised and amused.

In front of me, a sunbeam broke through between the raindrops which were slowly letting up, and lit up a single red rose from among all plants in the garden.







### 15

# My French Great-grandmother by Lucia Sallustio

#### HOTEL UNIVERSO

I'm tired, it was a long journey and I had to change train four times before arriving in this place, which has been impressed in our family's DNA for four generations. It runs like blood in our veins and would risk overflowing if it did not silently flow back into the channels of memory.

It is shadow and memory, joy and torment. It is me, who would not exist without this subtle, contorted thread that re-connects me to a distant story, a banal story of times past that smells of faded violets, of humiliation and deluded hopes, of the scent of my skin, tanned by the July sun, burnt like the arid, cracked earth of my south homeland.

For years I've been planning this journey into the past, this dive with a double twist into the shadows that I carry inside myself.

The hotel room has obviously been renovated, although it preserves a classic, refined, slightly retro

#### **LUCIA SALLUSTIO**

flavour in the choice of colours and patterns for the furnishings. I had reserved the one with a view of the piazza and the Teatro del Giglio, to help me reconstruct the story of love and passion that had made me cry and boil with anger as it unfolded, line after line on pages made ragged by silverfish. I think it is indeed the room alluded to in the letter. I told reception that I wanted the room from the othe-r time again.

I have to smile when I think that what is left to me of the great-grandmother in the story is above all this habit of the throaty 'r', which has been passed down to me and has given a certain French elegance to our way of speaking.

I was talking about the silve-r-fish, they had devoured parts of the letters which surfaced by chance one day as I was tidying up, from the drawers of Grandmother's dressing-table, which I had inherited from my mother. They were in a box of men's handkerchiefs, the long, narrow kind, and smelt of mould and violets. About fifteen letters, written at intervals of time that became increasingly close between the first and the last and covered a span of three years. Three years, then, the love story between Lisette and Arcangelo had lasted.

"Lisette, ma chérie, ma petite Lisette, lumière de mes yeux et flamme de mon cœur..." and the gentleman went on, employing metaphors and similes that must have made the French girl's heart beat more than a little faster, surely flattered by such a refined, knowing courtship. Poor Great-grandmother, or poor Arcangelo, I

Poor Great-grandmother, or poor Arcangelo, I wouldn't know which. I wouldn't want to take sides,

#### MY FRENCH GREAT-GRANDMOTHER

also because there is a vagueness around Lisette's arrival in Lucca and her final departure from the town. My parents never spoke openly about it, if not with small, distracted mentions of that Great-grandmother, a frivolous singer of drawing-room melodies, who had naively given in to the flattery of an already-married philanderer. An awkward story, evidently, which I had laboriously tried to reconstruct when it was by then too late. I don't know if my mother had purposely not wanted to get rid of those letters, or if she simply hadn't had time before she died. I like to believe that she had wanted to entrust them to me, the archaeologist of the heart. Perhaps she had not wanted to cancel that love story, so romantic despite everything.

"Mon amour, Arcangelo, mon adoré," replied Lisette, and went on to enjoin him to break off the relationship, telling him that she couldn't go on in that way, that it was impure and that God would have punished them. There was an interval of a year between the first letters and this one. Evidently Lisette had found out that Arcangelo was married and wanted to leave him, but he pushed to see her again. It is certain that by that time the affair had crossed the line of no return, that line after which all rationality loses lucidity and the mind is clouded by the heart.

The bells of the Cathedral behind the hotel toll. Long, sombre, vibrating tolls. They pass through the body, thundering like the word of God. Shameless and trembling, they must have perceived them like that, the two lovers surprised by the Creator in their Universe. And

#### **LUCIA SALLUSTIO**

this hotel was the whole Universe for them in those moments of solitude that had by then lost their bliss and were just heartbreak and anguish.

"My nostrils are still full of the scent of your skin as I bury my lips in the perfumed folds of your neck. I am lost, bewildered, my Lisette, by the immensity of this love that does not let me sleep, does not let me live, does not let me desire anyone but you. I am adrift in the memory of you. Your statuesque body, your delicate, velvet skin, your silken hair that caresses your shoulders. Furtive lovers dammed by the tolling of the bells that still disturb my dreams that have become nightmares."

Poor Arcangelo, the father my grandmother never knew, the grandfather my mother never had. The dammed lover who believed he had got away scotfree after a few crumbs of love, and instead had been caught in the meshes of his own net. A casual affair, he had told himself over and over again, a betrayal like many others during a business trip to Lucca. And instead, he had fallen in love like a schoolboy with that French girl. With her, love had been tinged with passion and yearning desire, it had been coloured with the dark red of the carpet in the hotel Universe, the green of hope and the velvet of the furnishings, and when he was with her, her eyes shone with all the lights that lit the hall and the rooms.

They had both lost themselves in that love born under an unlucky star, an unfavourable season, in a bed of chance that belonged to neither of them, and which had entertained and reinvigorated other bodies.

#### MY FRENCH GREAT-GRANDMOTHER

I can almost see them, my great-grandparents. She, tall and sinuous, a wasp waist squeezed by a corset, a little black hat with a veil on her ebony hair, long satin gloves. She peels them off slowly, with charm and seduction, seemingly spontaneous yet studied movements. An artist no longer recognizes the limit where illusion becomes reality.

Her large eyes made deeper by a bewitching black line, fathomless vortices that attract like black holes. And Arcangelo drowns in those eyes, burns with desire, he imagines drowning with his whole being in that woman he has been pursuing for days, that he met at the theatre, that he met and deliberately followed through the rooms of the hotel. He followed her into the hall, where he pretended to read the newspaper, to the restaurant, where he ate his meal slowly so he could watch her for longer, to undress her with his eyes and his mind, into the sitting room where he finally managed to speak to her.

"Pardon Madame, ce mouchoir est-il à Vous?" He may have pretended to ask her if that finely embroidered handkerchief, perhaps bought on purpose to feign that gallantry, belonged to her.

Yes, that love story will have started just like that, with a lie. How could an affair born of the falsification of the truth have lasted?

"Love affairs at the theatre give the illusion of eternity, but they are paper loves and they last as long as the play." This is how Lisette answers him in the last of the bundle of letters, when she is at last convinced that their af-

#### **LUCIA SALLUSTIO**

fair will not continue. It is a dignified farewell, without the melodrama that I would have expected of a woman of her times. Nowadays we would say that Lisette is a tough one, a woman who knows how to suffer with dignity. He is the one who cuts a poor figure, who acts like a silly woman. He implores until the end, he invokes his love, promises her heaven and earth and almost blackmails her when he knows that Lisette is pregnant. He would like to tie her to him, to go and see her in Lucca for as long as he wants her, until he is over his whim, his appetite for the forbidden. Who knows, had Lisette accepted perhaps she would have suffered an even greater humiliation.

