

WORLD BOOK DAY

Tales





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









Арр



Last autumn/winter, the members of our pool of authors each wrote an unpublished short story during their stays in various Golden Book Hotels: the suggested theme for the stories was the actual hotel providing hospitality, which set the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 2017, 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 #23APRIL to come. Enjoy!

GBH - The President

Marus Cally



Born in Rome in 1961, his published works include the novels "Da parte di Padre", "Gli anni belli", "Il coraggio delle madri", "Oltre gli occhi", "La terapia del dolore", as well as "Roma per sempre", a collection of short stories. He has contributed to numerous anthologies and short story collections, and edited the collections "Romani per sempre" and "Storiacce romane". He is a member of the Città di Subiaco literary prize jury. His articles and reviews can be found on "Cultora.it" and "Liberarti.it".

Foreword

by Marco Proietti Mancini

You can feel hotels. You can experience them. I imagine that for many people they are just temporary, anonymous rooms to be forgotten a few minutes after leaving them.

There are probably some people who, as soon as they have gone through the hotel doors on their way out, have already forgotten the face and the smile of the person who had welcomed them. Actually, I believe there could be some people who, when they arrive, don't even notice the face in front of them as they are passed the registration form to fill in and sign and are handed the key to their room, let alone the smile.

Do you remember the lovely hotel keys of years gone by? Normal front door keys with enormous, often heavy key-rings in carved wood or coloured plastic. A way of saying "Don't forget to leave me when you go out. After all, your home, your things are here. Safe. I'll take care of it".

The Hotel will take care of it. The people inside it. Those who work there, and often live there, far from the marble and the stucco, from the big rooms and endless corridors with their geometric patterned carpets. Those people, they are the Hotel.

I don't know if it's obvious from the premise, but I am not one of the "many people". I'm not even one of those "some people" who manage to be indifferent and aloof from the hotel they stay in. Whether it's for one night or for a week, or – as happened once in the United States – I have to stay for an entire month.

On the contrary, I feel a bit upset when I only have to stay for one

night, just a few hours, on business. I don't have time to make those spaces mine, to make myself feel at home.

I have been travelling for thirty years or more and I have stayed in countless hotels in Italy and abroad. In international chain hotels that seem identical, the same in France as in Germany as in Italy. I say seem, because actually every hotel has its unique soul, which is the sum of the people who work there.

Luxury hotels, those with a top-hatted doorman in a greatcoat with epaulettes, or little places with half a star, with radiators that gurgle and hiss all night, preventing you from sleeping. And then there is the middle ground, with mine host who shakes your hand when you arrive and when you leave, and the cleaning ladies who get to recognise you and greet you almost affectionately, even if it's the first time they've seen you.

That is why, when they asked me to take part in Golden Book Hotels' "World Book Day" project, I not only said yes, but entered into it with great enthusiasm. For me it was an unexpected and unhoped-for prize, an experience involving two of my greatest passions, hotels and books. I admit I didn't even know that this association, Golden Book Hotels, even existed; places where in addition to finding everything I have already described, you can also find a world of written words, where books are an integral part of the reception.

They put together my love of travel and books – the hand and smile of the receptionist who not only welcomes you and gives you a key, but also a story, a paperback, a tale to take you on a journey while you are a guest.

I've said (written) too much. It's a habit, a bad habit. Please forgive me, I won't keep you any longer. Think of me as a shadow next to the person who welcomed you. They gave you the registration form and you signed it. They passed you the key. And along with the key, these stories, the tales that you will find after my words.

Enjoy your stay and your reading in YOUR Golden Book Hotel. And please, don't leave without smiling. You'll see that this is a journey you won't forget.



www.satellitelibri.it



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Tales

CONSORZIO METE DI LIGURIA Imperia www.metediliguria.it

1

The right ingredients by Barbara Gramegna

Consorzio Mete di Liguria

I astonished them, and with exactly what they had asked for – something that was both simple and original, and was an example of tradition and wholesomeness.

I didn't even have to rack my brains too much, apart from the name, which had to describe the dish and be understandable by everyone.

I couldn't believe it. They asked me loads of questions, about the products used, the emulsion of that particular Brigasca sheep's milk ricotta with a few drops of Taggiasca extra virgin olive oil, about the delicate layer of Vermentino jelly resting on the puff of mousse, and on the aromas, which none of the judges was able to guess, and then on the figs, grown near the sea, with thin, light green skins and vertical white fissures, and sensual amber-red flesh, that I had decided to cut open and place alongside.

But let's go back to the beginning.

Mario, Andrea, Giovanna, Sandro and Elena, my companions of gastronomic merry-making and gourmet evenings, had been trying for at least a couple of years. "Antò, if you don't write in to the TV, we'll do it" they said one evening after sea bass carpaccio in prosecco, which I had seen being prepared in a recently-discovered trattoria and made for them in exactly the same way, much to their delight.

But one morning, after discovering that others were not allowed to enter your name, in a fit of madness and in less than no time, I got myself into an adventure that was the complete opposite of my concept of "cooking". We thank you for your interest in our programme. Your application has been accepted and you will shortly be receiving a confirmation email.

After all, we change with the years, and it's really hard to stay immune to media contagion. What's more, I've always liked games and ... and

Certainly, letting someone stick one of those spotlights that make you forget all your good intentions in your face, and cooking what others want to order is not exactly what I meant when I talked about the poetry of food, but to be honest, inside I was a bit of a poser.

However, I heard nothing more for weeks after the automatic confirmation email, to the extent I had almost forgotten that moment of madness.

It was exactly one month later that I received a reply – they had accepted me!

But as often happens after a long wait, I didn't react as you might imagine. I calmly read the instructions tell-

ing me I should present myself at the television studios in fifteen days' time, at seven o'clock in the morning. I could arrive the evening before and stay in a nearby hotel affiliated with the programme, and if I passed the audition, recording of the show would begin immediately and go on to the bitter end in a sort of culinary sequestration.

It's not something you could say is "for everyone". A good 70% of those selected give up because they can't get leave from work; another 20% can't leave their family, and only the remaining 10%, including me, decides voluntarily to go to be insulted by pitiless judges in the midst of fricassees and croquettes.

Of course, as soon as my friends, the ones who had been so insistent, found out, they began making fun of me. "Ah, that's our Antonio, cooking is poetry, slowness, meditation...." they said, mimicking me and reminding me how fiercely I'd criticized TV cooking shows, but then they hugged me and busied themselves giving me all sorts of advice. However, it was Giovanna, the group's tour operator who had the idea which I can now say was the winning one.

"Antò, what you need now are the *Ligurian ladies*" she said, completely flooring me, seeing that I'd actually managed to scare off the only woman I'd ever had. However, she then made herself clearer, and explained that to find inspiration and concentrate, I would need a place far away from everyone, with a mild climate, but one that stimulated the senses, because it would have to nurture my creativity. Good heavens, she sounded just like an advert. I hated it when she did that, but it was her job and I could see she was doing it out of affection.

In the end, audition nerves and the curiosity to know more about this idea of Giovanna's got the better of me, and I gave in and got her to give me the details about these *ladies*, who, it seemed, I was the only one of the group not to have heard of.

Elena gave me a detailed explanation that they were six businesswomen from the Imperia area on the Ligurian Riviera, while Mario, our "Latin lover", found a photo of them on the internet to put me immediately into "maximum gallantry" mode, something that's always been a bit hard for me given my abrasiveness. Lastly came advice from Sandro, our biggest wine enthusiast, who was already hoping for a supply of Pigato, and from Andrea, the olive oil taster, since he was sure that among these six splendid "Mete di Liguria", or Liguria Destinations, as the *ladies*' association was called, I would find the one to give just the right delicacy to my new recipe.

In fact, the information about the casting call said *The candidate will present a simple but original dish made with ingredients typical of traditional Italian cuisine.*

So it was, therefore, that I said goodbye to the gang and left for the Ligurian Riviera, where I would find the *ladies* and a true Paradise - completely unknown to me – waiting to welcome me. Maria Donata at Valcrosa, Maura at Borgo Muratori and Rosanna at I Freschi, all lived in the Dianese Valley with its orchards, vineyards planted with Vermentino and Pigato grapes, olive groves and aromatic herbs, while in the hills above Imperia I would find Lorena at Molino dei Giusi, and Tiziana at Uliveto Saglietto. In the Impero Valley, Torrerossa, also belonging to Lorena, was the realm of Taggiasca extra virgin olive oil, the one I could not have then imagined would be my recipe's touch of class.

Rossella's Adagio, on the other hand, would be my introduction to the Argentina Valley, around twenty kilometres from Imperia, where the river Argentina winds through olive groves and enchanting villages such as Badalucco, with a wealth of history, having been ruled by Genoa, Austria and France in turn, and Triora, known as the "town of witches", and included in the list of Italy's most beautiful villages.

I would never be able to do it all in six days, but I'd have to make do for this time and besides, it was already something wonderful.

I also thought of the fortuitous combination that the number six represented – we were six friends, a closeknit group, and despite each of us being terribly egocentric, we found ourselves in harmony at the dinners we organized nearly every weekend, seeing as we were all more or less without family commitments.

Talking of families, the last time I was in Liguria was thirty years before, on a holiday made up of hesitant swims, given our lack of experience, of little roads up and down the narrow coast, and my brother, who cleaned his hands, greasy from *focaccia*, on my trousers. My father often went there on business, and sometimes he asked our mother to bring us to join him. My childhood Liguria stopped at Genoa, though, even if I knew from the maps of Italy's regions that it reached as far as the border with France, which I was not far from now. Imperia province, where splendid mansions stand not far from the sea among olives and the scent of aromatic herbs, was totally unknown to me, and made me think how astute the English, who had always chosen it as a winter retreat, had been. I was more than happy to get to know it, and take the narrow roads that every evening led me to a new farmstead to make the acquaintance of my enchanting muses.

There I also found everything that I have always liked, but usually struggle to enjoy. The sea, but not too close, all the fuss that goes with it irritates me; peace, a rare commodity now: class, but without ostentation, even more rare, and scents – I've always been very sensitive to smells, both in the kitchen and on people.

Plants here on the Riviera steal the scene from the flowers, and aromatic herbs compete for fragrance with the citrus trees, and so from the very first evening a few ideas soon took shape in my head and on my palate.

If at first the idea of spending each night in a different place made me feel a little uncomfortable, I soon realized it was the only way to find the ingredients for my recipe. Right from the start I'd felt it would have to be for a dessert, light as the air I breathed, as cool as the breeze from the nearby sea, and as fragrant as mallow and pimpinella, herbs who had their natural habitat here. In the six days spent between Diano Marina, Cervo, Imperia and Badalucco, in addition to acting as hosts, telling me proudly about their land and their idea of hospitality, completely unconsciously each of my muses gave me what I needed – inspiration and determination.

And so it was there that the *Ligurian herbs ricotta mousse with Vermentino jelly and figs* took form in my mind and came to life in my hands, and thanks to which I now find myself spending my nights in a squalid hotel just off the motorway, kept company by the noise of the continuously running motor of a D energy class minibar.

If I had thought I'd find inspiration here, I reckon my adventure would have already ended.

However, my eyes are still full of those six little gems, and my senses still hold vivid traces of my feelings as I slept in wrought-iron beds in period rooms with stone walls, and spent hours in the *Ligurian ladies'* lush gardens, and which enable me to endure this "culinary sequestration" that has now lasted for four weeks.

Because it was the six "Mete di Liguria" – Liguria Destinations – that stimulated my senses and gave me the right ingredients to carry on winning.



ROYAL SPORTING HOTEL Portovenere (La Spezia) *www.royalsporting.it*

2

Tiny things by Rosa Tiziana Bruno

ROYAL SPORTING HOTEL

As soon as he entered the room and started unpacking his suitcase, Carlos began thinking about the absurdity of the daily grind. The perpetual repetition of actions that were often useless.

It's incredible, he thought, how worldly things tie us down.

They engage us to the extent of robbing us of even that small amount of time when we can concentrate on a thought, a sensation, an image, a piece of music, a smell. Sometimes, thanks to a combination of the currents and a favourable wind, he even manages to stop. Just for a few seconds, let's be clear.

You can't resist for long, but there's time to become aware, to participate in what is happening through the window on a level with the floor you've become suspended on. Sometimes you even manage to quickly shout banal or concise phrases to the person on the other side of the glass, like "How much do I owe you?" or "I'll always love you" or "Leave me in peace!"

Just a few moments before another current, another gust, takes us far away, accelerating our movement across the interminable façade of the mysterious building that is the life we inhabit.

And it happens that for months, years, perhaps forever, you remember the dismayed, furious or loving faces of those who watched you as you spoke behind the glass. Only a few minutes had passed and already the demanding ring of his mobile interrupted Carlos's thoughts, announcing problems and hassles.

He turned it off without even answering, without even looking to see who wanted him. He removed the batteries and put the inanimate object on the night-table.

When all was said and done, he had come to the Royal Sporting Hotel in Portovenere for one purpose: to switch off completely. And he had every intention of keeping that resolution.

He hadn't made himself the gift of a holiday for some time now. He'd made journeys galore in the past few years, but for work. Fleeting stops in airports, quick walks in European capital cities, breathless dashes to grab the last available taxi.

But travelling is not just moving, it's especially not moving at a run.

So this was the first real journey worthy of the name for Carlos.

Because a journey has to be able to take you far, far away, where time can't reach you, not even if you leave an exact address.

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And then, Carlos knew well, you can also travel staying in one place. And to do it, he had carefully looked for a place to stop, a place where the word fast had no meaning.

He had been to Portovenere before, stopping briefly years ago. But he had only a vague memory of it; after all, he had been a child at the time.

Now, as he hung his clothes in the wardrobe, he found himself glancing outside to enjoy the spectacle of that splendid June morning.

The Royal Sporting Hotel seemed to be an unreal, almost magical place. A drop of heaven that had fallen between the sky and the earth, just a few steps from the sea.

He had just decided to go out onto the terrace to take a few breaths of the crisp air, when he heard a knock on the door.

It was a young, brunette woman with a somewhat scatterbrained, dreamy expression.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, sir, my name's Arianna and I'm staying in the room next door. I need a favour"

"Pleased to meet you, I'm Carlos. I'd be happy to help you if I can. Tell me what's the matter..."

"I've lost an earring that's got great sentimental value, and I just don't know who to ask for help."

"But where could you have lost it?"

"I still had it when I came back to my room a short time ago."

"Then that's where it will be, have you looked properly?

"Yes, of course. But I've got a bit of backache today and I so couldn't bend down to look under the bed too." "I see, do you want me to look?"

"If it's not too much trouble for you... thank you."

Carlos agreed, despite it being a bizarre, unusual request. Moreover, the lady in question had a really nice pair of legs and you can't say no to a nice pair of legs. Or at least, Carlos couldn't.

Once inside her room, he began searching for the earring. He spotted it straight away; it was there on the floor, under the bed.

But it was a very big bed, and he had to lie down on his stomach to slide his arm under to reach the earring. After several tries, during which he deliberately looked at her heels rising from her amazing red slippers as she leaned over to see the earring, he gave up.

"Arianna, I think the only thing to do is move the bed," he said, trying to hide his excitement at the sight he had been watching.

To tell the truth, poor Carlos felt a bit dazed and almost jumped when he heard her say:

"If I shrink you to half a centimetre high you'll be able to slip under the bed with no problem and bring my earring out."

"You can't shrink a man!"

"I've got the miniaturization prototype. It was hard to get hold of, but it works perfectly. Do you want to try?" Thinking that she was making fun of him, Carlos agreed, and she pushed him over to the mirror, next to the wardrobe.

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"Once you've shrunk we won't be able to talk, so here's what you must do."

Carlos stared at her open-mouthed, holding his breath, incredulous.

She went on: "After the miniaturization process you could be frightened at the sight of me. I'll move very slowly and I'll get you to jump onto this coffee spoon. Then I'll put you under the bed, where you'll get down and go and fetch the earring. Considering your size it should take about three hours to move it to the edge. So the appointment for recovery is three hours after your departure."