"Ton amante? Jamais! Oublions tous les deux cette histoire malheureuse et amère comme du poison à mon âme," thunders an infuriated Lisette in her last letter. An ill-fated love as bitter as a poison that slowly enters the fibres and kills. There is an alarming letter from Arcangelo, dated 3 August 1912. My great-grandfather, at least biologically speaking, implores his Lisette to never repeat the gesture that has robbed him of his serenity, that makes him wander along country lanes like a lunatic, praying to God on his knees among the brambles, that makes him beat his chest overflowing with guilt. Perhaps my great-grandmother had attempted suicide or had just wanted to frighten him into hastening his decision. Then the letter takes on a biblical tone, Arcangelo threatens eternal damnation, makes the blandest compromises. He promises to make a queen of her, they will be husband and wife of the heart, and she will

#### MY FRENCH GREAT-GRANDMOTHER

be more than a wife for him, will be a friend and lover, she who taught him *l'Amour*, the kind which joins body and soul and will last for ever.

Poignant words, with a flavour of other times. They seem sincere on Arcangelo's part, he would not have been able to stage everything if it hadn't been true. He could buy himself the love of thousands of little actresses and singers if he had wanted only the physical intercourse, to lose himself in the forbidden delights that the frigidity of a wife acquired only for convention would never have shown him.

As far as my great-grandmother is concerned, after the last letter dated 31 May 1913, full of hard words to brand guilt on the beloved man's soul forever, I have lost all track of her. I don't know if she continued to be a singer after the birth of Grandmother Angela. From conversations overhead as a child. I know that she married a landowner from the south, and that my grandmother was born in the same town where my mother was born and where, fifty years later, I was also born. Here, in this town of the Daunia, where the wind sings through the ripe, waving wheat and the heat dries everything, even the memory of the past. The one from which I arrived after ten hours of train and four changes, the one which, with the warmth and affection of its people, restored serenity and the will to live in Lisette. A journey à rebours my great-grandmother would have said. I speak French too, I studied it at university and travelling around France and I speak it well. It was already running through my veins, it is the repressed language

#### LUCIA SALLUSTIO

that comes to the surface with memory and that French 'r' of ours. It seems to me that I have always spoken this melodious language. It may be pure coincidence, but when I speak French I feel as if I were singing.

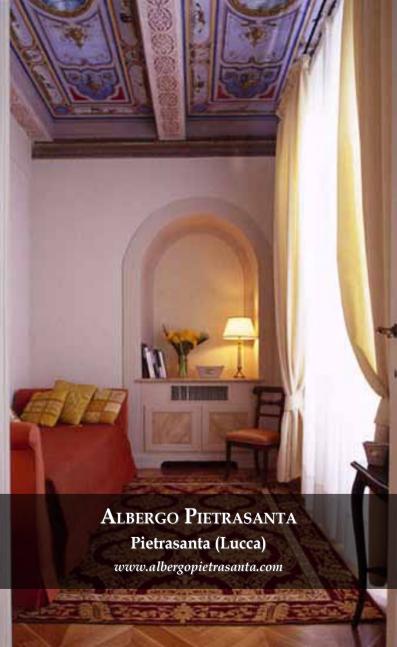
My gaze lingers for a long time on the façade of the theatre beyond the window, where Lisette really sang and Arcangelo scrutinized her through his binoculars from the boxes, down to the most intimate folds of her body, desiring her with an increasingly uncontrollable ardour. It is there that love was born and it is in this room that watches over the Theatre building that love began to burn and was consummated in a perfect marriage of body and soul.

The sparkling evening air comes through the open window, bringing with it the chatter of passersby, the cheeriness of the tourists and the words of people making arrangements for tomorrow at the door of the splendid late-nineteenth century hotel hall. King Umberto stayed here in these rooms, some of which have been modernized to satisfy guests with an allergy to the past. Puccini and many famous and not so famous artists spent the night, like great-grandmother Lisette on tour in Lucca, madly in love with one of the audience and then married for convenience to someone else. There are no traces of Arcangelo, but I imagine him to have been handsome. Great-grandfather Giacomo, instead, was an unattractive man, small and shy, who in the photos from those times shields himself behind his Umberto-style moustache and behind the imposing Lisette.

#### MY FRENCH GREAT-GRANDMOTHER

"I love you", someone shouts from the piazza, followed by the silvery, impudent laugh of a girl. They must have had a drop too much to drink, or love, as we know, plays bad jokes and needs to be shouted, otherwise it doesn't seem true.





### 16

# Time's Equilibrium by Roberta Minghetti

#### ALBERGO PIETRASANTA

#### Prologue

#### TIME LAPSE

I didn't tell him, I just went away.

One day he asked me a question that made me rush to pack my bags without even having time to understand what was happening to me. My heart was beating like crazy, my head was full of confusion as if my thoughts had caught fire and were giving off a dense cloud of smoke. I left, but not once, always...

in continual relocation from

#### SLOW SHADOWS

She didn't tell me, she just went.

She took my question and the unspoken words of her reply with her.

Since then I've become the *shadow man*, the guardian of slow-moving time, of waiting time.

During the day, I stop to observe everything, I study the shapes of objects and animals; I rummage through the silent heaps of gestures that collect

#### ROBERTA MINGHETTI

one place to another, without giving the houses time to get fond of me and then become "lonely houses".

I am a jewellery designer, quite a famous one too. I can speak four languages fluently, although Chinese still gives me some headaches, and it's not easy to talk behind my back without being understood. I speak very quickly and I have a habit of forming short sentences, without too many conjunctions or turns of phrase, so I can think more quickly and schematically in all the languages.

I'm Olivia, the new girl, I started introducing myself like that in my first design classes, then at art school and when I presented my first collections, and there was never a time when I didn't love the sound of that phrase. In whatever language I said it. "The new girl" is a tail that my name carries behind it like a train of elegance mixed with pride. When I use it, it means I'm in a new place,

lazily around people, minute after minute. And at night, I recreate everything; my work is the ancient art of shadow theatre When darkness falls and everyone else shuts their eyes to sleep, I raise the curtain on dreams. Mine are fairvtales with indistinct outlines that move slowly through space, and little by little come by to take the hands of the lengthened shadows of all those present and carry them with them until the last act. I use all kinds of recycled material for my performances, and I accompany myself with sounds and music without ever using words I can't use them

I've learnt to move the shapes I create like an ancient Indian "dalag", and in the same way I can keep everything in my life under control, except one – words.

Every syllable insists on wanting to slow down time in a way I cannot control; my tongue gets stuck on letters as rough as a carpet, it balks stubbornly, creating a scratchy effect that is out of

#### TIME'S EQUILIBRIUM

and that makes me happy. New people to get to know and new inspiration, and then being the new girl gives me the idea of bringing a touch of innovation here and there around the world.

I am the only one in my family to have decided not to have a house, a town or souvenir knick-knacks to put on a mantelpiece. The only things I take with me are my art and a constantly growing list of contacts on my computer.

I live every moment in *time lapse* mode; it's the only way I have to fully absorb all the places, people and sensations I experience in a short time. Everything runs quickly in my mind. In one thought there's the idea for a new piece of jewellery, in the next two I can already see it made.

A dear German friend is interested in displaying some of my jewellery in his shop in Pietrasanta, and I'll take the opportunity to take a trip around those parts to look for new inspiration.

tune with the harmony of my performances.