"OK" was the only sound Carlos managed to make.

"Relax" she said, pointing a strange pen at him. Then a flash of white light and a terrible falling sensation filled the next three seconds.

Recovering from the shock, Carlos found himself on a strange, rough, whitish platform. Then a tremendous shaking of the ground made him raise his head, and finally he saw her.

She could have been five hundred metres tall. Her gigantic jeans clung to her magnificent legs, while he saw her face distorted by the distance.

Arianna was no longer his neighbour in the room next door but a goddess, compared with whom he was nothing more than an ant. Her enormous feet were planted a few centimetres from Carlos's terrified body.

Then she started to bend down and laid an enormous spoon next to him.

Remembering her earlier instructions, Carlos jumped

onto the metal surface and suddenly felt a violent acceleration as he was lifted up towards her face.

A green eye, twice as big as himself, filled his sight, while a deep, thundering rumble vibrated through his body. He realized that Arianna was saying something, but he couldn't make sense of her words.

The journey towards the bed was short; her feet thundering like drums as they hit the floor.

As he was set down on the ground he again felt as if he was falling. Getting down from the spoon, he saw Arianna stand up, towering over his tiny, insignificant life. There he was, immobile, between the feet of a giant.

Then Arianna's hand made a sign, reminding him that the appointment was three hours from now.

Turning towards the bed, Carlos slipped easily into the small space where the earring had fallen, and which now seemed to him like a normal ceiling.

The job was less difficult than imagined as the earring was made of filigree and so, fortunately, was easy to move. He dragged it across an enormous space, but realizing that there was still a long way to go to the edge, he sat down and thought about how to get out in two and a half hours.

As he sat there looking at the enormous room, he saw Arianna come in with a bathrobe in one hand and a pair of clogs in the other.

He saw her place the clogs on the floor and slip them on, leaving the slippers a few dozen metres (for him) from where he was sitting. The thunder of her steps grew fainter as she went towards the bathroom.

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It was then that Carlos decided to change plan. He walked towards the slippers with the intention of just having a look, and found himself looking up at the heel from the bottom.

From his point of view it was at least twenty metres tall. He went towards the point, and on reaching it saw how the central seam could act as a ladder to explore that strange red mountain.

A violent shake from the ground roused him from his thoughts. Then a gust of wind suddenly lifted him up, making him sail across the room, spinning him around and out of the open window. It lifted him over the roof of the building and carried him a little further on.

Up in the air, imprisoned in a warm current, he remained immobile for a few seconds, suspended between the scent of the salty air and the fragrance that came from the blossoming junipers. He then began to descend in a graceful spin that at every turn made the signs traced on a single side flash. Signs that looked like words.

If anyone had been able to read them, those brief phrases, they would have captured meanings such as smiles, water, young; perhaps also tickle.

Leaves from different trees, fragments of every size, edged with traces of salt, rained down around him, gliding slowly with elegant twists and turns in the hot, scented currents issuing from the hotel.

Far below were the tennis courts, the multicoloured poolside buffet, the laughter of guests, the gigantic words, Royal Sporting Hotel, the colourful sunshades, the rocky wall, the Ristorante dei Poeti. And the scents were more and more intense. Mixed with the salty air were the essences of art and history, which cannot be described, but only breathed.

Byron, Petrarca and Montale had left something of themselves that was still alive in the air and in every single thing.

In other words, there was everything, everything that could be desired; only one detail was missing. Time.

The hours, the minutes, the second were suspended, still, immobile. Carlos seemed to taste Paradise. He thought the hotel was enchanted and that he couldn't know what was underneath, what supported the avenue where the guests walked, where they loved, where they lay down to sleep. He imagined faults of sea water that stagnated lazily around the bases of pillars, or caves studded with crystals, or ancient cemeteries turned upside down by bulldozers, or rocks crushed into piles of colourful leaves, or simply wide open spaces.

Now, tiny like this, he realised he could look beneath the world's clothes. Because you have to be small to see certain things.

A sudden gust of hot air helped him slide down the trunk of a large tree in the hotel garden.

He bounced on the canvas of a deckchair, almost falling head over heels onto the ground. Luckily, something a lot softer than a tile cushioned his fall. But what was it? He smelt a strong odour of paper, tried to see what was under him, and realised that he was sitting on an enormous book. It must have been one of those the ho-

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tel provided for guests, left there by someone who had gone for a dip in the pool, perhaps.

Gathering his thoughts, he reflected how, absurdly, it is always words that save us in this world. Be they of paper or air, it's always words.

He thought of the great number of books in the hotel, scraps of sentences rose up, flotsam of thoughts, ideas. All had the power to conquer, to teach, thanks to some exceptional meaning, how to survive through time.

He thought he would have liked to put them together, to reconstruct the world in the way he had seen it during his day as a miniature being. Following the roads and paths marked by small, powerful things.

He understood that it was not he who was small, but that in reality everything was small, this is the time of small things. Even if everything seemed to tell us that we have to do on a grand scale and that it is impossible for a minuscule individual to change the world, or understand.

But it is not a case of finding answers so much as asking questions, of getting away from the exhausting feeling that by now everything is known and taken for granted, from the passive acceptance of views of life induced by others, by the television, by advertising, by haste.

To understand the world, thought Carlos, you have to be tiny. And he felt that he had done the right thing, in the right place.

He then turned round suddenly and realised that now it was the book that had shrunk, and that he had gone back to his old size. In short, everything was like it was before. The three hours were up.

Arianna was there, stretched out at the side of the pool in her apricot-coloured swimsuit, her head bent over a novel.

She knew, she had always known, that to see Paradise you have to shrink, to become as tiny as printed letters. Now they could understand each other, yes, now they could.

Struck by this unimagined affinity, Carlos kept silent, until he saw that those eyes were lifting from the book they had been fixed on to look at him.

He found the idea of appearing indiscreet unbearable, and so he turned to stare at the outlines of the trees framing the garden, without seeing them.

He didn't see that a fleeting smile had creased Arianna's lips when she had become aware of his embarrassment.





Hotel Spadari al Duomo

Milano

www.spadarihotel.com

3

Intuition by Cristina Sottocorno

Hotel Spadari al Duomo

The sun was about to set over a Milan sweltering in the summer heat: like an enormous incandescent coin it bathed the roofs of the houses, the tall spires of the Cathedral and the ancient bell towers with a dense, liquid light.

The sky was extraordinarily limpid and clear as dusk fell, just a few light, solitary clouds streaked the horizon with a pink stolen from the hand of a refined Flemish landscape painter.

He threw his bag on the bed and went towards the wide window: the top floor of the Hotel Spadari in Milan always provided a view of rare beauty of that frenetic, evasive city.

He was lost for an instant in intense memories so vivid that they almost hurt.

He took a deep breath and gave a last quick glance at that beautiful scene, then pulled the elegant brocade curtains closed, almost completely darkening the room. He had learned at his expense that you could never be too careful.

Especially in a job like his.

Job, it was not longer just a job! It was a matter of his life itself.

He had found himself reflecting consciously and at length on it for the first time towards the end of January, during the long intercontinental flight that had taken him from Paris to Boston.

He remembered it perfectly. As usual they had booked him a seat in Business Class, and immediately after boarding he had found himself sitting next to an elegant Saudi businessman and a short distance from a fur-coated woman in her forties who appeared to be travelling alone.

He had observed her carefully, she was undoubtedly a fascinating woman: her long, glossy, black hair fell in soft waves to her slim shoulders, eyes as green as an Irish lake discreetly examined her surroundings, while golden freckles scattered across her face like crumbs on a tablecloth made her look younger and gave an occasional glimpse of the rebellious child she must have been. Her hands were well-cared for, with red-polished nails and a velvety lipstick in the same colour. Little jewellery and long, slim fingers.

She had smiled at him straight away, unexpectedly, shortly after sitting down in the wide seat to his left.

And she had also given him a lingering bold glance.

It was this that had put him on the alert.

Between the dark-faced Saudi and the attractive wom-

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an sitting a short distance away from him, it was the latter his instinct had made him wary about.

Any other man of his age would not have hesitated to exchange the glance, perhaps hazarding a polite nod of the head or just a word to make a link with that elegant woman and everything pleasant that could come of it. But not him.

No.

From the moment she had sat down, the thing that had obsessed Gavin was that dammed black leather bag the girl had with her. Too small to be the hand luggage of such a sophisticated woman, too big to be just a shoulder bag, but exactly the same size as the one he had put in the overhead locker just a few moments earlier.

And which he had to take to its destination at any cost. So he needed to think of a defence strategy.

The woman seemed to be leafing distractedly through a French news magazine, but Gavin was perfectly aware that from where she was sitting, she could definitely keep him in her line of sight from the corner of her eye. To get up, move the bag and show his hand so clearly would have been silly as well as lacking in style.

So he would have to watch carefully over his precious cargo to prevent that woman from substituting the contents with some squalid substitute that she carried hidden in her leather bag.

«I wonder who she works for...» he asked himself through clenched teeth.

And he realized immediately that he would not have closed an eye all night.

That he would not have eaten, drunk or tasted anything.

That he would not have become distracted in any way, not even to go to the toilet.

You could never be too careful.

And that's how it was: he remained on his guard for all the eight long hours of the flight, while the woman seemed not to deny herself anything. With an enviable, calm lack of concern (she was definitely a professional!), she enjoyed an aperitif of strawberries and champagne and a lavish dinner of green lasagne, fois gras and a warm apple tarte tatin drizzled with Calvados before reading through some papers she had brought with her, (he managed only to see that it was a psychological treatise on borderline personality disorders).

Every now and then their eyes met, like those of two sleuth-hounds sizing each other up and warily guarding their territories.

They sniff each other, without a sound, feeling the weight of their eyelids slowly closing until they fall into a deep sleep.

But not he.

He could not sleep.

He pretended to doze off so as not to arouse suspicion, and in the meantime – as they had taught him years ago – took note of every noise, every word, every syllable uttered in Business Class of Air France Flight 123F from Paris to Boston.

To *MIT* as far as he was concerned.

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At dawn they were flying over the American coast and the pilot informed the passengers that they should get ready for landing.

The woman came slowly out of a still, deep sleep and tried to recompose herself.

She had not moved for the whole flight, she had done it on purpose.

Then suddenly she grabbed that dammed black bag and headed quickly towards the toilet. Or so it seemed. In a flash, Gavin took his leather bag from the overhead locker and without paying too much attention, put it at his feet.

He felt much calmer now, even if the flight was not yet over.

Some minutes later he smelt the woman's heavy jasmine and gardenia perfume preceding her as she came closer, but just at that moment the man behind him (a lanky, clumsy Parisian) got up from his seat with a sudden, uncoordinated movement, tripping the surprised Frenchwoman with his big left foot. The woman managed to grab the arm of a seat, but the bag she carried on her wrist fell right next to Gavin's ankle.

Excellent! He couldn't have hoped for more.

The zip of the black Balenciaga was completely open and all – or almost all – of its contents were scattered over the beige carpet between the seats.

Gavin could not believe his eyes! He immediately bent down to pick up (and examine) the objects tossed around his feet. A Louis Vuitton diary full of pages,

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a bone hairbrush, two Dior lipstick, three different Chanel face creams, the mask she had worn to sleep, a BlackBerry, sponges, toothbrush, a long, narrow Prada wallet, keys and – nothing else.

He took the bag by a handle, then glanced with *nonchalance* into the quilted interior and as he slowly replaced the items one by one, felt the bottom carefully to see if something hidden had escaped his notice.

Nothing.

Only that infinity of half-useless things women always carry when they travel, like powerful talismans against bad weather, misfortune and adverse destiny.

The woman hurried up, her cheeks red with embarrassment. She thanked him first in French and then in English, and finally she shook his smooth, pale hand:

- Celine Lafèvre, pleased to meet you... and thank you again *Monsieur*!

«Celine Lafèvre...» he repeated half to himself, smiling courteously.

- Don't mention it.

He sat down and realized that he had been working for the *Organization* for far too long.

He could have chatted amiably with that delightful, elegant creature for the whole of that incredibly boring flight; instead he had stayed in a wary, ferocious half-sleep, ready to leap on an imaginary prey in the event she dared to interfere with his umpteenth "mission".

«Paranoid, that's what I've become... a stupid, foolish thirty-eight year old paranoic who can't even get him-

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self some healthy fun ... »

It was then he realized it was no longer just a matter of "business".

No.

For Gavin, antique books had become his whole existence.

Their discovery, the tortuous paths which led them from far-away, godforsaken places to the *Organization*'s headquarters was the essence of his days. The smell of old leather and centuries of mould on delicate, yellowed page was his lifeblood.

His path was marked by solitary footprints in foreign cities, in sun-baked, unknown deserts, in dangerous lands parched by time and history, in the elegant lobbies of select hotels.

That was his life.

At least since – following a Master's degree from Oxford in Bibliology, Armenian Studies and Coptic Civilisation – he had been contacted by the *Organization*. This small, secret group of wealth patrons from all over the world was interested in deciphering the enigmatic codes concealed in ancient sacred texts, stories of which had come down intact through the centuries since the dawn of time.

Since that day, his job – extremely well-paid apart from anything else – had been to "recover" those precious manuscripts conserved in half the world's remote libraries and private collections so they could be subjected to the scrutiny of the experts and scholars in the *Organization*'s employ. He slowly opened the leather briefcase lying on the bed and drew out a rectangular package wrapped in numerous, thick layers of material and tied with string.

He laid the bag to one side and went to sit with the precious parcel on one of the elegant blue and white settees positioned in front of the window.

He turned on the light and carefully opened the wrapping.

The coolness from the air conditioner helped him concentrate, the deep blue of the walls enveloped him, silently sharing the moment, while the sophisticated works of art on the walls of the suite he loved to reserve during his stays in Milan, gave him a kind of immobile, crystallized serenity that he rarely felt in other parts of the world.

Everything in that room was perfectly in its place.

Time stood still between those elegant painted walls in the heart of Milan.

Not for nothing had Gavin understood right from his first brief stay at the Hotel Spadari that there could be no other place to stay in Milan if not this refined jewel of a hotel, set like a precious stone in the heart of a vibrant, foreign city. Like a corner of harmony and rest, like the ordered, expert brush strokes of an artist in the centre of a great canvas dominated by chaos.

The sharp, precise shades of dark and light blue made the place his perfect "thinking spot".

The sound of the telephone almost made him jump. «What the heck...»

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- Hello? Ah, yes... I see... Tell him to wait for me in the lobby, I'll be down immediately.

«That's all I needed, what does he want?!»

Dr. Landi, the elderly, knowledgeable Milanese antique dealer from whose shop Gavin had just recovered an inestimable incunabulum by St. Anthony (the Confessional "Omnis mortalium cura" Specchio di Coscienza, printed in Venice by the typographer Cristoforo de Pensi on 18 July 1500), was now waiting impatiently for him in the hotel lobby.

Now what did he want to tell him?

The negotiations were already closed; the *Organization* had written out a considerably cheque to win itself that manuscript and now the precious object lay immobile on the settee of his room.

Gavin was doubtful, but he couldn't allow himself to appear discourteous or worried; that could jeopardize future deals and his superiors would absolutely not be pleased...

He picked up the room key and went out.

The lift took him quickly to the airy, elegant atrium.

The discreet coming and going of guests and staff generated a flow of movement and a quiet hum of conversation.

Gavin looked around to find Landi: at the desk a tall man in a tailored blue pinstripe and a woman seen from the back – slim and ethereal in a white chiffon dress – were talking cordially with the receptionist.

An elderly Englishwoman, pale and bejeweled, smiled from beneath the wide brim of her straw hat at a whitehaired man in a polo shirt and linen trousers who was examining a battered-looking map.

On the right, sitting on the low settees in front of a splendid artistic installation above the fireplace, were two women earnestly chatting in French.

Suddenly he saw him, sitting on one of the blue settees, sweating and trembling. He appeared to be unwell.

- Hello Dr. Landi, is everything all right? What are you doing here?

- Oh thank goodness I've found you!

- Has something happened by any chance?

The man did not reply; he wiped his forehead with a white handkerchief and rummaged inside a sort of worn briefcase.

He waved some crumpled papers under his nose.

Gavin was puzzled, what on earth did the man want now?!

- Excuse me, what are these? - insisted Gavin, taking the papers in his hand.

- The authorizations, of course!

- "Authorizations" for what??

Gavin realised that he had involuntarily raised his voice.

He cleared his throat and looked around.

The two Frenchwomen had got up a little annoyed and were moving their luggage towards the lift, while the couple at Reception had turned round for a moment, giving him an enquiring look.

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- Oh good heavens... you told me that the work is going to the United States, didn't you?

- Yes, and so?

He was quietly becoming impatient.

- Well, these papers are in-dis-pen-sable! Because they are the *passport* for the ancient volume you have bought!

Gavin was becoming even more perplexed. He had been doing that job for many years, and not a few strange things had happened to him, but he was completely unable to understand what the man was raving about.

- That manuscript already has a "passport"; if I'm not mistaken we checked all the documents relating to the purchase one by one this afternoon in your shop and not so much as a stamp was missing!

- Oh no, dear Mr. Connors, when it's a matter of *Venetian incunabula*, the city of Venice has to issue a special exit visa. Which is what I forgot to give you a few hours ago and what I'm giving you now. Here it is, see?

- Gavin gave up.

- Alright... thank you then, Dr. Landi. Do you think everything is settled now?

The man nervously adjusted his tie, almost offended at the allusion.

- Certainly, now *everything* is truly alright - he answered, stressing the words.

Gavin was suddenly overcome with a strange feeling of guilt towards that old merchant who was, after all, just a bit distracted and zealous. Perhaps he had taken him the wrong way.

- Good, so may I offer you something to drink at the bar now?

The man's expression changed, and the tense expression on his face relaxed. The lines became less deep and with a nod of his head he accepted the peace pipe the foreigner was offering him.

Between one chat and another about art and the city's entertainments, Gavin managed to get back to his room after about an hour.

When he looked at his watch in the lift, he could hardly believe he had wasted all that time!

He hurried down the corridor to the door of his room.

A second later his heart suddenly leapt to his throat and his blood turned to ice in his veins. He felt a sharp pain in his stomach as if an unexpected fist had punched him hard in the abdomen. «Dammit, it's open!»

Gavin burst into the room like a fury, even though he had already realised it was too late.

He rushed to the settee, where a pile of layers of material lay defenceless and empty next to the string.

«Oh my God, my God! What an idiot!»

Nothing else in the room had been touched. Nothing.

But nothing else in that room was of any importance.

He sat down on the bed despairingly, with his head between his hands, and it was then that he recognized it clearly – jasmine and gardenia.

The same intense and unmistakable perfume.

In a second he had a clear picture of that Frenchwoman

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with the green eyes and jet-black hair, the same one who had probably been sitting in a corner of the lobby waiting for his stupid distraction.

The same one who had undoubtedly paid the greedy antique dealer handsomely to keep him occupied with that series of useless stories about the incunabulum's *Venetian passport*. The same one his instinct had warned him about the first time, on that flight to Boston.

«Never doubt your own intuition...»

But it was too late now, too late for everything. He smiled bitterly.

He threw himself on the bed and closed his eyes. He imagined her naked, imagined her agile, slim body in that embrace he had been unable to enjoy.

He imagined her rummaging through his room and her body with the same avidness and passion. On the other hand, it was the only thing left for him to do.

He would think about the Organization later.



Hotel Gran Duca di York

Milano www.ducadiyork.com

4

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 nowcold 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.

4.00рм

The train's slow progress has always relaxed Angelo.

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 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".

6.10рм

Before going in, I linger for a few moments on the pavement; the facade 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 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.

8.00ам

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 vanilla 1 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". 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 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.

"You're welcome, professor".

7.15рм

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.

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.



HOTEL SAN GUIDO Milano

www.hotelsanguido.com

5

Places by Cristina Sottocorno

HOTEL SAN GUIDO

There are places in Milan that have been forgotten for centuries.

Hidden, mysterious places with stories more than a thousand years old: ancient legends, popular myths and enigmas whose obscure origins are lost in the mists of time. They are silent corners, fleetingly glimpsed and almost anonymous, but as watchful as sentinels over things and the passing of time. At the St. Ambrose Basilica there are no less than two of these places. The first is situated to the left of the church, a few metres from the fence marking the boundary. It is a robust Roman column known as "The Devil's Column". Legend has it that in far-off times it was the site of a fierce duel between St. Ambrose and the devil himself, and that it marks an accursed place since then. The second, on the other hand, is to be found inside the Basilica, in its warm, amber and incense-scented interior, and is the so-called "Serpent's Column". It is a slender, dark grey travertine cylinder crowned with a bronze serpent, cast – it is said – by Moses himself.

The people of Milan have always attributed miraculous powers to this column, donated by the emperor Bail II in 1007. In popular culture, it represents a kind of point of contact between Man and the divine, a thin membrane that separates the earth from the hereafter, a door, a path that leads to what we have not yet been given to understand.

- Captain, what do you think of this mess?

Stefano Sterpi waited a few moments before answering, took a deep breath and hunched further into his wrinkled raincoat, never taking his gaze off the naked, tortured body of Father Saverio.

- Well, it must have been a bad case of indigestion.

His subordinate stared at him with a perplexed look, and the officer thought he heard a distant echo.

- Gargiulo! What on earth do you imagine I think, can't you see that this poor man was savagely beaten? He certainly didn't die of a heart attack!

The Captain was irritable that morning.

Very irritable.

The fault perhaps of the seven Winston's already smoked, of the merciless headache that had been gnawing at him since the evening before, or the nasty surprise of finding the body of an old priest barbarously murdered and tied to the *accursed column* in St. Ambrose's.

- Gargiulo, brief me.

The policeman nervously cleared his throat:

PLACES

- His name's Father Saverio Dionisi and he was the parish priest of Santa Maria del Carmine Church, situated in the eponymous square in the Brera district.

The captain shook himself, *"That's where I've seen him"*, he thought.

Stefano remembered an evening, some months before, when he'd had dinner with some friends from Radio Strega at the *Trattoria del Carmine*, one of Milan's oldest restaurants, which occupied a prime position right in the heart of one of the neighbourhoods that he loved most. It was a neighbourhood of artists, of quaint restaurants, *bohémienne* life and writers – a neighbourhood that seemed to come straight from the pages of a novel, *"a stanza of a poem"*, as he loved to describe it. The restaurant's tables impudently stood almost in the churchyard of the lovely Santa Maria del Carmine Church, whose red brick facade took on all the shades of brown and orange at sunset.

That evening, as he now recalled it, he had seen that priest, as hoary and lined as an ancient olive tree, talking to a handful of very shady-looking young men at the great door of the basilica. That detail had intrigued him to the extent that he had not taken his eyes off the apparently ordinary scene. His policeman's instinct had prompted made him keep his eyes open, and he had done so. He had lingered, watching for a few minutes more than necessary until the disreputable group had moved on, cackling, and the priest had hurried back inside.

"Fancy that," he thought, stunned by the macabre coinci-

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dence, "Desdemona and Filippo will never believe me."

His subordinate continued, clearing his throat and explaining that the victim, who had lived in the presbytery adjoining the church for more than ten years, had not only seen to his parishioners' needs, but also to rescuing disadvantaged youths. Father Saverio had worked with the city's best-known social co-operatives and charity foundations, and over time had become a reference point for the needy, regardless of the up-scale neighbourhood where he carried out his priestly duties.

- Well, Gargiulo, I'd say there are a number of hypotheses to sift through now.

The subordinate moved off in a hurry.

He couldn't even remember how long it had been since he had enjoyed a cappuccino!

"*An age, at least,*" he muttered to himself, slowly savouring the aroma and filling his lungs with sweet, far-off memories. He stretched his arms and relaxed his stiff shoulders; the black jacket and those clothes he wasn't used to wearing were painfully restricting.

Once outside the Caffè Carducci, under the leaden, familiar sky seen from a different perspective, he quickly headed towards the knot of policemen at the entrance to the basilica. He politely elbowed his way through the curious onlookers and finally joined the dark head of Captain Sterpi.

- Good morning, Stefano!

The officer turned, starting at the familiar voice.

- Lele?! I don't believe it! What a surprise, it's been ages!

- the man greeted him warmly - What are you doing

PLACES

here? If the *Osservatore* editorial office bothered you, it means this is something big for sure!

They hugged; it was many years they hadn't seen each other.

- For heaven's sake, you haven't changed a bit! How's that possible?

- Neither have you, Stefano, still in the firing line are you?

The policeman sighed and his face darkened.

 Right, have you seen this? It's horrible...there's no pity any more, sometimes I think we'll all end up like a pack of starving wolves.

The man put a hand on his shoulder and the captain went on – However that may be, the Holy See…excuse me, your editors, never send anyone if the matter isn't of primary importance, so what's going on?

The journalist looked at him steadily with those unforgettable ice-grey eyes.

- You're right. Father Saverio was particularly highly regarded by my superiors and the Curia authorities, a well-deserved admiration that grew over the years as a result of his constant, zealous commitment towards the weak, the needy and social outcasts. That's why we hope his sacrifice won't go unpunished.

Sterpi rubbed his bristly chin with his hand.

- I see...have you got any ideas yet?

His friend did not reply, hesitated a moment, then walked past the officer and headed quickly towards the body, already stiff with *rigor mortis*.

He stroked the priest's bent head with compassion, pa-

ternally brushed the livid cheek and softly whispered some words.

Sterpi watched him in silence.

The officer started suddenly as he saw his friend slip his fingers into Father Saverio's mouth.

He moved forward immediately, just as the man took a kind of large pebble from between the corpse's livid lips.

- What the hell is it? Good heavens, we hadn't no-ticed... -

The officer then threw a sharply rebuking look in the direction of the two subordinates who had examined the crime scene.

Gargiulo swallowed, the other seemed to disappear chameleon-like against the wall of the basilica.

In the meantime, the journalist quickly turned the stone over:

- Can you read it now?

The man was dumbstruck.

– I.N.R.I.

– The assassin wants to let us know that Father Saverio died for what he represented. Another cross then, another martyr.

Sterpi looked away, he felt his anger growing.

– Calm down, Stefano, – his friend reassured him with a steady voice – I think I know where to look. I made some enquiries before coming here, we have excellent sources in Rome.

They scrutinized each other for a moment.

"When did he find the time to make enquiries if the body was only found this morning?" Sterpi asked himself.

PLACES

- Out of curiosity, Lele, do you perhaps keep a pre-obit ready at the *Osservatore Romano* for every active priest over sixty?

The journalist looked at him seriously, then smiled.

- Could be. We don't rest on our laurels you know!

- Come on, how could you have possibly already known about Father Saverio?

His friend came closer.

- A journalist never reveals his sources, - he laughed.

Sighing, the captain shrugged his shoulders.

– In the twenty years I've known you, you've never answered a single one of my questions seriously. Will you give me that satisfaction sooner or later?

- Perhaps. - he answered ironically. - Do you have a car?

- Of course, what do you want to do?

- Search Father Saverio's apartment.

- OK, but I need a warrant, I'll need at least an hour.

- Perfect, so you can take me to the hotel to drop off my bag and perhaps we can get something to eat. What do you say?

Stefano nodded, looking forward to a pleasant break.

- Which hotel, Lele?

- The San Guido, of course.

They reached the historic hotel in less than twenty minutes. The San Guido was Gabriele De Sanctis's hotel of choice whenever he came to Milan. It was a little as if it were his second home. Or third, or fourth...

Stefano couldn't have said how many homes that mysterious journalist had, always on the move, showing up in Milan every now and then. He lit a Winston while his friend got out of the car and – with the window down to let the thick smoke out – stopped for a second to admire that glimpse of the city. He looked at the hotel's façade and noted how the large windows overlooking the teeming street were framed with the same red bricks – *equal and thin, uniformly fired in the best Milanese tradition* – that adorned the façade of Santa Maria del Carmine. Milan evidently still knew how to surprise him.

Gabriele entered the reception hall; it was exactly as he remembered it. An elegant, sophisticated environment with that appreciable touch of familiarity that had always marked its management.

He hadn't even had time for his gaze to linger over the notable canvases on the walls and the valuable antique pieces dotted around, before a polite clerk welcomed him at the desk.

He went up to his room – his usual room, the one with the painting of the Annunciation hanging over bed and the magnificent French walnut veneer desk bought in Paris by the present owners' great-grandfather – set down his bag with all his papers and quickly washed.

Stefano was waiting for him downstairs, probably smoking his umpteenth cigarette.

He went down the stairs two at a time, went by the desk to leave the keys and a white envelope with the concierge, and joined his friend just outside the entrance.

- When are you going to give it up?

- Milan is a city I like to look at through the smoke of a cigarette.

- Poetic. But it won't lengthen your life.

PLACES

- To tell the truth, I'm almost already sick of this life.

- You've still got a lot left, my friend. Rather, let's decide where we're going to eat.

- At the Trattoria della Pesa, it's nearby, we can walk.

The walk was pleasant and quick, and the lunch did not disappoint either of them. Traditional Lombardy cooking in that memorable city eating house – with pictures of old Milan on the walls and its red and white checked tablecloths – was one of the pleasures a nostalgic Milanese like Stefano Sterpi could not do without at least once a month. And seeing that it really was a long time since Lele had been in town, they certainly couldn't deny themselves a "*riso al salto* and a cutlet *alla milanese*"!

At exactly three o'clock the car dropped them off near Santa Maria del Carmine Church.

Father Saverio's apartment was above the sacristy.

Stefano and Lele went in; in the semi-dark room, Teresa Occhipinti, the housekeeper, was crying disconsolately in an old, creaking chair, while a policewoman tried in vain to comfort her.

The journalist stopped a little over the threshold and stood in silence for a moment, half-closing his eyes as bright as pins, almost as if he were feeling the vibrations of those cold, unadorned rooms. Then he tapped Sterpi, who was standing next to him, on the arm.

- Stefano. - he was standing in front of an old, wormeaten cherry dresser - what's in there? - he asked, pointing to the left drawer.

Sterpi went to open it, giving the iron knob a sharp tug, but the drawer was evidently locked.

CRISTINA SOTTOCORNO

So the policeman turned to the housekeeper, who seemed shaken by a fierce, sudden shiver.

- Could you open it please, Madam?

The old woman wavered, in the throes of a great sorrow, then - resignedly, her face stricken with terror - turned the key which she kept in her apron pocket.

And unravelled the mystery.

A profusion of unequivocal documents and photographs met the astounded gaze of the representatives of the police force. The Captain called his two colleagues over.

– Catalogue everything. I don't want you to miss even one, do you understand? Let's not do the same as with the stone, – he concluded quietly.

The journalist gently picked up a Polaroid, put his hand on the old woman's shoulder and showed it to her.

The woman burst into tears again; desperate, maternal weeping.

This is your son, isn't it Teresa? – Gabriele pressed her.
I imagine Father Saverio was trying to help him get out of this dirty business, right? – he continued with an almost paternal tone. – Drugs? Robberies? Teresa, tell us what happened.

The woman was shaken by violent tremors.

- It's not his fault. Paolo has fallen under a bad influence and Father Saverio saw it before I did! – she forced herself, – It's that friend of his, the one they call the *Baptist*! Him, always drunk, violent, always giving people dirty looks. I knew he was dangerous!

- And where is this "friend" now? - Gabriele asked calmly.

PLACES

- He lives in Piazzale Loreto, I'll give you the address. That miserable wretch!

The journalist looked at Sterpi.

– Look there. You'll find your man. – he said, turning to the policeman – He's probably still wearing Father Saverio's cross.

Sterpi watched with amazement the fastest solution to a crime he could have ever imagined. The man before him was not only the most able, sharpest, perceptive journalist he had ever known, but also the dammed luckiest!

And he'd also shown a mysterious sensitivity that had led him to where the *key evidence* was hidden.