I have a strange relationship with travel. I like to discover new places, but I cannot stand the sight of suitcases and travellers. People and objects tied to departures give me a feeling of anxiety that I try to keep in check through small subterfuges. I always travel by car to avoid railway stations and airports, and I forward my luggage to the hotel so that I find my things already there when I arrive, as if I was returning home. On the return journey, though, I always take my bags with me as they no longer represent that sense of inevitable. eternal departure. It is merely a journey that serves to take me and my things back home, so it is only right to make it together.

The Pietrasanta Hotel has asked me to enliven a special evening with my art.

My luggage is already en route.

#### ROBERTA MINGHETTI

hen Olivia reached her room at the Pietrasanta Hotel, she did not even unpack her bags. She opened the wardrobe, took out the packet containing the bathrobe, filled the tub and stretched out in it like a cat. With her eyes closed and the scent of lavender rising from the bubble-bath filling the air around her nose, she fell asleep for a few minutes. She was so used to changing hotels and bathtubs that just a few minutes' break was enough for her to tune into new geographical coordinates and recharge her batteries properly. Half an hour later, her clothes were already put away in the wardrobe and she was elegant, rested and smiling in the shop where two other collections were displayed in addition to hers. A man was murmuring something as he examined the brooch displayed on a knotty, almost alive, light wood stand. Olivia approached the man with an admiring smile and said in perfect German, "Hi Frank, I'm very glad to see that you are still the same dissatisfied perfectionist, yet your creations are almost about to reach the same level of perfection as mine!". The two friends laughed affectionately as they hugged.

In those same hours, another guest was arriving at the hotel in Via Garibaldi; his suitcase already waiting for him. The shadow man covered the entire route that took him from the reception desk to the part of the hotel where his room was located. He observed every detail, every shape – the rectangular outlines of the couches, of a lectern, a black casket, the pictures hanging on the walls, the more rounded shapes of some carved chair backs,

#### TIME'S EQUILIBRIUM

the tables on the veranda, the trunks of the ancient palms in the garden, and finally noted the corners of the stairs. All of this was essential for his work, because his shows included one set repertory and one which was improvised each time, taking inspiration from the place where the performance was held. Because of this, he was in the habit of patiently absorbing everything he heard, smelt and saw, except for colours, which he entrusted just to the contrast between shadow and light. Then once he was in his room, he began to process everything in a thoughtful work of emotions.

That day, though, he had not yet been able to collect enough material to formulate a story board for the evening, so he decided to take all the time he needed, starting with a stop on the veranda for a relaxed breakfast. With closed eyes, he was just enjoying a slice of cake that smelt of home, when he was distracted by a soft meow. A black and white cat was staring at him as if it were waiting just for him. He decided to leave the hotel and follow that unusual guide.

At the end of the street they came out into the Cathedral Square. At one of the very popular cafés surrounding it, Olivia was sipping coffee with her friend Frank and his wife. The caffeine ran quickly through her body, stimulating all the synapses needed to keep her attentive on a number of different fronts – the conversation in German, a quick check of the messages in Italian vibrating on her mobile, and one ear straining to catch the lively discussion that three English photographers were having at the table next to hers. At the same time, a men-

#### ROBERTA MINGHETTI

tal back-up was in progress of all the colours she had noticed around her since the morning; every nuance of light could be a good idea to recreate in her jewellery. The cat walked nonchalantly past the cafe tables, as did the man with him. Its black and white bottom sashayed proudly along Via della Rocca as far as the walls of the ancient medieval construction that gave its name to the road and from which the whole of the old town could be seen, a panoramic view full of geometric shapes that soon became pencil lines on a sheet of paper.

Olivia decided to repeat her bath ritual, but this time her eyes stayed open, distractedly lingering on the fresco on the ceiling. Since her arrival she had silently noted the passage of time along the walls of the hotel - works of art from the last century passed the baton to modern paintings and now the colours of the 19th century were blended in the fresco she was admiring, surrounded by a very modern environment. As if she were holding the ghost of a cigarette between her lips, she began to inhale and exhale mouthfuls of history. Her time lapse mode was satisfied and her gratified mind began to develop a new jewellery collection with very big, rounded shapes in black. The figures drawn on the wall above her head captured her attention once more, and this time they did so in a powerful way, leaving her with no escape. She had the feeling that the depiction of those bizarre, exotic animals were not the fantasy of some artist with little knowledge of zoology, but rather a traveller's precious haul of memories. Her gaze continued to roam from a

#### TIME'S EQUILIBRIUM

monkey that looked like a dog to a dwarf elephant, and her mind found itself going backwards and forwards in an endless loop between the words traveller and home. She imagined a man, no longer young, with sunburnt skin, loading a merchant ship with the crates that would yield him the expected profit, while with his mind he tried to capture what was most important to him, the memory of what he had seen during his journey so he could whisper it into the ears of whoever was waiting for him at home.

Perhaps it had to happen exactly like that, in the bathtub of a hotel, lying in water that was now freezing cold. A thought began to form in her mind that was so strong as to go straight to her heart and pummel it. She realized that she had never wanted a place to go back to every now and then, and this had made her continuous travelling mere wandering. She had thought she could control time by travelling through it in the wake of time zones, and all this had made it as fleeting and intangible as a shadow.

Still stunned by her thoughts, she slipped into a black dress, which the room's wood and velvet furnishings made appear even more elegant.

In the meantime, the shadow man was staring at the marble veins that radiated along the walls of his bathroom. His eyes, so skilled at recognizing finite shapes even in the sketchiest of lines, were frantically processing all those variegations as if they had broken the code. Nature had created them and now he was revealing their story. He took a sheet of tracing paper and placed

#### ROBERTA MINGHETTI

it against the wall, tracing the outlines of faces, hands, castles and ships. He had to move quickly, there was not much time left to finish the story-board and with the meticulousness of an expert craftsman, fine-tune all the details of the shapes and the mechanisms that regulated their movement.

When he reached the room, loaded down with boxes, spotlights and panels, he realized that everything had been prepared following his instructions to the letter. It was all so perfect that it did not in any way seem to be the work of inexperienced hands. He looked around and had the feeling of being in a performance himself and to be exactly where someone else had foreseen he would be. He was sure that there was a skill similar to his own behind the organization and attention to every detail. The hotel staff also seemed to have been knowingly guided in their gestures and words by someone who, although remaining invisible on the stage, moved in the wings, where everything originated, just as he did with his art.

He took up his position out of sight of the audience, and before beginning, in the silence of the room enveloped in an adjusted half-light, made his ritual, private salute to the light, his inseparable ally and the only one able to give shape to the dark, to thoughts and fears.

All of his shows began with a tribute to an ancient Chinese legend that is said marked the beginning of the art of shadows. The story says that to alleviate an emperor's sadness at losing the woman he loved, some artists created a silhouette of the woman and projected the

#### TIME'S EQUILIBRIUM

shadow onto a curtain. The illusion was such that the emperor thought he had found the spirit of his beloved and so regained his lost serenity.

This is why the first shadow the man projected that evening was of the woman he had asked to marry him and who had disappeared that same day.

Olivia entered the room at the beginning of the first scene; almost all the places were already occupied, and not wanting to disturb the dreamlike atmosphere that was developing, she sat down sideways, without even moving the chair, and sitting almost off-balance. From the familiar atmosphere created by the sounds and the special way the scene was lit, she realized that the parade of beautiful frescoes accompanied by modern works of art she had seen winding across the walls of entire rooms and corridors in perfect chronological harmony, were nothing less than a message, a sign entrusted to the colours to transmit emotions and leave a trace of themselves in time.

In her mind, the idea of staying still to leave a trace in time joined the new idea of home that had began to take shape in her head a few hours before. It was inevitable – her time lapse mode suffered a small but significant short-circuit, the effects of which were apparent only the following day.

In the meantime, the man skilfully moved one of the projectors to make the shadows of the audience so long that they reached the stage. He liked to think that a part of those shadows remained attached to his silhouettes to mix with those that would be gathered in subsequent

#### ROBERTA MINGHETTI

shows, in a continuous blend of emotions. Olivia's shadow lengthened until it touched the black silhouette that portrayed her on the stage. It was a matter of a moment, but enough to break the sort of spell that had held the man trapped in an unmoving time. He had spent years attaching shadows and letters to his time in an attempt to make it heavier and slow it down, but the only thing that was coming to a halt, losing the pleasure of travelling and even of moving, was himself. As he was busy whispering under his breath the words that his characters were giving life to, he realized that his tongue was slipping smoothly over the letters, ushering them out with new grace and rapidity. He was so surprised that he could not wait to try speaking aloud. He shortened the show by cutting a few scenes and waited as usual for the room to empty without revealing himself or turning on the lights, so as not to break the illusion of the story just told. When he was alone and heard the fluent sound of his voice, it was confirmed - the shadow of the sundial of his life had started moving again.

He never answered at the first ring, the third had always seemed more suitable.

"Hello?"

"Hi. It's Olivia."







## 17

### The wait by Lella Cervia

#### PALAZZO GUISCARDO

Long rows of poplars seemed to chase one another, and the intense heat created a flickering, trembling mirage on the asphalt.

There wasn't much traffic, and on that Sunday at the end of June, Lucia was apparently serene as she drove towards the Tyrrhenian Sea.

They were announcing her favourite programme on the radio. It was three o'clock in the afternoon.

She reckoned she would get to Pietrasanta at about five, and this thought reassured her.

She didn't like driving, and it was no coincidence that she had chosen to leave on a Sunday – at least she would avoid the trucks.

The long ones, with trailers.

She felt a touch of anxiety at the thought of those monsters of the road and breathed deeply to dispel it. She reminded herself that the journey was going well, that it was Sunday and she was about to enjoy a

#### LELLA CERVIA

week's holiday in the citadel of art.

She had already taken the interchange for La Spezia and would soon be breathing in the scent of the sea. Planned with care, it was to be their first romantic getaway.

Francesco had reassured her they would travel together. He had fixed the date, but a few hours before they were due to leave he had telephoned her. "Something unexpected has come up, so I'll join you on Tuesday," he had told her, abruptly.

She had replied "Very well, I'll see you in two days," lowering her eyes to hide her anger.

Like that, without thinking about it too much, she had left from a Milan made steamy by the first wave of summer heat.

And now she was there, on the motorway, driving her orange Mehari.

Alone.

She and Francesco had met at a painting exhibition in a lovely gallery near Piazza Sant' Ambrogio and, at the end of a quick courtship, he had kissed her.

That same evening, without ungluing their lips, they had ended up in bed.

They had made love all night long: he inside her, liquid and sensual as she had never been before.

A year of furtive meetings and stolen kisses had passed since that day. Francesco was a very much married painter and he wanted to stay that way.

"I'll never leave her," he had told her, speaking of his wife, a wealthy businesswoman in the fashion industry. And so from the start, that relationship became her

#### THE WAIT

prison – hours of waiting for a telephone call or an email message, and dates postponed at the last minute. Paradoxically, over time, it had all begun to give her a subtle pleasure, an ambiguous delight forged in the embers of anguish.

The holiday in Tuscany had been organized to appease one of those moments when egoism had gained the upper hand.

"We'll have fun. You'll see," he had said. "There are a lot of workshops and foundries in Pietrasanta. I could give my latest painting a material tridimensional effect; make it a sculpture".

A bend, and the horizon opened wide to the sea.

Lucia lowered the car window to let in the salty air and breathed deeply.

Once off the motorway, an avenue of lime trees led the Mehari towards the little town lying in the shelter of the Apuan Alps. The imminent presence of Botero's bronze warrior sign-posted the bend that led to the hotel - Palazzo Guiscardo.

She was welcomed in the foyer full of works of art by the receptionist who quickly completed the formalities and handed her the keys to "Sodalite Blu". It had been Lia, the owner's, idea to give each room the name of the marble that sumptuously decorated the respective bathroom.

Once inside her room, Lucia noticed a ladder that led to a roomy sleeping loft dominated by a soft double bed reflected in an erotic wall of mirrors.

To her right, a window open to the empty air gave a

#### LELLA CERVIA

good idea of how enjoyable the starry sky would be from there.

She began to unpack with care and chose a light, black silk dress to wear for the evening. It had been Francesco's first gift, followed by the most intense night of love she could ever recall.

The only daughter of a navy man, captain of a ship of the line, she would never have dared buy anything similar: too see-through; too low-cut.

Francesco, on the other hand, had insisted, "This is how I want you, soft, sinuous," and before she could say anything, had added "You'll wear it with this pair of heels. Perfect I'd say".

Obediently, she had practiced walking on those six inch heels the same day while he watched her, sprawled on the sofa, with lips full of desire.

It was almost dinner time. Lucia left the hotel and headed towards Osteria alla Giudea, a pretty restaurant not far from Pietrasanta's main square.

The dining room was full, but she managed to find a place to sit.

A few seconds later, Alessandro arrived, smiling. "Good evening, madam," he said cordially. "I'll leave you the menu to look at, but if you need any explanations, just give me a nod and I'll be with you in a heartbeat".

They had already met briefly at the hotel. The waiter was a sort of factorum between Palazzo Guiscardo and the restaurant, both owned by Arnaldo, who had realized a long-nurtured childhood dream of being an inn-keeper when he purchased the Osteria.

#### THE WAIT

The dinner was excellent: gnocchetti alla trabaccara, baccalà al pesto, and to finish, an apple cake drizzled with Zibibbo di Pantelleria, an aromatic white wine, which she ate with delicate slowness, without ever taking her eyes off her mobile, waiting for a call.

Waiting, as always, for him.

The little town was full of people even though it was late at night.

It took only a few minutes to get to Palazzo Guiscardo. Sliding glass doors opened smoothly and Milos, the night porter, smiled at seeing those slim ankles teetering on stiletto heels, bending slightly right and then left trying to find the right balance.

"Here you are madam," he said, handing her the room key.

She smiled as she took her leave as the other, pressing on courteously, added "Tomorrow will be a splendid day. Sleep well," but his voice was lost in the stairwell that led up, towards her room.