He lit a cigarette, still disorientated by the rapid turn of events, then turned round to meet Gabriele's gaze, just in time to see him leave the house silently.

He heard only a few distant words that merged with the light mist drifting through the streets.

When Stefano went to look for Lele at the hotel, he didn't find him of course, he had already gone.

The porter handed him an envelope with his name on. He opened it and inside were just a few words.

> I think I owe you an answer: Necronomicon

It took him a while to understand which question his friend was referring to. Then everything was clear. And then again even more mysterious than before.

There are places in Milan that have been forgotten for centuries. Hidden, mysterious places with stories more than a thousand years old. Irene lit a candle in the soft dark of St. Ambrose's basilica.

Silence reigned.

Suddenly, near the entrance, she spotted the silhouette of a tall, pale man with large grey eyes that shone even in the semi-darkness of the nave. She watched him for a moment, and then lowered her head again. An unexpected rustle made her turn towards the ancient *Serpent's Column*. A fleeting shadow, a sort of light smoke slid by quickly, and Irene thought she saw that slim figure disappear, like magic, right behind the smooth stone. Incredulous, she approached the marble pillar, but it was useless. She heard only a subdued, muffled rustle, a light beat of wings and the scent of flowers filled the whole nave. Irene raised her eyes to the heavens – a white feather settled at her feet, exactly at the edge of that ancient, mysterious border between this world and the next.





SAN GIACOMO HORSES Arluno (Milano)

www.sangiacomohorses.it

6

Distant trots and unencumbered thoughts by Silvana Giro

SAN GIACOMO HORSES

Dear Rita,

I've just come back from Miami, well, actually the suburbs of Miami. No, it wasn't for leisure. It was for a conference on *data-protection*. Main topic: analysis of the difference between EU and USA regulations. It was an endless series of interventions regarding the importance of safeguarding the citizen's privacy. I can't disagree with that, even though I still can't understand why my mailbox is filled with leaflets sent to my name. To my very person. Who gave them my credentials? Considering I usually say NO to any request to disclose my personal references, my name should disappear from lists. You never know. It will always be an unsolved enigma.

My American co-worker was accompanying me: thirty-two years old, attractive, dedicated to her work with the usual *Yankee* hysteria.

SILVANA GIRO

The conference's location was a luxury structure, where it was 40 °C outside and -10 inside the halls, or at least this was my perception. Journeying among handsome, barely-dressed *ladies*, I found my way inside those buildings with my *cashmere*, almost wintery cloak on. They looked at me as if I was insane. My coworker used to tell me "*Don't worruuh!* – in a strong American accent – we are used to Europeans coming to America. They tend to do what you do." I used to go outside sometimes to enjoy the warmth, just like cats do.

The "outside" offered a few fashionable clothing stores and some *lounge bars* where participants would drown their daily weariness in gin or in any other alcoholic drink. Men would stay stationed at the tables with unbuttoned shirts and loose ties, women fastened up in *neon*-coloured, *stretchy dresses*. Laughter was directly proportional to the amount of alcohol consumed. The ladies would have soon gone back to their hotel rooms, their *five-inch heels* in hand.

My co-worker used to rule those South Beach brightly coloured-buildings as *very ancient*. I tried to avoid specifying what *very ancient* meant here.

Basically, we had different habits. Air conditioning brought us close to Northern Pole temperatures and ice was overflowing the glasses: whiskey & soda, vodka & soda, vodka & juice and infinite more variants.

Plus, if you don't own a *business card*, you don't exist. You are what your business card says you are. My coworker forgot to bring hers, causing a general chill in the air and suspicion from her interlocutors. On the second day, she had the main branch send her a hundred cards, and followed each and every one of the people that the previous day had gone without one, proving that she, Kathy, was a true, existing individual.

In short, dear Rita, I disembarked at Malpensa airport and I was told that I had to participate to an event taking place in Rho's Fair, covering for a co-worker that stood them up. You can imagine my joy.

While heading to Milan, my head was spinning with thoughts of that huge injustice.

I didn't feel like coming to this place. The message they left me on the answering machine gave vague directions. *Lost in the middle of nowhere,* this was my thought.

The driver who picked me up at the airport (it's not a promotion: it was simply less expensive) was quite the tough guy. He travelled halfway around the world and, as a second job, sold spare parts for *Mercedes* cars on the *Internet*.

He asked me: «San Giacomo? The one with the horses.»

I said: «Horses?»

«You won't believe it.»

«Look, as tired as I am I won't even be able to see the horses.»

«You be the judge» he turned around and smiled.

I was missing a crazy person, I thought – interrupting the conversation and starting to stare at my phone as

SILVANA GIRO

if to melt it with the sole power of my mind, turning it into a tasty juice.

I looked up for an instant and Mount Rosa appeared in the distance. It stood clear and majestic, with a touch of snow embellishing its profile.

And then I saw them. Actually, I saw one in the distance, then more. The sun was setting already, and I wondered why they weren't in their stables. Then I understood. It was a surreal place, where it looked like the horses in the paddock were conversing as old friends.

The entrance walkway, framed by huge trees on each side, looked like a painting. Behind the bended road you could see the B&B. The warm, strong light of a porch drew to it like a magnet.

On the inside, a woman was moving in a calm manner, lingering on each table to light candles standing in elegant chalices. With no rush, as if to savour scented notes, the result of a refined cologne conceived after years of research.

I looked around. Flowers and wood, bricks and stone. Old tools fallen into disuse randomly there, witnesses of a time that can wait.

The driver brought me back to reality.

«See you soon» he smiled, waiting for an answer.

«Ok» I said, surprising myself too.

He smiled while waving at the owner, and walking down the front path in no apparent rush.

I watched him go away. I wasn't sure why I felt sad.

I reached the elegant womanly figure, smiling at me

from the porch. That look, welcoming but filled with a tad of sadness. Artistic sensibility. She recommended me the "Audrey" room. I remember noticing it on the website: "Antique furniture and Sanderson wallpaper with big magnolia flowers characterize this bright and elegant room, with a view on the garden and on the broodmare's paddock."

A coincidence. Maybe. I was too tired to understand it. The lady walked me to my room. The pierced bricks along the stairway showed a peek of the surrounding countryside. I stopped to catch a glimpse of it, that precious miniature soon turning into memory. Bricks pierced like lace woven with ochre-coloured light.

Once alone, I took a look around. Each corner told its story. A pitcher, a reminder of a trip, a lamp witness of infinite conversations, a mirror, a recollection of meetings.

I took my shoes off. I was already wishing for a shower, when a pleasant warmth suddenly rose through my body, as soon as my feet touched the floor. It was quite the endeavour to part ways from that sensation, but it was late. I had to hurry if I wanted to find a restaurant still open. I wore my robe on my steaming skin, and stepped outside, on the terrace. The sunset was exploding in its orange light. A hellebore flowerbed suddenly painted in pink.

The smell of freshly cut grass was pungent. And the smell of various herbs in their terracotta vases: rosemary, dill, coriander. Wild thyme created a confusion with its fragrances of lemon balm and oregano. Some

SILVANA GIRO

neighing, the only note accompanying the sound of silence.

On the coarse wooden table, a picnic wicker basket left there, as if by mistake. Boiled eggs, Altamura bread, a head of *Radicchio Rosso di Treviso* (exquisite red radicchio from the city of Treviso), half a bottle of Curtefranca red wine, a couple of apples and a few tangerines. I felt as if I had been sleeping forever.

That morning I wore my tracksuit for my usual jogging run before leaving for the fair. I entered the basswoodlined road, with my running shoes and the pedometer on my wrist. Everything was perfect. While I was running I took a look around. The horses were following me with their gaze. A magnolia and a cherry plum tree were so heavy with fruits that it looked like they were about to explode with joy. The gate, the fence, the roofs, the stables. Each detail told its story. I wondered how much passion one had to employ to reach such perfection and how much effort was then needed to maintain it. What matters most is not the destination, but the journey. Who said that? A thought kept coming, throbbing, louder with each step. What is my destination? I slowed down my jog until almost coming to a stop. Back in my room, I went downstairs to have breakfast. The porch was a rainbow of colors and the breakfast a painting.

And here I am, writing to you. The reason why I am doing it right here, right now is because I want to remember every instant. I can't leave this place.

After breakfast the driver will arrive. I called him this

DISTANT TROTS AND UNENCUMBERED THOUGHTS

morning. Yes, I know, what am I doing? I don't have a destination yet, but at least I need to start travelling. I long for a home and for lavender thoughts. Scented, light, floating in the wind. I feel that something's there. As soon as I find out what it is, I'll write to you... maybe still from this place, the one with the horses.

Yours truly, Rossella





HOTEL BELVEDERE Bellagio (Como) www.belvederebellagio.com

An 1

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 eve 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. "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 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 temperature 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". 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.

"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

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.







PALAZZO VITTURI

Venezia

www.palazzovitturi.com

Keep my memory alive (Interview with Veronica Franco) by Maria Rosa Giacon

PALAZZO VITTURI

Interviewer: Madame Franco, tell us about your birth. I've read that you came from the *cittadini originari* of Venice caste, but with the best will in the world, I do not exactly understand what that means...

Franco: Native-born citizens were a class above the common people, their ties with the illustrious city since time immemorial giving them higher social status. Anyway, I was born in Vinegia in 1546 to Francesco, who actually came from there...

I.: Oh, I see now! But tell me about your mother. Was she also a native-born citizen? Was she also a courte-san?

F.: My mother Paola was not of the same class. And yes, she had been a courtesan in her youth. Being such was not considered disreputable in Vinegia, unlike the street whores, who were a completely different case to ours. When I reached adolescence, she initiated me into the same profession in the Santa Maria Formosa

district where I then lived, and under her guidance I practiced the profession for a fee of 2 ducats.

I.: Excuse me, but were not 2 ducats very little for the excellence of your services? Were you not perhaps one of the most beautiful and desirable courtesans in all of Venice?

F.: Vulgarly speaking, yes. But you must remember, dear Sir, that I was neither greedy nor mercenary. Money? I cared nothing for it except for taking proper care of the beauty bestowed on me by Nature. Besides, the many gentlemen, prelates and magistrates, artists and intellectuals who were graced with my favours showered me with such generous gifts that I never needed to raise my price.

I.: In conclusion, unlike the common prostitutes, you were rich...

F.: Without a shadow of doubt! And within a short time I was able to become the owner of the prestigious Palazzo Vitturi, right there, in Campo Santa Maria. I chose it for its jewel-like ancient Byzantine elegance. When the sun shone on it, it sparkled with golden wall decorations! I was enchanted by the four-light window jutting out from the piano nobile, adorned with ceramic phiales and marble tiles. I had always stopped to admire it and fantasize that one day I would be able to look out and, envied by all who saw me, contemplate the fervid comings and goings in the quarter and the view of Church of Santa Maria. And then there was the delightful mezzanine, another jewel, with its discreet three-light window. I used to

think to myself it would be a place to reserve for the most intimate affairs and the very greatest depths of passion.

I.: Vitturi... What a strange name, though!

F.: Strange? You think so? Perhaps because you do not know Latin, in which it means *destined for the victors*. Believe me, the name of the palazzo was one of things that most fascinated me. I was convinced that in making its walls mine, I would have shared its fate and celebrated glorious victories... in the battles of love, of course! Why such a bemused look? Such an expression really does not become you, believe me!

I.: But I'm truly a little at a loss... that fact is, you are one surprise after another!

F.: Come now, my dear Sir! Who did you think you were dealing with? But I pity you and forgive you. I am well aware that my status would be incomprehensible and alien in your material society, where the oldest profession is considered despicable. You should know that the honest courtesans of Vinegia lived in respectable dwellings, and washed daily in scented water with salutary effects, and were much cleaner than gentlewomen who adopted the French fashion for disguising body odours with sickly-smelling perfumes. Their poor husbands! And as far as culture was concerned, we benefited from a refined education, and mine was particularly so, since I was truly a cut above as they say nowadays. I knew Greek, spoke French fluently, and sang in a trained, well-modulated voice, accompanying myself on the lute. I was a connoisseur

of the fine arts, and more than anything else, I loved poetry, as evidenced by the verses I left, among the loveliest of the Italian sixteenth century. Only Gaspara Stampa, the Paduan, could rival Veronica Franco.

I.: It's true, they are beautiful. Was it not you who wrote: «Female beauty was given by Heaven to be the delight of men»? However, wasn't your mother being blasphemous when she called you Veronica? Doesn't this name mean the true icon or image of Christ's face? *F*.: Oh, how badly you've put it! Among the many faults that could be ascribed to my lady mother, blasphemy is certainly not one of them, because the image of our Lord Jesus has nothing to do with it. Yes, Veronica means true icon, but of Love and Beauty.

I.: Isn't it a little reductive though?

F.: You think it is of no significance? Then you haven't understood anything, not even the verses you have just quoted. In my days, Love and Beauty were everything, not only for me, but also for those who received the gift of my favours, you can be sure of that!

I.: Forgive me, Madame. I have only seen Tintoretto's portrait of you, and am unable to form a real idea of your beauty.

F.: Well then, I will make it clear to you with this brief description. I was naturally tall, without the need of any strategems. I never made use of, in fact I detested, those bejewelled chopines that other women, whores, courtesans or virtuous patricians, wore to tower over others or protect themselves from the mud on high water days. My supple gait, like the agile stride of a

greyhound, meant I was able to avoid all the filth in the streets. When I went out in my moiré taffeta dresses, with sparkling silver discs at my neck (since *we* were forbidden to wear pearl necklaces in public), and a thin, silk *zendado*, or veil, pinned to my hair, I was an object of envy and admiration. My golden braids, held at the sides of my head by a double mass of interwoven flowers and silver threads, could be glimpsed through the sheer veil. I never went out with my hair loose, only whores wore it hanging round their faces, with a great quiff, like a man.

I.: Braids on both sides? I don't understand.

F.: Of course not! You don't have anything to compare in your fashions.

I.: Did you always wear your hair up like that?

F.: Not at all, dear Sir! You ask the most extraordinarily naive questions. I also loosened my hair of course, but only when making love. Then a coppery blonde mantle fell below my waist to cloak my nudity. There a little artifice did come into play, and Venetian women had known about it since ancient times – it was called *la bionda*...

I.: La bionda? And what might that have been? A kind of dye?

F.: Yes, a mixture of herbs and egg yolks to spread on the hair and leave to dry in the baking sun on the roof terraces. It was a somewhat uncomfortable procedure to be honest, but it was worth it. The result was that seductive colour you see in all the portraits of Venetian women, including that one of me by Tintoretto.

And you should have seen the effect on my lovers! Admiring me covered in that red-gold mantle, they were overcome with a kind of reverential awe, almost as if they found themselves before the Virgin Mary.... Then I had to persuade them instead that I was Woman, namely a special creature to caress, kiss with inexhaustible hunger and possess with the sweetest words in the world: "Oh, Veronica, my one and only true love!" I aspired so much to hear them say this to me that I wrote

«So sweet and delicious do I become,

when I am in bed with a man

who, I sense, loves and enjoys me,

that the pleasure I bring excels all delight».

All the while knowing deep down that those words were nothing but a splendid lie. But then isn't love as a whole?

I.: Uhm... I'm not really sure if I grasped that last concept. Tell me, what did you do to encourage your lovers to get over that shock? I would have felt it too, I'm sure!

F.: I didn't do that much to tell the truth. It was enough to point my finger at those soft rosebuds on my snowwhite breasts, of that pink that cherries also become as they ripen, *et les jeux étaient faits*. Their overwhelming lust would be unleashed, and I triumphed, as victorious as the name of the noble palazzo where I welcomed them. I remember as if it were yesterday that was how I won over Marco Venier. He had come to my house on the recommendation of his brother Domen-

ico, a patron of the arts and my illustrious benefactor. He had come with a somewhat mocking air, but when he saw me in all my splendour under my cloak of hair, he was transfixed. My usual gesture not being enough to encourage him, I had to come to his aid with loving words, running my fingers again and again through the dark hair which grew thickly above his forehead. It was certainly no problem - the young Venier was so handsome! So much so that he immediately inspired great love in me, one made up of passion, but also of that tenderness that only we women know how to instill in men's hearts. On our second meeting I led him to the mezzanine, where I had arranged a white lacecanopied bed covered with the finest sweet-smelling linen. And there, in those airy rooms, with aquamarine-coloured walls decorated with subtle flower and fruit motifs, I fell hopelessly in love with his slim, muscular body as much as with his fine, noble soul. From the morning to night to dawn the next day, we fed upon each other, touching no other food than our flesh, and drinking only from our kiss-wet mouths. We came to know each other for what we really were - two elect spirits that fate had brought together in spite of overwhelming odds, I a courtesan, and he a patrician, destined for the highest offices of the Most Serene Republic and to wed a virtuous gentlewoman. Not for one moment did I nurture the hope that Veronica Franco could take the place of that young noblewoman. So I held no grudge against him, but just felt a great, bitter pain on the day he came and told me "My splendid, only love of my life, you, the true image of my soul, today is our last encounter. In three months I shall wed" And here he told me a name. I had heard of her, blessed with every quality to keep him tied to her forever - virtue, beauty, a lively mind and of the highest birth. How could I blame him? It was life that required me to step aside, to stay in my class, in my world which, despite all mutual understanding and sharing of soul and senses, was so distant from his. So I never saw him again, except at some public meeting, satisfying my hunger with a glimpse of him from behind the mask that we courtesans were obliged by the Magistrature to wear. And I was deeply wounded the day I saw the signature *M. Venier* beneath a sonnet which began: «Veronica, a verily unique whore»...

I.: What a cheek, that Marco of yours! He should have been ashamed of himself!

F.: No, no, don't interrupt me, dear Sir! It was not my Marco, but his nephew, Maffio, a despicable young man, who by writing insulting verses about me, sought to wreak revenge for my having thrown him out of my house following his violent, vulgar behaviour towards me. Fortunately, the misunderstanding was cleared up, and I was able to preserve my treasured memories intact, the only good thing left to me.

I.: So as far as I understand it, this Marco Venier was the love of your life. Were you able to recover from the cruel blow of his abandonment?

F.: Never, to tell the truth. That love was an open

wound that time could not heal, but only soothe.

I.: Nevertheless, history says that you still knew great success. What can you tell us about your meeting with Henry III? It must have been exciting to be loved by a king! Is it true, though, that they asked you act as a spy?

F.: Indeed, while I was praised almost everywhere for my virtues as a poet, I also experienced an event which, at the age of twenty-eight and at the very height of my beauty, would make me famous in all assemblies. Among the magnificent honours with which our Republic welcomed Henry of Valois...

I.: So it was Henry of Valois? Not Henry III?

F.: Please, my dear Sir, do a little history revision! Your interruptions are most annoying. Give me patience! I have to explain everything the way one does with little children... So, having given up the Polish crown for the French throne, Henry visited Venice, welcomed, as I said, with the greatest honours. And among such honours was I, chosen by the Magistrature. And to answer your second question, these high ranking gentlemen said «Madame, you who are the most honoured courtesan will be treated with the highest favour by our Most Serene State if, quick-witted and discreet as you are, you report to us the secrets that Henry lets slip while in your arms". Naturally, I promised I would. I then made ready to welcome the royal personage to the piano nobile of Palazzo Vitturi, which I had recently had frescoed by Veronese's workshop. In the end, since the palazzo was too much in the public eye, I was persuaded by the same Magistrates to receive the future king in my other residence, in San Giovanni Grisostomo. And so everything took place there. Henry was much too wary to let anything be elicited, and moreover, he behaved like a great gentleman, to the extent that I would have been very reluctant to act as a spy. Fortunately, it was not necessary. The king was gallant, but very much in control of himself. I especially enchanted him with my manners as a woman of the world, «worthy», he declared, «to be received at the court of France! ». We discussed and conversed for the entire duration of our encounter. In short, no spark of passion was ignited, if not in extremis, and that was extinguished velociter... However, he left satisfied, showering me with generous gifts, and I reciprocated with some verses and an enamel miniature of myself.

I.: Ah! So the whole affair should be put into perspective...

F.: Yes, like all earthly things that glitter only to inexpert eyes. Excuse me, but I am a little tired and should like to leave now.

I.: One last question. I beg you, dear lady! It is said that you wanted to leave a conspicuous part of your fortune to found an asylum for fallen women, and many saw this noble gesture as a sign of your repentance.

F.: Yes, as if I had been converted, repented and mended my ways. Oh human heart, how small you are! How much pettiness is yours! No, my intention

sprang only from compassion and a desire to redress the injustice of destiny. My heart bled for those unhappy creatures, prostituted by their mothers from a young age, who had conducted their business in the most wretched dives and alleys, sinking further and further into degradation. But I felt no repentance at all. What should I have repented for? For having shared always and only love? Even as I sold my favours I was directed by nothing but the generous instinct of my nature as a woman. I had worked my magic and performed all the rites our poor flesh affords us on the bodies of my lovers, always giving extreme pleasure. Was that a sin? «No, Veronica, yours was not a sin but a gift from the gods» - was how Marco comforted me, appearing through the mists of the fever that took my life at the age of 45.

Now, farewell, gentle Sir. I pray you, preserve the memory of me, Veronica.

2



HOTEL MAJESTIC TOSCANELLI

Padova

www.toscanelli.com

9

Do you know you're really photogenic? by Franco Zarpellon

HOTEL MAJESTIC TOSCANELLI

I

He met him by chance, as he was coming across one of the four Prato della Valle bridges. A meeting like so many, that happen every day between people who don't know each other.

He, Professor Andrew B., was accompanying his wife on a tour of Padua when, glimpsing St. Anthony's Basilica in the distance, he stopped him to ask him to take their photo. The other, Francesco, had willingly agreed. "There you are, I think it came well," he said in his English perfected by years of practice.

"Yes, thank you, very kind of you," agreed Andrew looking at the camera's liquid crystal screen.

The each had gone his own way.

It had been an anonymous meeting, where the parties feel no need to introduce themselves and don't wonder if that meeting will have a follow-up.

Π

The doubt began to grow in Andrew's mind in the next few minutes, following his wife's words. She had been silent until, at her husband's urging, she confided "Don't you think that man who took our photo was a famous Italian journalist? Yes, you do know him, his name's Francesco R. He also writes about culture for the International Herald Tribune. There was one of his articles in this morning's paper."

The name meant nothing to Andrew, more interested in scientific treatises than articles about culture. How had it stuck in his wife's mind?

It's not difficult to learn to write, he thought, and muttered something under his breath about women. Luckily she did not hear him.

Andrew began to count to himself the numerous statues surrounding the square as his wife continued to regale him with the life and times of the journalist. She seemed to know him very well, almost as if he'd been a childhood friend she'd never lost touch with. The more she spoke, the more cheerful and loquacious she became.

Having finished with the statues, Andrew remained in silence with his thoughts. They were contradictory thoughts. They ranged from wishing he had never stopped that man to wanting to confront him. It can't be that hard to write for a newspaper, he thought, you just have to put a few words together and it's done. You don't have to be a demigod. A few hours later, everything was back to normal. They spent most of the afternoon touring the neighbourhoods of the old town, strolling through the tangle of medieval alleys and arcades. Towards evening, tired and hungry, they went back to the Toscanelli and stopped for dinner in the hotel's bistro.

III

After dinner they went back to their suite on the top floor. They had chosen it because of its all-encompassing view of the city's rooftops, but at that moment they didn't even give it a thought.

She got straight into bed with a pile of magazines and newspapers. Andrew remained alone in the other room.

He arranged the books he had brought with him on the little table, staring without seeing at the image reflected in the mirror on the wall. He was a middle aged man of average height, thin, with a slightly sunken face. His long, untidy hair was completely white, showing signs of an incipient baldness that made his wide forehead even higher. All in all he appeared an ordinary man, but one gazing into space, contemplating the evanescent projection of a formula or following the steps needed to demonstrate a theorem.

He opened one of his books and began to look up some information that would make his arguments more effective next day. The university had organized an international conference to which it had invited the top mathematicians from all over the world, one from each continent. They had chosen him to represent the Americas. It hadn't been a surprise, but it had been difficult to hide his satisfaction.

Each of them would present a new theory, demonstrating its validity with complicated dissertations. At the end of the day, a group of world-renowned professors and scholars would award a prize for the work held to be the most original and of the greatest interest to the scientific community.

He was not nervous, mathematics was the lifeblood that kept his neurons flexible and hyperactive, but he wanted to give it his best, especially now that he had met that damned journalist.

IV

He forced himself not to think about it and to concentrate on his formulas. He had always believed that mathematics was the only rational science able to prove itself and self-generate. The only science where, starting from assumptions recognized as plausible even by laymen, or precisely from their opposites, you could build opposing universes, each with its own implicit rationality, but both without defects or imperfections, or, worse still, a tendency to invade the other's space. At times, you could put these universes together to make a third, and in so doing erase the infinite distance that seemed to separate them. This could continue in a sequence of new constructions and subsequent integrations.

How different to writing. How could his wife be so interested in a journalist? How was it possible to be attracted to someone who can choose to express the same concept with a thousand different nuances without having to justify their choices?

He tried to go back to the formulas, but soon realised that it would be useless. He closed the book and told his wife he was going out to get some air. She made no objection, turned off the light and settled down to sleep.

An hour and a couple of Martinis later, Andrew went back to the hotel. He wasn't used to drinking.

With some difficulty he managed to undress and slide into bed without waking her.

V

The following morning he felt better. He got up and stood at the window, breathing in the essence of the new day that was beginning. In between the spread of rooftops he could spot some of the town's historic churches and buildings. This view strengthened his sense of security about the results of his work. "Come on, get ready" his wife urged, and shortly after they went down for an abundant English breakfast, with the addition of a hot cappuccino.

Before they went out, she smiled at him, kissed him and said, "Today's your day."

They left the hotel and retraced their steps along the alleys of the Ghetto, heading towards the University where the conference was to be held.

Andrew mentally went over the entire procedure and events that had led him to identify his new theory and demonstrate the soundness of its logic.

The more he thought about it, the more he discerned the random nature of discovery, together with the instability of the human brain. He usually imagined neurons as particles balanced on a bridge – one small push and, if they fall in the right direction, a new world is discovered.

He felt that the idea of the bridge he had held for so many years disturbed him, he would have to substitute it with something different.

VI

When they arrived, the prestigious main hall, its walls covered with hundreds of student emblems, was packed with people. The other mathematicians had already taken their places on the stage.

His wife took her place among the guests of honour and the authorities. Having greeted his colleagues, Andrew went to sit in the place reserved for him. A bell rang, a ritual that reminded him of his school days, and the conference coordinator came in from the back of the room.

It didn't take him long to recognize the person as Francesco, the journalist he had met the day before. He came forward, smiling, walking down the central aisle that had been left between the seats in the hall. Everyone began to applaud.

Andrew's hands and forehead started to sweat. It wasn't emotion. Rationally he knew that the applause wasn't for the journalist, but he felt a growing sense of annoyance. The stage would be a prerogative for that man, a man of letters, while he and his mathematician colleagues would get just a part, certainly less than a fifth.

He looked at his wife, who was smiling at him from the front row, giving him the thumbs up and nodding as if to say "Yes, it's him." "So what, Andrew asked himself, what does it matter?"

He though again about his neurons, and how until then, in their state of dynamic balance, they had answered positively to the slightest urging, always finding the right answer. But this wasn't a mathematical theorem.

VII

Francesco reached the stage and shook hands with each of the five mathematicians, one by one. When it

was Andrew's turn, he smiled with what seemed to be a mocking expression.

"Do you know you're really photogenic?" he whispered as he came close.

Andrew was left dumbfounded, not knowing how to answer and wondering what meaning he should attribute to those words. His feeling of discomfort continued to grow, like that of a guest invited to the wrong party. Francesco began his introductory speech.

"Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. I've always wondered how it is possible to interlock the infinite variants of reality in the rigid laws of mathematics. Perhaps these scholars, here to represent the five continents, will be able to explain it to us."

VIII

Francesco continued speaking. Andrew heard that voice like a distant buzzing. He looked around. The audience, his colleagues, his wife, everything began to be confused. She carried on smiling, intent on that man's words. A journalist, a literary man. Suddenly it all seemed clear, he had to do it.

He stood up and left the stage. A last glance at his wife and he bolted towards the emergency exit.

At first, no-one took any notice, not even his wife, intent like everyone else on listening to the journalist.

When they saw him come back in, Andrew had a faint smile on his lips. His right hand, tucked into his pocket,

seemed to be clutching something like a weapon. Everyone stopped talking.

He walked slowly towards his wife, continuing to look her straight in the eyes. In a second the tension dissolved.

"Take some photos for me" he said, handing her the camera.

The buzz started up again in the hall. Andrew walked towards the stage, once more slipping his right hand into his pocket.





Discontration of

X

10

Where the wind carries you by Grazia Gironella

HOTEL SUITE INN

Dawn in Udine. The first rays of sun skim the rooftops and light up the angel on the bell-tower after which my room at the Suite Inn is named. I'm awake earlier than I would normally be, but I already know it's no use trying to go back to sleep.

I lie down on the rug beside the bed and make a sluggish start to my fifteen minutes of morning exercise. Within a few minutes I'm out of breath and with tears in my eyes. I fight them back and swallow hard. What does it matter – or rather, who cares - how much time I spend working out? Marco used to like watching me. He liked many things about me. Now he's interested in other things.

I take a cold shower to rouse myself, but it leaves me with a cold and clammy feel in my stomach that refuses to go away, even when I am dressed. Alice won't get here till mid-afternoon – something's come up, she said on the phone - so I have hours of emptiness stretching ahead. I will use this time to pick up the pieces of my former self, so I will appear the same Vanessa I always was. I don't want people feeling sorry for me.

I don't know why I called Alice a week ago. We had dropped our habit of meeting up as old friends once a year. We are so different now... Alice, with her whole life taken up by work, family and good habits, has always seen me as a sort of superwoman, the symbol of everything that she missed. She has no idea how a lover's faithlessness can bring everything crashing down.

Perhaps I should go out. No, I'll wait for Alice here at the hotel - read something. It will be a long morning.

Alice passed the hotel without noticing it, her mind distracted by a myriad of thoughts, and she had to double back for quite some way. She'd been on the point of refusing Vanessa's invitation and felt slightly guilty about it. When there was just so much going on, with people to contact and things to do, it was hard to sacrifice even an afternoon.

She'd been friends with Vanessa since they were schoolchildren, but as a friendship it had always been shaky. After graduating from college, when each of them had gone their own way, they had invented the autumn ritual to keep the bond alive. After ten years they were both getting increasingly tired of the idea and eventually autumn had passed without a call.

Alice smiled at the memories, not all of them cheerful. Vanessa had always been the prima donna of the situation: self-confident, full of ideas and bursting with energy. She needed a duller backdrop to show off her colours and the choice fell on Alice who was the exact opposite: as shy as Vanessa was exuberant, as withdrawn in appearance and behaviour as the other was flashy. It had not been an easy relationship; yet occasionally Vanessa revealed an unusual side of herself, both tender and vulnerable, and Alice still felt close to her, despite everything. That's why she had accepted this invitation, even though her life was hectic and she had heard nothing from the other woman for the last five years.

As she entered the hotel, Vanessa, who was sitting in the lobby, looked up from the magazine she was reading.

"Alice! I was about to give up on you." She got up to hug her with a typically brusque gesture. "How are you? Nearly forty, but you are looking good."

Alice straightened her hair with her fingers, embarrassed and annoyed with herself for feeling so insecure. "Sorry I'm late – things cropped up." She sat down next to Vanessa and looked around with some surprise. "This place is really cozy. You usually choose hotels that are ..." She hesitated a moment, "pretentious" would not be a good start to the conversation. "But tell me, how was your trip? Did you fly down to Trieste?" Vanessa gave a half smile.

"The plane is so fast, so cold ... I wanted to enjoy the scenery, so I took the train."