A cool night breeze was coming in through the open window and a slice of moon peeped in, lighting up the room.

The palm of Lucia's hand brushed the telephone in her shoulder bag.

Francesco hadn't called, not even to know if the journey had gone well.

A deep sadness engulfed her, but in the meantime an irresistible desire for him urged her to justify him.

"He'll be painting" she started to tell herself, fascinated by the idea "He'll call me as soon as he can, I'm sure".

#### LELLA CERVIA

She brushed away the tears, irritated with herself for being so faithless and doubting her lover, and began to undress.

The little mother of pearl buttons gave way one by one under the pressure of her fingers, and the dress slithered down her legs, while the mirrors behind the big bed reflected her image caressed by furtive rays of moonlight.

She checked her phone again, put it where there was the strongest signal and went into the bathroom, being careful to be quiet so as not to risk not hearing it ring.

However, the silence was broken only by the sound of the water running out of the basin set in a blue marble surround.

Shortly after, she slid into bed and fell asleep almost straight away.

Dawn coloured the room a pale pink as Lucia half opened her eyes, smiled at the day and turned over in bed, snuggling down again into the cool sheets to continue dreaming.

Francesco was kissing her.

He had started gently from her neck to then savour the taste of her nipples.

His hands along her back urged her to arch her hips.

His mouth was soft, his tongue quick.

Lucia did not hold back and exploded in a dreamlike orgasm.

In the distance, a bell tower began to strike the hour. She had slept well and, when she felt her legs weak, she smiled at the memory of the dream.

#### THE WAIT

She stretched in the bed and reached out her hand to pick up the phone.

Although she still had her eyes half closed, she realized with horror that it was off.

Her heart began to pound in her chest when she realized that the battery was flat.

Perhaps he's trying to call me, maybe at this very moment...

With this thought hammering in her head, she began to drown in panic.

She jumped up, stubbing her little toe on the chair next to the bed, and limped towards the desk.

She had put the charger in the first drawer.

Her hands were shaking as she inserted the plug into the socket.

The screen of the smart phone lit up to ask for the password, which she entered with forced slowness: *love*.

She waited for interminable seconds for the screen to light up completely, but the inbox gave no sign of life.

She tried searching, but there had been no messages or calls.

By now unhealthily used to waiting, this time she felt relieved of the sense of guilt, and to celebrate decided to wear her yellow dress.

On the darkest night of the year, he had presented her with a new gift, a skin tight, saffron coloured, sheath dress.

"I give you the sun," he had said as he tasted her lips.

"Put it on. I want to make love to you dressed like a mannequin".

She had obeyed, and he had taken her in a frenzy on the

#### LELLA CERVIA

kitchen table, her eyes covered with a silk blindfold and he exploring her, free to be neither seen nor waited for.

A shiver of pleasure ran down her spine at the memory. It was already nine o'clock when she went down to the foyer, and the smell of coffee led her towards the breakfast room. The tables were covered with elegant tablecloths against which the white china stood out, an invitation to breakfast.

The fragrance of the pastries cheered her, and she had almost forgotten the phone when it began to ring.

It was a long, vibrating ring.

Lucia had put everything into an orange straw bag – sun cream, bikini, sarong, a pair of flip flops, wallet and car keys.

Everything needed for a day at the beach.

In that moment of panic, however, she couldn't find the phone.

She began frantically pulling everything out until the little table was as crowded as a market stall, while the phone hidden in the folds of the lining continued to issue its plaintive call.

When she finally snatched it up, breathless from the hunt, it went quiet.

"no number" said the display, and the phone landed on the floor after Lucia had read it.

"More coffee, madam?"

The waiter distracted her from the drama she was drowning in.

She thanked him with her eyes, moving slightly to let the steaming, black liquid pour into the now empty cup.

#### THE WAIT

She sipped it distractedly as she tried to remember if she had ever answered a "no number" in the past and heard Francesco's voice at the other end of the line.

She wisely decided to put the incident behind her, but not before putting the precious device in a pocket of the bag, easy to find in case of a call.

As she left the hotel she felt the caress of the warm Versilia sun, and a delicious sense of pleasure washed over her.

She reached the car in long strides, gently swaying her hips, while the crazy idea that he was hidden among the people watching her, desiring her, made her feel attractive.

She reached Bagno Sandra after driving the few kilometres to Via Arenile, an elegant promenade where Mediterranean vegetation of tamarisks and palms grew in flowerbeds bordering the pavement, just brushed by the light steps of joggers.

Inside the lido, the beach stretched out before her eyes. A few orderly rows of sand-coloured tents ran parallel with the horizon where the sky became clearer and clearer as it blended with the sea. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply.

"Good morning madam".

A man's voice broke the spell.

Tall, with an enviable tan and that delightful salt and pepper hair... As she held the seductive gaze of the stranger, Lucia primly closed her mouth, which had dropped slightly open in the grip of pleasant surprise.

He was the lifeguard, as she would find out later.

#### LELLA CERVIA

A real Casanova, but always gallant and discreet.

The day passed lazily while her body began to take on the colour of summer. The phone was always there at her side, the silent friend of answers not given.

It was late afternoon when she got back to the hotel, where she met Pietro, the manager of Palazzo Guiscardo.

He cordially offered her a soft drink and she accepted. They sat down on the sofa in the foyer and Lucia found

herself talking about Francesco and his art.

Never about herself.

As if she were just an appendage.

Pietro did not notice. On the contrary, he enthusiastically invited her to the preview of a painter friend of his whose works he also collected.

"Ciro's exhibition is in two day's time. You will still be our guest, won't you?" he smiled as they parted.

"Yes, I'll still be here," she answered as she went up the stairs.

The following days slid by, slowly, without anything earthshaking happening.

The phone still silent and the nights spent remembering him and the love they could have made in that bed looking up towards the sky.

Tuesday came and went, and Francesco had still not shown up.

She couldn't call him. He would have been angry.

He would have caused a scene, like that time when she had dared call him after waiting for two hours, alone in the rain.

#### THE WAIT

He hadn't called her for a month after that evening.

They had been thirty long, sleepless days.

Seven hundred and twenty hours of anxiety and feelings of guilt.

He had come back in the end and she had sworn on everything she held dearest that it would never happen again.

Wednesday came and there would be the preview at seven in the evening.

She got out of bed in a good mood that morning.

A red-breasted sparrow perched on a branch had woken her with his love song.

The air was warm.

A vague memory of freedom elbowed its way into her thoughts. She was aware of it and forgot to look at her phone.

Getting out of bed, she saw with a start of surprise her slight, shapely body and her sun-bronzed skin reflected in the big mirror.

Lucia saw herself and she felt beautiful.

Shortly after, she enjoyed her breakfast with gusto.

Wrapped in a turquoise Indian sari.

That too, was a gift from Francesco.

He had just come back from a painting symposium in Calcutta when he had appeared with the package.

He had asked her to put it on without panties, he wanted her completely naked underneath.

Docile and excited, she had obeyed.

When the silk had made the last turn around her slender body, he had begun to grope with slow obsession.

#### LELLA CERVIA

Among the folds of the material.

Searching for her skin.

And once he had found it, his caresses were unremitting.

"Turn around," he had told her. "I want to kiss your back while I take you".

She found herself completely naked when the last knot of the sari came undone and he behind her, inside her, moving with sweet slowness.

It was already eleven o'clock when Lucia got to the beach. She arranged herself on the lounger, ready to bask in the sun, when, with her eyes closed, she felt a presence.

"Do you want me to give you a massage, madam?"

A small but shapely Chinese woman was standing by her side.

"I do Shiatsu," she went on, showing her a square of cardboard with some drawings subtitled with Chinese characters.

Lucia agreed and YaMei, that was her name, began her work.

"You are very tense, madam. Your meridian says so. This is all the anger that you have accumulated," and so saying, she began to press a precise point on the side of Lucia's thigh with her thumb.

Lucia let out a pained cry and, almost automatically, a tear fell from the corner of her eye to roll down along her cheek.

The Chinese woman noticed and stopped.

While the other angrily fumbled in her straw bag,

### THE WAIT

grabbed her telephone and impetuously threw it back where she had found it.

Only when she saw her calmer, YaMei started the massage again.

This time it was lighter, the breach had been opened, the energies had to regain balance.

Without any more earthquakes.

Lucia felt the need to tell the stranger about the pain in her heart during the hour they spent together.

She talked about Francesco, about the love that had stifled her for years, tying her down in a wait that seemed endless.

The Chinese woman kept silent the whole time, but as they said goodbye, she pulled a sheet of paper folded in four from her pocket.

"This is my gift," she said, extending the hand that clutched the piece of paper. "Read this short story. Perhaps it will be of use to you," and then she left with a bow.

The sun had reached its zenith.

The air had become too hot and the sea was crystal clear, inviting.

Lucia put the gift carefully into her bag and headed towards the water's edge in search of waves.

When she got back to the hotel it was already six o'clock in the evening; she would have to hurry.

She got into the shower, while the sun coloured the sunset over the sea with red.

She chose for that evening the red dress, with a plunging, vee back that stopped just above her buttocks.

## LELLA CERVIA

He had just come back from Paris when he arrived with a large bag; inside was a lacquer-red cloud.

Francesco made her put on the dress and then pushed her gently towards the small bookcase at the end of the room.

He made her make a half turn so that her back was towards him.

He delicately opened her arms and tied them with a cord to the corners of the bookcase.

Then he placed a cube of ice on her naked back, and as it melted and a drop fell, he licked it, resting his tongue where the cleft between her two firm buttocks began, waiting for gravity to drive it down, along its moist path. They had made love all night long and she found herself alone in the bed the next morning.

As always.

He had gone back to the other one.

The gallery was not far from the hotel. Lucia found Pietro, who introduced her to the artist with a smile.

"The driving force behind my research is humanity, history, oppression," Circo had begun when she asked him to explain a painting.

"Mine is always a homage to the last. Look at the titles: *Disinherited, Apogee, 00447, Jew,*" he had gone on while offering her a glass of the local Vermentino.

The evening passed pleasantly and Lucia realized that she hadn't looked at her phone or even spoken about Francesco once.

To anyone.

She got back to the hotel in the dead of night.

#### THE WAIT

In her room, she found the paper YaMei had given her folded on the bedside table.

She smiled at the memory of what she had read and fell asleep in the pleasure of the cool sheets.

The next morning, she went to the reception desk as soon as she had finished breakfast.

"Good morning," she said. "I'd like to know if it would be possible to stay with you for another week".

"Yes, madam, it's possible," said the clerk after skimming through the register.

"A double for single use would be fine," continued Lucia.

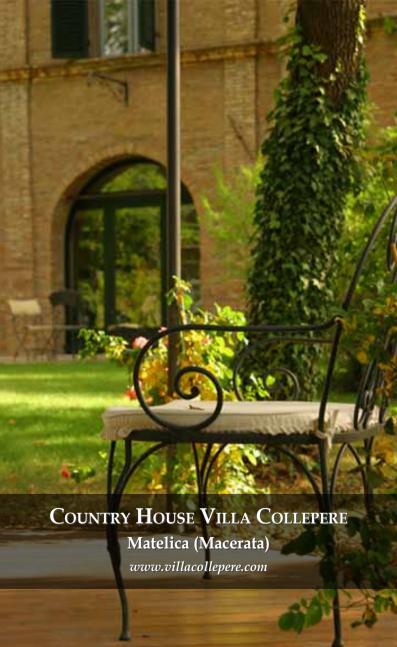
"Are you no longer waiting for someone?" asked the clerk raising his eyes.

"Not any more," she answered, smiling.

A mandarin fell in love with a courtesan. "I will be yours – she said – only when you have spent a hundred nights sitting on a stool, in my garden, under my window, waiting for me". But on the ninety-ninth night the mandarin got up, took his stool under his arm and went away.

(ROLAND BARTHES)





## 18

# Grandma Adele would be happy about it by Carlo Favot

## COUNTRY HOUSE VILLA COLLEPERE

Frankie Donato has been turning the glass in his hands for several minutes. He had himself asked for that bistrot-type shape in heavy glass, like the ones they used to use in country houses in the hills of The Marches. It is unusual for him both to hold that glass and to taste the flavour of the never-before tried Verdicchio di Matelica. Or at least he has never seen that wine, never tasted it or smelt its bouquet, but as far as hearsay is concerned, he has heard about it and then some. Many, many times, in his grandfather Donato Settimio's impassioned stories.

When he was young, Donato Settimio was different to other boys of his age, but more importantly, also to his brothers and sisters. They, three boys and three girls before him, were the picture of perfection. Alfenore, the eldest, followed in their father's footsteps in managing the family's assets; Vitaliano had studied at Urbino and

#### CARLO FAVOT

had become a personage of note; Eraldo was a merchant trading in woollen cloth; Delfina had learned sewing and was a dressmaker; Brunilde, but now she should be called Sister Chiara, had chosen the convent; while Odetta had married a nobleman from Macerata and her marriage guaranteed excellent references also for the rest of the family.

Donato Settimio was the last-born and had two names; the first had been given to him because his mother had conceived him at a late age when it was thought she could no longer have children, while the second certified his being the seventh of the prolific brood. But while his brothers and sisters had fully met their father's expectations, being successful in studies and businesses that ensured a certain financial soundness, he swung between self-taught poetry and musical composition, taking lessons from Father Anselmo, a scruffy parish priest from Camerino.

A poet and musician. Good heavens, that was certainly not what his father expected of him. "Verses and notes do not fill the stomach", his father always reprimanded him, and not even the game bag, which was always considered a genuine value in the hunting lodge among the Matelica hills.

So Donato Settimio usually related more to his mother, Adele, although not without some stormy ups and downs. He was the youngest of the litter and his moth-

er adored him, he was her favourite, but precisely for that reason she wanted him to excel at something and never missed the chance to tell him so. And this inevitably ended up causing arguments and squabbles that led to fits of anger.