"Train, from London? No, hang on a sec; I'm just assuming you still have that flat near Trafalgar Square, but who knows where the wind has carried you." It had always been one of Vanessa's favourite expressions: "I go where the wind carries me". Just to point out that, unlike ordinary mortals, she could enjoy a real taste of freedom.

Alice settled down to listen patiently, putting in the odd comment where appropriate, without losing the thread. She knew from experience that it was not worth trying to elbow in on the conversation.

Vanessa was no longer living in London. She had grown tired of the chaotic lifestyle and found a nice apartment on the Swiss border, in the mountains. After all, working in online commerce meant you could live wherever ...

As the minutes went by in a stream of information, and despite the fact she was only half listening, Alice began to grasp that something was not quite right. Vanessa hiding herself away in a village in the Swiss Alps? Strange, she could have sworn that her friend had always described that kind of landscape as "revolting". She'd chosen to arrive in transport as plebeian as a train? Now she was talking about the need for free time, for peace and tranquility ...

"Vanessa, is something the matter?"

"Why do you ask? Everything's fine. Really."

Alice looked her friend over, carefully. Vanessa had failed to match the colours of her accessories with her clothes - always one of her obsessions - and there were new wrinkles around her mouth that the heavy makeup failed to hide ...

"I don't believe you. What's the problem?"

For a moment it looked as though Vanessa was going to deny the obvious, then she slumped imperceptibly in her chair.

"I've touched down in the normal world" she said, avoiding Alice's eyes. "My feet are now firmly on the ground."

The normal world. Alice bit her lip to keep from snapping at her.

"Has the economic crisis hit your business? It's no surprise, these have been difficult years for everyone."

Vanessa gave a bitter smile. "My business is gone." "But how ...?"

"Oh, it wasn't difficult. All it took was an article in a magazine denouncing one of the ingredients in my cosmetics."

"But you've been on the market for years ... your customers can't have disappeared into thin air!"

"They can indeed. Sales dropped by seventy percent in the first month. You know what's so funny? I knew that ingredient was not exactly healthy, but I said to myself: it won't be any worse than all the other junk that's on the market. How stupid of me!"

Vanessa had always been proud of how successful her online cosmetics business had been. She was a "selfmade woman", as she loved to repeat, and the company she ran with her companion had a huge turnover. "I'm sure that you and Marco will recover. You are far too enterprising to give up. Just a few months from now …"

Vanessa cut her off with a gesture.

"You are way off, Alice. Marco, for all I know, is in Ecuador with the dancer he met at a party. And that completes the picture of my life. No happy ending around the corner, this time."

Alice quietly took in the news. She felt absurdly guilty. For what? Because her own life was not falling to pieces? She looked around for something positive to say or do and met the gaze of the girl at reception, who immediately approached the table.

"Can I get you anything? A hot drink, a slice of cake?" Vanessa gave no sign of having heard. Alice was about to order something for the two of them, when she had a flash of inspiration.

"I saw that you rent bikes" she said, on the spur of the moment." Could we have two ... now?"

"They are free of charge for our guests. I'll have them brought round."

The girl walked away.

"You're crazy," Vanessa muttered wearily. "Do I look in the mood for a bicycle ride?"

"That's why you have to agree. It'll make you feel better."

"But I haven't been on a bike since I was ten. And take a look outside!"

As the sun went down, a fog was settling. It would soon be completely dark, on this damp November evening.

"Vanessa, can you let me decide, just once? I've had to jump through a load of hoops to get here. You owe it to me."

Ten minutes later the two women were cycling towards

the old town, caught in the purple haze of twilight with the city's sounds muffled by the fog. They chose the back roads, making their route longer, but giving Vanessa time to readjust to travel on two wheels. Based on Alice's experience, cycling was a surefire way to calm down and clear your head. She was not sure it would have the same effect on Vanessa under the circumstances, but at least - she hoped – the bike ride would distract her from her darker thoughts.

Vanessa without a man at her side, no job and no money. A worrying situation, and difficult to imagine. There are people who are flexible, ready to bend rather than be broken by what life throws at them, others are less able to adapt to circumstances. As far as she knew, Vanessa was in the second category. She had always claimed to be in complete control of her life; how must she feel now?

They got off their bikes in piazza San Giacomo, in front of Grosmi Caffè.

"Shall we have a drink before going for dinner?"

"Wow – it's been a long time ... I'd forgotten just what it felt like." Vanessa sighed as she dismounted. "No, I don't want dinner. A coffee and a sandwich here will do just fine."

Despite the biting cold, Vanessa chose a table outside, shunning the bright lights inside the bar.

"Are you feeling better?" asked Alice, more in jest than in earnest.

"Not at all, and I'm also tired and sweaty. But I must admit, that was nice."

They sat for a while in silence. Shrouded in fog, the square looked like a poorly lit stage surrounded by halos of dim streetlights and the glow from the bars and shopfronts along the sides. The hushed atmosphere swallowed up the impressions of the afternoon and blurred the edges towards a softer melancholy.

At least Vanessa seemed to have dropped her usual mask. Alice saw it as a good thing. She tried a few questions to break the silence. What's the Swiss village like? A morgue. Have you looked for another job? I'll get round to it soon. Friends? They haven't even bothered to phone.

"I don't want to talk about it" Vanessa said. "In any case, I've had my period of glory. Somehow I have to adapt to normal." Her voice seemed to crack. "What is normal, Alice?"

For a moment Alice thought about getting up and leaving. Vanessa could be really unpleasant, without even realizing it.

"It may seem strange, but not everyone dreams of wild parties, luxury and holidays" she said, in a tone rather shriller than she intended. "That was never what I wanted, for example." She noted the expression of disbelief that passed over Vanessa's face. "I'm serious. At university, I wondered how you managed to live at that pace, always surrounded by people, always at the centre of attention. It must have been gratifying for you, but for me it would have been pure torture."

"I always thought you envied me," Vanessa said softly. "I know. But that was fine, wasn't it? You needed a prop, it made you feel stronger. For me it wasn't a problem."

Vanessa said nothing for quite some time.

"You put up with me all that time. It can't have been easy."

"Why? I was fond of you, we were friends. We *are* friends."

"Even ... like this?"

"Like this too."

As she spoke, Alice realized it was true: she was fond of Vanessa, despite everything. Maybe friendship could also be this stubborn indifference to what you got back from a relationship.

"I asked nothing about you." Vanessa made a face that Alice found amusing. "Did I ever?"

"Rarely" she replied, relieved that the conversation had taken a different direction. She did not like going back over the past. "Well yes, things happen even in my *normal* life. For example I am about to move with Ramon to the Costa Smeralda; we're going to take over a bed & breakfast there. Actually, I was wondering..." She hesitated. No, this was crazy. She should at least discuss it with Ramon... but what the heck, you can't always be reasonable. "How about coming with us to give a hand with the business? We'd need an extrovert, someone accustomed to dealing with the public. Think about it. You have until tomorrow night to decide." Vanessa gasped and then cleared her throat.

"Who is *Ramon*?" she asked in a small voice.

I need something strong. I walk along the streets in the centre of a semi-deserted Udine, taking one turning then another, until a suitable bar emerges from the fog: Coffee Contarena, art nouveau style, old-fashioned elegance with a touch of glamour. They'll know how to prepare a drink here.

I said goodbye to Alice back at the hotel after returning the bikes, and went out again. I needed to think, not about her proposal, which of course I refused - what would I do in Costa Smeralda? – but about what I should do with my life. I can't even imagine the first steps towards a possible future. Part of me is still paralyzed by grief, disappointment. I don't know when, if ever, the old Vanessa will come back: that woman who was full of sparkle and ideas. But today I realized that I can't hang about waiting for her. Perhaps she no longer exists. Who has taken her place?

Sipping my Martini cocktail in the lounge where I'm the only customer, my mind turns, inevitably, to Alice. My drab friend, with her banal life, in recent years has managed to divorce, to fall in love with a Spaniard and to embark on a new life in an unfamiliar area. It would be incredible, if it were not also true. But the strangest thing is that Alice, who revealed the very worst side of our friendship, was also ready to come to my aid.

It's getting late; I'd better go. I pay and then leave, just slightly light-headed after the cocktail. While deciding which direction to take, an intense glow of light in the fog draws me forward. Like a mouse enchanted by the Pied Piper I take a few steps and find myself in front of a porticoed building from which a dim light spills. A plaque reads: Loggia del Lionello. Of course, Alice brought me here once.

WHERE THE WIND CARRIES YOU

It happens in an instant: in the time it takes to decide whether to climb the steps, the fog unravels in large swathes, spreading clear gashes of air, and then fades. I watch in awe as the Loggia emerges from its shell to shine like a gem in the heart of the square, with its arcades and its mullioned windows, surrounded by historic buildings that now, in the crystalline air, shine clear and bright in the city night.

Reluctantly I turn away from this magical setting and I head, unhurried, toward the Suite Inn. I feel as if I had witnessed a miracle. That beauty has always been there, at hand's reach, yet I had never been able to see it.

And if I were to accept Alice's proposal? It would be sheer madness. I've never been good at playing up to customers. I'd end up arguing with Alice, and even with this Ramon, who I don't even know. And I hate the sea.

The piece of paper on which Alice jotted down her new mobile number lies in my pocket. Who knows? The night is long.



PARADOR HOTEL RESIDENCE Cesenatico (Forlì-Cesena)

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Miling - Sparse

TREATING TRAFTING

www.paradorhotel.com

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11

Room 219 by Roberta Minghetti

PARADOR HOTEL RESIDENCE

What does it take to start?

It's enough to close the door behind you, fill up the empty wardrobes, throw a book on the bed, customise the glass in the bathroom by putting your toothbush in it and wash away your name under a hot shower.

A quick look at the times for breakfast.

No memory, no fragrance gently clinging to the heart.

These walls will be the walls of my room for five days.

I let myself fall on the bed: with my eyes closed I imagined millions of footsteps going frantically in and out of the other rooms: people undress, have a bath, get changed, talk on their mobile phone, they go out; there is always a mission to accomplish when you spend some time in a hotel room.

My mission was a very basic one: the agency for which I worked had sent me on a refresher course, all booked, hours fixed. I would only have to sit on one of those chairs with a small tablet arm for a note pad and wait my turn,

ROBERTA MINGHETTI

say my name and tell absolute strangers the reasons for my being in that classroom, trying to be more original than the people who had already introduced themselves. I imagined myself sitting there, filling the pages with ink, with more or less useful marks, while my gaze roamed over the others on the course, the rest of the team! Naturally, because the course was aimed at our becoming a team. For 5 days we would have lunch together, share the same space in front of the coffee machine, would invent a previous life to talk about in the virtual and tight-knit team of strangers, and then there would be the aperitifs and the discussions about the day's lessons. On the last day of the course, the most sensitive member of the team would ask us, his voice broken by emotion, to exchange our email addresses because at that stage we had become perfectly unknown "friends" and it would have been a pity to lose touch with one another.

There was none of my dust beneath the bed in Room 219, none of my books on the bedside table, none of my memories in the wardrobes and none of my salty air came in through the window; it was perfect for filling up with any kind of dream.

This is what key No. 219 opens: the ideal place to draw out a dream.

That night I used little of the mattress: my petite body hardly moved during sleep; the mattress was thankful to me for this.

My mobile phone alarm went off: damn, the course! By now my dream had got free and I found it in front of me, looking at me impatiently. I gently grabbed it by a cor-

ROOM 219

ner and rested it on my lap: "You must have a bit more patience", I thought.

I ordered coffee, bread, butter and cherry jam; nothing starts without a good breakfast: not even the dressing rite; so I enjoyed my food on the mattress, between pillow and blankets.

I turned my laptop on and sorted out a collection of tales that were kept in an old yellow file on the desktop, I uploaded and published them on a website dealing with the printing of books. I ordered 50 of them: delivery scheduled for the following morning.

I went down to the hotel hall and asked the porter for the name of the city's biggest bookshop.

I went out for some shopping and before going back to the hotel I passed by the bookshop for a look: four enormous windows at the front and two smaller ones at the side; a lot of light filtered in and had great fun bouncing between the shiny and opaque book covers, had there been some silence I am sure the brightest laughter in the city would have been heard.

That night my petite body moved all the time; the mattress did not thank me for that.

I had just got out from the shower when I heard a knock at the door: it was a delivery for me. Not knowing how much room a parcel of 50 books would take up, I threw open my door with a flourish. The look on the delivery boy's face reminded me that I was wrapped in a towel that barely covered my front. I pressed my back to the door and asked the delivery boy to leave everything on the bed. Once alone, I unwrapped my books in such a violent passion that I reduced the wrapping to paper petals at the mercy of a hurricane. As soon as I saw the book covers, my hands tried to turn the pages with delicate impatience, flipping through them near my face to smell the dream's perfume.

I loaded the books into a taxi and asked to be taken to the bookshop.

I walked through the entrance dressed in a dark green dress, with legs sheathed in stockings and 5-inch heeled knee-boots. As I headed confidently towards a shop assistant, I was overwhelmed by all the scents and colours of hundreds of books. I staggered, but no one noticed my loss of balance and I managed to carry on. I told the shop assistant I urgently need to talk to the manager.

A smart man asked with exaggerated politeness if he could help me.

"Hello, I'm Violet" I replied urgently. "Yes?"

"I am sure everything is under control but, as you are well aware, I'll have to start the presentation in less than half an hour. Where did you think of placing me? Where can I have my books unloaded?"

Panic. His shifty eyes suddenly stopped in a lost look.

I had to reply before he could get his breath back.

"During the past few days my editor already delivered other copies of the book to you as agreed. In order to save time, I've brought 50 autographed copies with me and thought of offering some before starting, to involve the customers".

The secret is to maintain a high enough tone of voice

ROOM 219

to penetrate the head of the person in front of you and prevent its neurons from connecting; word pace must be fast, he must lack air, breathe with difficulty, and panic.

And he did panic. He did not have my books to put on display and my workspace was not ready. Guilt made him call most of his assistants over to him. While I stared at them setting up an improvised dais, my heart started beating in my chest like a prisoner wanting to escape, my stone-cold hands frozen in an unnatural position. With an almost liquid embarrassment he apologized for not having a microphone due to an oversight.

I smiled. "It is not ideal, but I'll make sure I keep the tone of my voice sufficiently high".

Not knowing how to introduce myself, I was introduced in a vague way by the manager, creating a certain suspense which enabled me to capture the interest of customers in the shop. I introduced myself, described my love for books and talked and talked, light was laughing and thousands of words kept leaping out from the books on the shelves, the kids yelled, people chatted, the tills issued receipts, opening and closing like mouths in search of nourishment. Some were listening. There really was somebody listening to my words; someone even touched my book. It felt as if an unknown hand was gently caressing me. When I finished my speech, the people collected the free copies of the books piled up near me and started moving along. I watched my pages going on their way, each with their new family. I noticed a hand stretching in front of me as if to say hello, it shook my hand and I looked for the arm it was attached to. A guy had a copy of my book in the other hand, the same copy that ended up on my mattress in Room 219 soon after. That night my petite body hardly rested upon the mattress: a much heavier body put the springs' resistance to the test. That night our bodies met with sweet insistence; the mattress understood.

I said goodbye to my unknown guest soon after breakfast and saw him take away that body of which I had seen even the smallest part. I got hold of a notepad and wrote what I would have handed over as courses notes: "Case history: conference to introduce a new author. Communication strategy, method plan and event organization". I dressed and closed the door of Room 219 behind me.

General rule for basic level missions: leave everything to do with people or events connected with the stay behind at the hotel. Only notes relating to the course are allowed in order to go back to real life.

I took my cases to the hall and while I was waiting for the taxi to take me to the railway station, I turned around and saw a woman with a red bag in one hand and a room key in the other. Without realizing it, I had moved close enough to read the number on the key: 219. I approached the woman and whispered with a knowing look: "Let your dream escape".

The taxi left and I with it.





HOTEL CARD INTERNATIONAL Rimini www.hotelcard.it

12

Play the Card by Silvia Seracini

HOTEL CARD INTERNATIONAL

Sooner or later There comes a time in your life To stop and destroy all your past And then start over and destroy it again

- Good evening Mr. Pasini! I'll be with you in five minutes...

– Just the person I was looking for. You'll have to forgive me but I'm not going to be able to meet you today either... I'm here with *Rudy e i rudi del liscio* who are recording their first disc and I...

- Well... when can we get together then?

It's the fifth time that Raul Pasini, the head honcho of *Mazurka Empire*, the biggest chain of ballrooms on the Romagnol Riviera has postponed their appointment.

And although every blessed one of the five times Federico Ferri has left Milan especially to meet him, he can't tell him to take a running jump, simply because he is the best customer of *Acoustic Factory* – the sound-

SILVIA SERACINI

proofing company Ferri was made director of five years ago after working an average of sixteen hours a day for ten years. That made a total of fifteen years of sacrificing his life for what? Oh yes, putting up with Sofia, for example.

– Just a moment, Mr. Pasini... I'm very sorry, I have a call on the other line... Sweetie-pie, I'm speaking to Pasini, can we talk later?

- But honey bun, I've got the plumber here and I have to choose the tiles for the bathroom and...

- Darling, I'll call you later. Speak soon, 'bye now. Mr. Pasini, are you still there?

- Yes. Get a load of this! - and he shoves his mobile into Rudy's voice box so that a blast of ballroom dance music almost makes our poor yuppie swerve.

- Great, yes, but... when can we meet? Is tomorrow O.K.?

- What?

– Mr. Pasini, can we have breakfast together tomorrow morning?

- Yes, yes. Fine. Click.

In the meantime, Federico Ferri has stopped in front of the Card International Hotel, his refuge the last five times he has been stood up thanks to dear Pasini's recent commitments as a record producer.

It's not that he doesn't like driving to Rimini, also because the only time he can listen to his favourite punk band now is when he's in the car. What really annoys him is that he can never enjoy a track right through without being interrupted by Sofia's continuous tel-

PLAY THE CARD

ephone calls and his fruitless attempts to locate the elusive Pasini, with his one hundred kilos dancing in time to a mazurka between thirty or more ballrooms still waiting to be soundproofed.

Just as he was about to go in through the sliding doors, out of the corner of his eye he caught sight of a black leather-swathed bony leg drawing back like a spider's leg into a hurrying taxi.

A pop star who wants to avoid his fans perhaps. And he felt like running away too.

Why do you hurt me Hurt hurt hurt me

So deep ♪♫♫

"Cherry, Cherry, Cherry, it's your party tonight and I won't be there..."

Kurt Hurt held his head in his knotty bass player's hands as if to hang onto the fragments that had survived too many make-up and wig sessions.

Curled up on the back seat of the taxi, he kept wiping his hands with gel detergent and muttering: he had just remembered that he had left his metallic-purple Fender Sid Jazz bass with rusty bolts in place of the machine heads, in the *Maasai* suite at the Card International Hotel.

He couldn't go back. Like the empty mask of a clown, he sagged inside his skin-coloured t-shirt, the pattern of little flesh wounds more than slightly stretched over the beginning of a paunch which was in no way hidden by the leather jacket pierced with a shower of safety pins.

SILVIA SERACINI

'Cause life turned to kill your desires And turned you into a sad clown Such a sad clown in chains Slave to your own life

- Welcome back Mr. Ferri! Just leave me your car-keys, we'll see to parking it. Would you like your usual room? The receptionist smiled affectionately at him, her lips mirroring the curve of the red scarf draped softly around her neck.

– Of course, I'm here more often than I'm at home now-adays.

- We're always happy to welcome you. By the way, how is the move to your new apartment going?

- Absolute madness, don't ask. Don't forget, tomorrow morning...

– Il Sole 24 Ore, Milano Finanza and the *Financial Times*, of course. You'll find your copies outside your room, number 212. Here's your key card.

"What have you become?" he asked his reflection in the lift mirror. "You practically live in hotels. You appreciate the quieter ones more and even always ask for the same room."

Outside the door of room 212 was the latest copy of *Rolling Stone*.

- What on earth... it must be a mistake.

It would have been just like the troublemaker he had become to go and ask the reception for an explanation if an article hadn't caught his eye.

Rolling Stone. New York, June 2011 - "A lot of water has

PLAY THE CARD

flowed under the bridge since the Punk@'s last tour! Fifteen years after their last gig at the Velvet was cancelled following Cherry's unforgettable tragic death in circumstances that are still unclear, bass player Kurt Hurt's legendary band returns to the stage of the Rimini club with a new vocalist, the riotous young Pinky (Hurt's current love-interest, Ed.) and even flaunting a new name - Punk@Pinky. This "restyling" has baffled purists among the fans of the New York punk band - one of the most vehemently outspoken against 90's post-industrial alienation. 'Hurt is in great form and ready to win back his fans,' says Tim Box, the band's longtime manager. 'I'm betting that Pinky's energy and backing by the die-hard Tods twins on guitar and drums won't disappoint anyone,' he adds. 'Play the card', Hurt's latest heart-breaking single revives the ill-fated '96 show that never took place, giving fans who had the heart to wait for it a single date, which promises to be a blaze of high-tech, special effects. Here's hoping the card they'll be playing at the Velvet turns out to be a winning one for Punk@Pinky".

His favourite band! At the *Velvet* in Rimini that very night! So many things have changed during the past fifteen years, and his hero Kurt must be over forty by now.

"He could even have a paunch," he thought, congratulating himself as he checked his tenaciously gymsculpted abs in the mirror.

Fifteen years ago he'd also been one of those left holding an unused ticket for the *Punk*@ concert, and for a while he'd hung on to it – until Sofia had put it among the stuff to be thrown away when they moved to the new house. Not his bass guitar though, even if it was ages since he'd found time to play. He had fought against getting rid of that – and it had been a tooth and nail fight with Sofia.

- Honey bun, why didn't you call me back? I'm, going crazy...

- I've just this minute come up to my room!

- ... I'm going crazy with this dumb tile-layer!

- Don't be like that sweetie-pie!

"What have you become" he repeated, this time to the bathroom mirror, which reflected the magnified dark circles under the eyes of a stranger.

"Weren't you the one who challenged everything, played punk music in youth centres and squats and slept wherever he found a bed? Just fifteen years ago you had a girl who loved you for what you were and you felt the future sliding over your skin like the complimentary 'vegetal shampoo & shower/bath gels' they give you in hotels," he went on.

"Just fifteen years ago you had a fresh-faced girl and wore a long beard. Now you brush on bronzer to even out your sun-lamp tan around your hairline and under your chin to show off to customers who are even more salon-tanned than you. The truth is, you've become a clown. Someone who goes into a place and thinks how to soundproof it making the customer spend as much as possible. You're ridiculous."

Yet even Punk@ had transformed themselves into

PLAY THE CARD

Punk@Pinky. And judging from her photo in the magazine, the band's new member wasn't bad at all. Apart from her shaved head and tattoos, Pinky reminded him of the girlfriend he'd had when his life was a poker hand waiting to be played and he was sure he held the winning cards.

"Looking at you now, with your toned muscles and your flabby morale, one would say you're just a slave to the life you've chosen," the shadow of that yuppie wrapped in a white towel told him.

"Nowadays, if you didn't have your business card to remind you that you're an acoustics engineer who designs the best way to deaden the noise that just fifteen years ago you pumped at full blast out of your Marshall, bought with your first pay-check, you wouldn't even know who you were. All that money ended up doing nothing less than building you a papier-mâché trap that has soundproofed your heart. All that work has eaten away your brain. And that's not to mention ambition. And the need to always be top dog – you kept on changing girl until you settled for the one who was most full of herself, the one that demands dinners in exclusive restaurants and expensive gifts.

- When are you coming back, honey bun? You don't know what it's like having to deal with all this work alone... Honey bun are you listening to me?"

As he answered the phone he gazed dispiritedly out of the French doors at the sign on the Thai restaurant on the other side of the street. A real estate's sign in black on yellow fixed to the railing on the first floor of the building opposite announced "128m² APARTMENT FOR SALE". He thought of the two hundred square metre penthouse with luxury finishes in the Moscova district of Milan, thanks to which he had indebted himself for the rest of his life, and he felt trapped.

"Sure, Sofia is quite something, the kind of girl people turn around to look at when she goes by... could it be because she even wears heels to go to the bog and also gets made up to go to bed?"

There she is calling him again to tell him about the refurbishment work. Those luxury finishes are infinite, they'll never finish.

Punk[@] at the *Velvet*. That very night. As he rubbed the key card between his hands, he realised that the only thing he wanted was to take part in that gig. But then, seeing that the working day had gone up in smoke, he preferred to relax with a toning workout at the "Ego" fitness centre located on the top floor of the hotel.

Why do you hurt me

Hurt hurt hurt me

So deep ♪♫♫

- Tiiim - wailed Pinky gripping the telephone - Kurt has gone...

- Whaat? What do you mean, he's gone? The concert is this evening. And there's one hell of a penalty if you don't show up on stage, they'll have the shirts off our backs.

- Tiiim, he called a taxi...

- Hang on, hang on. Calm down, I'm coming. In the

PLAY THE CARD

meantime call reception and ask them to stop him.

- Tiiim, Kurt's been gone a while. He was feeling ill, he couldn't do it and... Tiiim... how...

- Shut up and call reception straight away. Stop him. I'm on my way.

- Hello, reception? It's Pinky, I'm calling from the *Maasai* suite.

- Good evening, madam, how can I help?

- You have to stop Kurt... Mr. Hurt. Send someone to the airport immediately. It's important. Please...

– Madam, we'll send a car to Fellini aiport right away, but I'm sorry to tell you that Mr. Hurt's flight will have already taken off by now...

- But he only left five minutes ago, he can't have got there yet...

- Excuse me for interrupting you Madam, but the hotel is less than four kilometres from the airport and...

- What's that?

- About two miles.

- Nooo!

She then hung up and took advantage of the impasse to try out the jacuzzi, seeing as that health freak Kurt had forbidden her to contaminate it with her body, using it only and exclusively himself.

But now it's time to play the card Last chance for you to raise the stakes And take back your own life No winner or loser No killer, all victims of this dangerous game

SILVIA SERACINI

Seeing that the fitness centre was being monopolized by two enormous American twins (strange, they reminded him of someone but he couldn't say who), he decided to go back to room 212 to browse through the music magazine.

- Honey bun, we have to talk. Actually, it's too late now.

- Sweetie pie, what are you saying?

- Sweetie pie my foot. There, I've said it.

– That is?

- You're never here and I've cheated on you with the parquet guy.

"I told you; you've sunk too low" commented the usual voice in his ear.

Panic-stricken, he forgot to take the lift and slid his keycard into the first door he came to. However, the door was already open.

In the faint light admitted by the closed curtains and a mist spreading throughout the room, was something that leapt to his eye, delineated by its unmistakable shape. Amid a mountain of leather leggings, leather jackets, leather belts, flimsy lace dresses and t-shirts of every colour, the circular bed framed the legendary metallic-purple Fender Sid Jazz bass with rusty bolts in place of the machine heads. It was said that at each new moon, it was Kurt Hurt himself, the owner of that instrument, a cult object for fans of the genre, who religiously replaced those bolts with other rusty bolts.

Gripped by an instinct he feared he had lost, he picked it up and began to play, almost without realizing that the whole suite, so perfectly soundproofed that he could hear his own heart beat, echoed to the riff of *Dirty Job*, the hit from *Punk*@'s glory days. After all, he knew all of *Punk*@'s pieces, and now they poured relentlessly from his fingers.

- Daaarling, you're back! So we're playing tonight...

Pinky materialized from the steam of the jacuzzi like a Venus – apart from the shaved head and tattoos. Then she widened her big eyes and just managed to cover her nakedness (top part) with a pair of lace leggings and (bottom part) with a plum-coloured wig with a studded crest.

The soundproofing was proof against everything except Pinky's voice, and her screams attracted the attention of the big Tods twins, who ran – more pumped up than ever – in shorts and vests from the nearby fitness centre. And two minutes later, Tim Box also turned up. Great: now the *Maasai* suit seemed to house a complete African village. Ready for a great council of the elders.

Do not hurt me again

No, don't you hurt me again

No, don't you hurt me again Ann

Rolling Stone. New York, July 2011 – "Memorable is the word for *Punk@Pinky*'s gig last June at the Velvet. A unique date – in all senses – for Kurt Hurt's historic band. From behind a colourful mask that let the entirety of his soul transpire (and an incredibly buff yuppie physique, Ed.), he celebrated the end of an era by storming the stage of the Rimini club and making the cords of his Fender Jazz bass vibrate in unison with the

SILVIA SERACINI

rhythm of his heart and that of thousands of fans who had been anxiously waiting for that show for a good fifteen years. And now that even the echo of the last, eternal note has dispersed into the ether of a high-tech, multi-media show, it's time for silence to bring restorative relief to tormented souls. Like an inn for passersby, like a hotel for travellers."





ALBERGO PIETRASANTA Pietrasanta (Lucca) www.albergopietrasanta.com

13

Time's Equilibrium by **Roberta Minghetti**

Albergo Pietrasanta

Prologue

TIME LAPSE

SLOW SHADOWS

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 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.

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, 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 mental 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 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 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 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."





PALAZZO GUISCARDO Pietrasanta (Lucca) www.palazzoguiscardo.it

14

Atlantis outside the box by Andrea Cattaneo

PALAZZO GUISCARDO

It's dinner time in Rome; for Mr. Mu the engineer, three hours time difference were decidedly too much. From his hotel room window, he could admire the sun setting over the feverish comings and goings in Atlantis' three ports; it was a serene image that agreed perfectly with his natural indolence. In the distance – veiled by the ruins of the ancient walls destroyed by the cataclysm – rose the temple of Poseidon, covered with great sheets of orichale.

When the oil had run out, orichale turned out to be the only alternative to a new middle ages, and the only nation to possess that mysterious material was Atlantis.

Of course, a race to corner it had exploded. But while the richer governments did everything they could to ingratiate themselves with Atlantis, Italy sent a single delegate, Mr. Mu, the engineer, with the job of brokering agreements for an exclusive supply of orichale. In exchange, the Italians, who had nothing else to offer, were counting on a presumed common culture which would in some way bind the people of Atlantis to the Italians. In other words, as the English tabloids would put it, "Italy gives us the best joke in history". Mu's job was to tell it; in a word, he was being asked to perform a miracle.

The city of Atlantis wasn't his comfortable office on Via Veneto, but it was pleasant enough in itself, or at least so it seemed to Mu. With its canals and its ruins it was like a combination of Venice and Rome. The taste of the island's architects had stopped with the style we call Hellenistic. Created using these shapes, a capital equipped with every kind of amenity had arisen around the old city. There were grand, colonnaded buildings used as hotels or banks that recalled the temples of the Ancient Greeks. For the people there were groups of low, whitewashed houses with spacious terraces used as hanging gardens.

Plucking up his courage, he left the room. The hotel – a majestic building halfway between an Ionic temple and a Roman domus – would not have looked out of place next to the Artemision. The corridor, studded with mammoth statues and columns at least twenty metres high, was intimidating. Strangely, all the sculptures reminded Mu of the winged Nike of Samotracia.

«That's right, it's her» said a little girl, looking at him as if he were a Martian.

«Do you read people's minds little girl?» asked Mu smiling.

She pointed to the hotel's central courtyard, a sort of

outsize peristyle. «The other foreigners are all there. If you don't hurry they'll have eaten everything and you'll have to go hungry».

Mu stroked her head. «Thank you» he said, and began to hurry towards the buffet. «Just a moment, what's your name child?» Mu asked before he went.

«Antinea, and your's?»

«Vittorio, my name's Vittorio».

The child was right; the other countries' delegations – groups of forty or fifty diplomats – had plundered everything. Only some leftovers remained.