Donato Settimio was a free thinker, an independent spirit. He was also a little solitary, but the trait that most characterized him was his intolerance of rules. He left the house without asking permission and came back when he wanted to. He never kept to times, let alone meal times, which were sacred for his father – not even when there was steaming hot polenta to eat all together from the "spiendola", a pear-wood rectangular board placed in the middle of the table. And when he came back from his forays into the hills, his mother would always reproach him "What do you think this is, a hotel?"

No, for Donato Settimio that house was an essential reference point, an irreplaceable source of inspiration. He was immensely fond of the building's austere, unostentatious elegance. Arches on the ground floor lightened the architectural lines and the higher central body gave it a certain solemnity, half-hidden behind age-old trees and with splendid views that Donato Settimio had called "glimpses of the universe" in one of his poems. And he loved wandering through the rooms of the house, feeling himself invested with the austerity that emanated from those walls as he roamed the high-ceilinged corridors of the upper floors in the semi-

#### CARLO FAVOT

darkness, the result of shutters kept half-closed summer and winter to protect against the sun or against the wind when it blew hard, straight from the sea. The wind they call "u Serrà" here, and which sooner or later inevitably brings rain. He liked to peep out through the slightly open shutters, just moving the large curtains at the windows to one side and not having to forgo the reassuring intimacy of the rooms and corridors.

It was here that he sought refuge, that he paused to meditate and unscramble the ideas of an exuberant youth. It was here that he studied or composed, seated at his desk or bent over the piano in a room that was his alone. A room where the floor was pleasantly cool in summer but freezing in winter, because few of the rooms were heated and the bedrooms were always cold. His room was on the top floor, beyond the bedrooms, with one wall overlooking the garden. Imagine, to keep warm in winter he had to wear a thick dressing gown over his clothes and pull on an additional pair of wool socks. At night he only had blankets to keep him warm and a bed-warmer that had to be filled with hot coals - a real luxury because until a short time ago, they had just used a brick heated in the fireplace.

Maybe it was also for this reason that Donato Settimio spent so many hours out of the house, or at least that was one of the pretexts. The truth, however, is that it was his youthful restlessness that drew him outside. Mind you, he was not irresponsible or bad, just intolerant of habits and duties. But he adored the position of the house along the white road through the hills, with wide open spaces all around and the distant horizon marked only by the peaks of the mountains. With this view filling his eyes, he stopped to think, to reflect, to write; to create poetic compositions or give birth to melodies that sprang forth spontaneously as if inspired by the place. Because this land must have something of magic if it was the birthplace of men such as Gioacchino Rossini, Giovanni Battista Pergolesi and Gaspare Spontini, as well as a certain Giacomo Leopardi.

However, all Donato Settimio's flourishing ideas and thoughts clashed with those commonly held by the town's other boys and elders who met to chat under the merchants' loggia, the elegant seven-arched arcade that marked the passage between the market and Piazza Grand in the centre of Matelica – right beneath the clock tower to be exact. It was here that Donato Settimio liked to go to argue, exchange views and give his opinions.

But among themselves the people said that he had "the crazy man's license". That's what they say around here about someone who went bankrupt and who, according to an ancient law in force during the rule of the Ottoni family, had to run numerous laps around the fountain in Piazza Grande. They called him "crazy" because his ideas were different to those of the others. One idea

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above all, that of maintaining that the hills should be looked at in perspective, just as they appeared, one behind the other, the beauty lying precisely in seeing them together, forming a kind of theatrical backdrop. What was that all about? In the town everyone could easily distinguish one hill from another. Each with its own town, its own bell tower, its own traditions and its own well-defined character. So much so that even marriages between boys and girls from different towns were frowned upon.

In Matelica everyone was known not just by their surname, but also by the nickname that unequivocally identified each family. Donato Settimio, on the other hand, maintained they were all the offspring of the same history, and cited past dominations, saying that there were traces of Visigoth, Byzantine, Lombard and Frank blood in everyone's veins. Who was going to dare tell a Censi Mangia, a Finaguerra or a Murani Mattozzi that they were related to a barbarian? Who was going to tell a Porcarelli, a Mosciatti or any Matelica citizen that his great great grandfather came from Pannonia? Provided of course anyone even knew where that was.

And then there was also some gossip going round about him. Nothing ever proven, for heaven's sake, but in town they had the saying "If the leaves are moving it means the wind is blowing". And so credence was given to the rumour that he had been seen

in the company of the beautiful Imelde, a girl from a good family but already betrothed, heading for Vicolo Orfanelle, which everyone knew as "Basciafemmine", "kiss the girls", a little place where you could hide away and steal a kiss ... or more, without being seen. After all, Donato Settimio was a good-looking boy, and more than one of the town's damsels would have liked to be courted by him. When he went home, however, there was trouble. His father was constantly angry with him, so much so that he no longer spoke to him. It was his mother Adele who had to take on the job of rebuking him, reproaching him and keeping him in line, but the strictest, most authoritarian thing she ever managed to say was "Have you taken this house for a hotel?"

No, for Donato Settimio that house was a favoured place, where he could eat good things, even if he often did so at odd times and cold, eating the serving that his mother lovingly covered with a napkin and put to one side for him. And how he liked that food. His favourite was "vincisgrassi", or lasagne, a rich, hearty dish that filled you up just looking at it, but he also had a weakness for "ciauscolu", a very soft sausage that spread on bread as if it were butter. To celebrate high days and holidays, his mother Adele made "crescia fojata", a cake filled with walnuts, almonds, raisins, dried figs and apples that was finger-licking good. Finally, there was a little secret concerning Verdicchio. In the family, drinking wine was a privilege reserved exclusively for the men, certainly not for

#### CARLO FAVOT

boys, and so intolerant of rules as he was, he would hide a glass under his hat and go the cellar to draw it off directly from the barrels.

Then one fine morning he decided to emigrate, to go and experience the dream of America, land of liberty, the new world. There he made his way playing in an orchestra. A modest success, for a few connoisseurs one might say, but enough to allow him a decent lifestyle, crowned by a marriage, the birth of a son and of his adored grandson, Frankie Donato.

And it is he, now an adult, his curiosity aroused by his grandfather's tales, who has asked for that stemless wine glass with faceted sides, the kind you don't find much anymore. He turns it in his hand after having it filled with Verdicchio di Matelica, a wine appreciated since ancient times. It is said that one of its first admirers was Alaric, king of the Visigoths, who had forty mules laden with barrels of wine brought to his troops before the sack of Rome to make them more courageous. The same wine that Frankie Donato is tasting now, with its brilliant colour, delicate fruity bouquet and a smooth, dry, slightly acidic flavour. He is sipping it, but it would be more appropriate to say he is enjoying it, beneath the arches of Villa Collepere, just outside Matelica, seated at a table overlooking the garden, with the stones of the walls giving back some of the heat absorbed during the sun-drenched day just ended. On a summer's evening, cooled by the light breeze coming

## GRANDMA ADELE WOULD BE HAPPY ABOUT IT

from the sea, under a starry sky. Until late, without fear of enduring grandmother Adele's reproaches, because in her heart she too would be happy to know that the villa has now become a hotel. The loveliest in Matelica, the most enchanting of all the surrounding hills, the most charming in the world. So says Frankie Donato.





HOTEL MI NORTE Ribadeo ~ Spagna www.hotelminorte.com

## 19

# Extreme North by Barbara Gramegna

## HOTEL MI NORTE

Giacomo was an extremist: either no woman or three at the same time, vegan for a week and then a gourmet's tour of Parma.

Giacomo loved dangerous places like sheer cliffs, empty landscapes like that of snow-covered Lapland and working holidays where you never ever rest.

I say "was" because something has changed since that time.

Our relationship, if you can call it that, started in an art house cinema, after a showing of Jean Jacques Annaud's "L'Amante", a movie that's dated now but which created quite a stir at the time.

We'd never met before, but as we fell into conversation after the movie, we were immediately attracted to each other, but only as movie buffs though.

Not because we didn't like each other, on the contrary, but because of my not wanting to complicate my life, and his taking our shared times as limited just to see-

#### BARBARA GRAMEGNA

ing certain films.

We went out together that way for about a year, until that holiday.

Needless to say it wasn't something in his style, but since I wasn't in a brilliant place at the time, he humoured my desire to get away.

Perhaps we would never have crossed the line of being just "movie friends" if it had been up to him.

I was about to turn fifty, I didn't have a partner, he wasn't serious about any particular woman, and the cinema often brought us together, so why not play the travel card? The situation was a bit humiliating for me though - as I was suggesting it I could see he was sceptical, and I could feel myself becoming disheartened.

At the beginning he also laid down another condition, that we kept to our mutual theme also on holiday.

"No problem" I told him, "I know what to do".

Naturally he had already imagined Cannes for the Festival or Berlin for the Golden Bear or Turin for the Cinema Museum.

He would never have thought of Galicia, even though it was the setting for a couple of not exactly insignificant movies that he certainly knew and had dissected! I wanted to reveal our destination immediately, since otherwise he wouldn't have come, but I kept the rest of the surprise for the moment we arrived there.

What convinced him was precisely the geography, its extremity, at the end of the world if you like, and during the journey there he filled a notebook with thoughts on the concept of "limit".

### EXTREME NORTH

As I said, you couldn't say he was exactly ecstatic, but it was a pleasure to talk with him, something that I didn't find with many people.

We rented a car and got there in the evening; after landing in La Coruña, I hadn't told him anything else.

In the car I asked him what really fascinated him most about going to the cinema, and he said "the dark". So I blindfolded him.

Of course it wasn't easy to explain the pantomime at the hotel, that I wasn't a kidnapper and that he was OK with it, but when they understood the reason, they made no fuss – on the contrary, they went along with the game.

"Señor, que película quiere ver?" they asked him, and he, thinking he was being funny, answered "El amante". 'Bingo!' I thought to myself.

I led him to the room, took off the blindfold and saw a child, with his mouth agape and his eyes wide open, speechless. Then he gave me a kiss on the cheek, the very first one between us.

I couldn't believe it, were we in a movie or what?

He didn't know if I had taken him to one of those studios where they recreate the scene in a hotel, or if we were in a hotel were they recreated the rooms from famous movie scenes.

He stuttered, put his arms around my waist, and I felt just fine.

Then I started to explain a bit. He went to the window, but still wasn't completely sure.

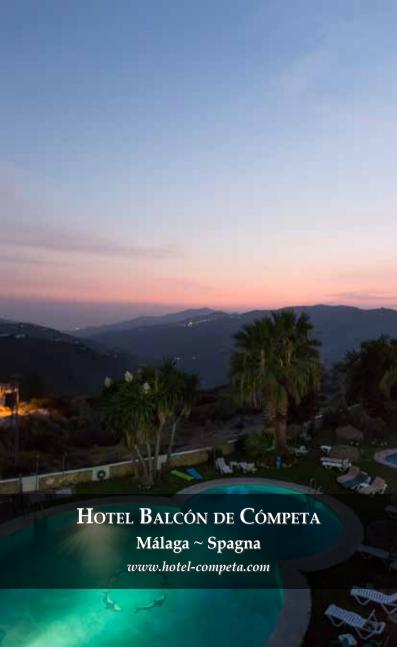
The place was wonderful, if we had imagined it, we

## BARBARA GRAMEGNA

could only have imagined it like that. In a place at the end of something, close to the sea but in the country, completely quiet, just like a cinema before the movie starts, in the darkness of the night, alone in a room for the first time, inventing a scene from our own movie: at the Hotel Mi Norte







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# My dress will also be yellow by Barbara Gramegna

## HOTEL BALCÓN DE CÓMPETA

I book the flight for Malaga, easy enough, and then look at pictures and descriptions of hotels, houses, cottages, inns and holiday villages. Everything seems to be *estupendo*, but nothing really strikes me.

The place I'm looking for has to make me hear "the poets sing".

"The Andalusian poets sing", begins the poem by Rafael Alberti, the poet of Italian descent born in El Puerto de Santa María, not far from Cadiz, and it's a song that feels like a call I have to give in to at this moment in my life.

I don't want a town, but I want to know that there is one not too far away; I don't want a beach, but I feel the need to breathe the scent of the sea.

"The sea / Smiles from far off Teeth of foam / Lips of sky." F. GARCÍA LORCA

### BARBARA GRAMEGNA

I've always thought of Andalusia as a land that gives birth to poetry.

My finger on the map sees mountains close to the sea, hears distant seagulls. I don't need the buzz of night life, I need peace and quiet, and to find blue and white.

I ask a friend for help, he knows me as I am outside the home, in the suspended time of distance and solitude, and so I can trust him.

He gives me a name, *Hotel Balcón de Cómpeta*, and a number. Cómpeta, what a strange name. It seems it means crossroads, a village of Roman origin in the Sierra de Almihara mountains.

I'm excited. I call, I don't want to write, I'll write when I'm there. I want to hear how the person who will welcome me sounds, and get a foretaste of the language that until now has only resonated on paper, the language of the verses I love and that I have never mangled except with my eyes. Friendly, warm voices give me all the information I ask for.

I pack my bag with light clothes and a few notebooks, cool sandals and a big straw hat.

For a few days I want to be a foreigner in a *pueblo* that's already hot in April, and imagine myself as Amaranta, the woman in Alberti's verses.

"Your curls form a red bridge that ignites your undulating ivories. Bite, predator, your blood-stained, curved teeth, hovering, raise you to the wind."

R. Alberti

## MY DRESS WILL ALSO BE YELLOW

My bag is ready now, and I've also packed my flamenco shoes, mementoes of uncertain attempts and a promise – to use them in a place that is "Andalusian" enough, and I know that the Balcón de Cómpeta will be: with live music and a room for fiestas!

In my mind I begin to trace the patterns of the *azulejos*, I see enchanting wrought-iron lamps shining, and imagine being gently cradled in one of those dark wood rocking chairs that remind me of scenes from old films. It could be that after all these dreams I'll find myself simply swimming or playing tennis, seeing that they have everything there, but I won't be sorry just the same.

"April came, all filled with yellow flowers. Yellow the stream, yellow the fence, the hill..."

J. R. JIMÉNEZ

And my dress will also be yellow when I cross the threshold of the Balcón de Compéta that evening in April.





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