Camille Arouet – the member of parliament leading the French representatives – joined him, chuckling in her usual, irritating way. It was impossible to resist her clear gaze and her self-assured manner; she was one of those people who rarely feel awkward; in a word, the exact opposite of Mr. Mu. For some minutes, the entire German delegation had been swarming clumsily around her, thinking the same thing as all the other male delegates.

«So, you are the Italian envoy, – said Camille – all alone?» Mu wiped his hands on his trousers in an attempt to dry the sweat. «Either your government isn't interested in the orichale, or you're a formidable negotiator. We'll have to keep an eye on you it seems». Then the American delegation swept her away with brazen kisses and rough hugs; it was as if they had come to take back a capricious slave who had run away from their harem. Mu watched them move away with a mixture of relief and disappointment. An inhabitant of Atlantis, a woman with tanned skin and cobalt blue eyes, was serving wine flavoured with honey, drawing it from an enormous terracotta bowl. The scent of the honey and her snow-white linen clothes attracted Mu's attention: he suddenly felt a growing thirst that he could not contain. He approached the girl, asking himself if that sand-coloured hair smelt of sea salt, then she smiled at him and poured him a drink. «Who are you? What's your name? Where have you been all this time?»

«I don't think they understand your language, Casanova, and I believe they have orders not to talk to us – an amused Austrian delegate told him. – You Italians always have this myth of the foreign woman to conquer, don't you?» The Austrian allowed her glass to be filled. «But here we're all foreingers, Vittorio. It's almost obscene, don't you think? Oh, look, the Japanese have arrived, I have to run. Don't forget, be careful what you do».

Giving him a sidelong glance, the girl who was serving the drink walked back into the hotel. Mu followed her with his eyes until she disappeared, then sending the negotiations to the devil, ran after her.

He thought he saw something, a flutter of white linen, behind a winged statue; there was something lugubrious about the deserted, silent corridors of the hotel. All that marble, those mammoth statues and columns seemed to him like the ornaments of a colossal sepulcher. He heard a laugh. It was her, Mu was certain. He began to run until he found himself in a dark, unknown wing. «Vittorio, hurry». Someone called him from the end of the corridor.

He advanced cautiously. «It is you? Where are you? Don't hide, I can't see you».

«Vittorio...» Mu reached a circular atrium crowned by a great cupola which was broken open in several places; in the middle of the atrium was the colossal head of some unknown deity laughing lewdly, its marble tongue unfurled onto the floor. Festoons of ivy and creepers of every kind hung down from the breaches in the cupola. It all gave the place the untamed, sultry air of a tropical jungle.

«Vittorio». The girl was waiting for him, standing on the tip of the marble idol's tongue and wearing only enormous wings attached to her back and a laurel wreath on her tied-back hair. Mu moved forward smiling, unable to understand whether this was a game, a joke or something much more ambiguous.

«Here I am». It was the last thing he said before someone hit him, causing him to slump to the ground unconscious.

He came to, lying on what he recognized as a triclinium, the girl from Atlantis stretched out at his feet and watching him apprehensively. «He's waking up, he's not dead, he's waking up». A commotion of titters and the screeching sound of metal on metal followed.

«Wake up». It was the peremptory command of someone unknown. Mu obeyed immediately.

The Empress of Atlantis, sheathed in elegant bronze armour, scrutinized him intrigued; she too had two

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enormous wings attached to her back. «So you're the Italian».

«Who are you?»

«It's the Empress – whispered the girl at his feet – watch what you say».

The Empress turned suddenly in a flurry of snow-white feathers.

«Follow me». Mu got up with difficulty. They went out onto a terrace from where the outer port and ocean as far as the horizon could be seen. They were in the innermost circle of Atlantis, in the imperial palace, a short way from the great temple of Poseidon. Mu noticed that all those present wore wings on their backs; in Atlantis that was the mark of the elite caste admitted to the presence of the royal family. «The Americans have threatened us, the English tried to buy us, the Japanese tried to copy us, the Germans tried to persuade us to conquer the world with them and the French tried in every way to seduce us. Now it's your turn, Italian, what are you going to do to win us over?»

In his mind, Mu went over the spiel about Rome, Greece and Italian culture. Such embarrassing nonsense that he just couldn't bring himself to say it. «We don't have anything in Italy that could interest you, I'm afraid».

The Empress chuckled in amusement, her grave face softened and for a moment it looked like that that of a young woman weighed down by too great a burden. «You're wrong. Why do you think I had you brought into my presence? Did you know the other delegations have seen only second-class emissaries?» «No», he lied shamelessly. The Empress smiled at that brazen untruth and it was then that Mu realized he had wrought the miracle.

Two days later, Mu waited patiently in the hotel peristyle for the French delegation. Camille saw him too late to be able to avoid him. The two hugged, she had cried for a long time.

«Have you come to poke fun, Vittorio? What on earth are those?», she asked, pointing to the Italian's new wings.





COUNTRY HOUSE VILLA COLLEPERE

Matelica (Macerata) www.villacollepere.com

15

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

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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 mother 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-

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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 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

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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.



MECENATE PALACE HOTEL Roma

www.mecenatepalace.com

16

The first journey by Sabrina Arnò

MECENATE PALACE HOTEL

I've already been here a week, I still haven't got used to the fact that time is important in my life once more, but I still don't remember how long it's been since I was forty. Sitting on the bed I look at my feet, maroon socks on the blue carpet, the room is done in welcoming colours and they should be relaxing, but at night I still shiver before I drop off to sleep.

Looking around on the first day I asked myself if I would stay long enough to get used to the view from the window, to the noise during the night and the smell of the sheets and towels, if I would get used to a place where everything is at my disposal and nothing belongs to me. Now I ask myself if I'll miss it when I leave. They find it hard to believe when I say it's the first time I've stayed in a hotel, and in any case, staying here for a long or a short time won't change things or make me a traveller, especially since from my room I can see the view that I've known since I was born. I've wandered

SABRINA ARNÒ

around the corridors and the various rooms of the hotel, and now I can say where the bathroom is on each floor, and the same for the emergency exits and the terraces. I know where the staff entrance is, and the doors to the restaurant kitchens and the rooms reserved for personnel. I've memerized which number the rooms start from on each floor and I know the names of most of the waitresses, but the first name I learned was that of the concierge. Giovanni the concierge, precisely, certainly thinks I'm a strange one. Probably the fact that I haven't put a foot outside the revolving door in the lobby since I got here has made him somewhat suspicious. Actually I couldn't say exactly what he thinks of me, maybe that I'm a terrorist or a key witness in a Mafia trial or a secret service agent. As I went up to my room after dinner, our eyes met and as usual he greeted me courteously:

"Goodnight, Sir," he wished me with a sly smile that is almost a grimace on his face.

"Goodnight," I replied lowering my eyes and shoving my hands into my pockets in an awkward, almost guilty way, although I'm not guilty of anything at all. Yet his look seems to say "I know you've got a secret", and after all who hasn't got one. Sometimes I'd like to stop and tell him I've never done anything wrong in my life, that the only place I want to visit in this town is his hotel, that this is my journey, but then something stops me and I clamp my lips shut – on the other hand, I'm used to even worse looks when I'm really myself. This evening too I held my breath and went straight ahead to the lift, got in and turned around; our eyes met again, then the doors closed. Darkness. I was safe. When I wake up next day my first thought is "Eighth day. Wednesday." I try to lift my head off the pillow and it seems to be much heavier than the evening before. Perhaps it's too hot in this room, or perhaps not, but I don't intend blaming the half bottle of whiskey I drank in the hotel bar. I stretch my neck, sniff the air, and even though I know it's not possible, I seem to smell the scent of coffee from the first floor and even the noise of cutlery on plates. I sit up in bed – I didn't know such soft mattresses existed.

A little later I go down into the lobby and once more I stop to look at the magnificent sparkling chandeliers. Someone cleans them once a week to keep them looking so splendid. I saw them with my own eyes three days ago; there they were, deferentially cleaning every single pendant of this chandelier suspended above my head, and I can't help thinking about it every time I look at it. Lowering my head and looking down, there's something much softer at my feet – precious Persian rugs with long fringes and intricate, elegant patterns. To tell the truth, I feel a bit bad about walking on them and so every two or three steps I do a little hop so as not to tangle the slender fringes and to avoid the more delicate parts.

"Good morning!" I raise my head with a jerk; of course I knew I would have run into Giovanni as usual, but I'd hoped for a less close encounter.

"Everything all right sir? How is your stay going?"

"Good morning," I answer in what I hope is a convincing tone; I realise that this man intimidates me.

"If you like, I can recommend an excellent place for lunch," he goes on with affected kindness, adding after a pause, "if you intend eating out today. I've noticed that you enjoy the hotel's cuisine very much."

I look him straight in the eyes. He's much taller than me, imposing in his navy blue jacket, and his shirt collar is so small for that massive neck that makes me think of the Minotuar snorting puffs of steam from its nostrils. But it certainly isn't his likeness to an enraged bull that frightens me, it's not because he's tall and big that I'm scared of him. Even knowing that I've never done a bad thing in my life, as I keep repeating to calm myself down, I can't help looking guilty, so guilty that anyone watching me at this moment as I stand here in front of him would have no doubt about the unfolding scene and my guilt. Before answering I pause to look at the shiny gold badge on the lapel of his jacket; written in elegant cursive are his name and surname and underneath, in slightly bigger letters, "concierge". That is why I'm afraid of him. He has that badge, he has his place in the world, written on a gold badge, and I don't have that.

"Indeed," I say, trying to act naturally, "the food here is excellent. One doesn't usually eat so well in hotels unfortunately."

"Thank you for the compliment, Mr. Martini, but excuse me, when you arrived at the hotel you told me this was the first time you had stayed in a hotel. I remember because I was so surprised." Now he's looking at me with an even more suspicious air than usual.

"Yes, it's true," I'm even more tense, and despite my trying to stay calm, my anxiety grows and my hands are sweating, "they're things one hears, aren't they? Now I'm going to get a cup of your excellent coffee. Good-day."

I don't wait for his answer and hurry away before he can continue the conversation.

I cross the lobby at a brisk pace, heading for the breakfast room and finally I sit before my cup of coffee, looking around me and enjoying the normality of my travelling companions. I like to call them that. I like the idea of being one of them. My gaze lingers on a couple to the north of my table – honeymoon? I wouldn't think so, they're chatting too animatedly, I think they're just on holiday. To the north-west a pair of women friends are laughing non-stop. To the north-east there's a working breakfast, ties and suits. After this brief reconnoiter I get up to get some cake from the buffet table.

"Could you give me a slice too, please?" a voice behind me makes me turn round sharply, but I don't see anyone until I look down, and... Oh God! Please, not kids! I don't know how long it's been since I had anything to do with children, it's one of those things I can no longer remember. Perhaps one of them fell asleep in my arms at some time, or played with me, perhaps I knew their smell, but now I couldn't say and I stare at the little girl in front of me, at her tiny hands.

I cut a slice of cake without saying a word while she

turns towards an elegant woman seated at a table, asking for permission. The woman smiles and nods her head. The child looks at me again and I pass her a plate with the cake. I realise my hand still has that shake I'd stopped noticing until now. I make sure she has hold of the plate and hurriedly hide my hand in my pocket. I go back to my table, but suddenly I'm not hungry anymore; I finish my coffee and get up.

I don't know which way to direct my feet, but whichever way it is I'll have to go through the lobby again. Luckily the Minotaur isn't guarding the labyrinth this time, so I collapse onto an enormous black leather sofa, sink into the cushions and raise my head to lose myself again in the crystal spirals of those magnificent chandeliers. I don't know how long I stay so still, lost in that light, perhaps in the meantime I even sleep a little. I think about a lot of things; by now I'm not even used to thinking. I also think about Giovanni. Who knows if in other circumstances I could have even found him likeable? Maybe in a normal life we could have been friends and gone out for a drink together after work. Our wives would have become friends and Sundays would have seen us all together at the match, or we would have taken the children to the park. For the second time that morning a voice grabs my attention and brings me down from the chandelier.

"What are you looking at?" The little girl is next to me again, and for the second time that morning I feel my hands sweating in my pockets.

"The chandelier," I answer, my lips dry.

"Yesterday, when my mother was at the hairdressers, I counted all the pendants. Do you want to know how many there are?" She is sure that I'll say yes. I wonder how old she is, perhaps seven, she looks as if she already knows too much, and if she can count all those pendants... I couldn't, not any more.

"No," I manage to say, "I don't want to know, thank you." I would like to end this conversation, but I don't know how to without making her cry and so attract attention to myself.

"Why not?" she insists, as I start to look around, wondering where her mother is and why she hasn't come to get her yet.

"Because there are a lot of things it's not worth knowing, like how many pendants this chandelier or that one over there has, for example."

"And then?"

"And then there are lots of other things we could do without knowing."

"What?" she gives me a penetrating look and I understand immediately that I cannot get out of answering her. So I continue.

"Such as how many days there are in a week, you can live without knowing that. And their names? Who cares, as far as I'm concerned they could be called anything at all, it wouldn't make any difference, and what does it matter how many seasons there are or what time it is? We can do without knowing that too."

"But how would I know when I have to go to school?" she asks doubtfully.

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"It means you wouldn't go." She bursts out laughing, her laugh so sudden and noisy that it almost makes me jump, and I notice she is losing her milk teeth. It's nice that she's laughing, I think.

"What are the things you do want to know?" she asks me.

"Names. I want to know the names of people and towns and plants, oh, there are lots of things..."

"Do you want to know mine?"

"Yes, I'd like to." I really do want to know.

"Caterina." She smiles. She likes her name it seems.

"Caterina..." I repeat.

"Come. I'll show you something." she takes me by the hand and leads me to a hidden little room off the lobby and then shows me a reproduction of a map in a slim gold frame on the wall.

"This way you can learn the names of all the towns in the world." She smiles again.

I look at that map and slowly read those names written so small, some known, others I have never heard of, and I imagine what it would be like to really go to one of those unknown countries and towns, a real journey.

"Caterina! Caterina!" I had forgotten about the child being there next to me, but now it is another voice saying, or rather shouting, her name.

"Where were you? Do you know how long I've been looking for you?"

It's the same woman I saw at breakfast, but now, so close up, her elegance and determined stride as she comes towards me makes me uncomfortable. I make a clumsy move to stand up and she gives me an apologetic smile; my answering smile is timid and out of place on my face. Then I see her grab the child's hand as she hurriedly says goodbye and leaves.

Alone once more, my gaze returns to the map and I continue reading all those names.

The rest of the day slips by lazily; I wander from one floor to another and at intervals interrupt my tour with lunch, a coffee break, dinner, the usual whiskey.

I don't remember how I got back to my room. I have only a vague idea of the noises absorbed by the carpet and the colour of the walls, and I remember that on my last round, before going to bed exhausted, I took the lift to the top floor and went outside into the cold. The sight of the lights of the town seen from above hit me like a cold wind that made my eyes water and froze my breath. I huddled into my new jacket and stood there with my feet glued to the ground, my eyes opened wide so as not to miss a single light of that night and praying that it could last forever and that the lights would never go out. Once in bed I finally close my eyes and fall asleep imagining to be in one of those towns written on the map in the hall; when I open them it is Thursday, "the last day."

Someone is knocking at the door; I don't know what time it is.

"Coming!" I find myself shouting without realizing it. They've stopped. I wonder who it is, what they want from me and why in such a hurry. I pull on slippers and a shirt and with an unsteady gait go to open the

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door. I should have imagined that the only person in that hotel who could present himself at my door in that way early in the morning would be Giovanni. The surprising thing is that he is not alone but accompanied by two men in uniform, policemen.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, but a regrettable incident has occurred in the hotel and perhaps you are aware of something that could be of help to us." This is Giovanni's brief, smug introduction.

"May we ask you a couple of questions, sir?" the first policeman asks me.

"Yes, of course, but what's happened?" In reality I don't know how to react to this comedy, I ask myself which part I've been given, that of a simple extra or something more? Certainly not that of "the victim" I reckon. Looking at Giovanni's satisfied expression, it could be "the guilty one" – but what is the crime?

"First of all we need some form of identification," now it's the second policeman speaking.

I hand him my identity card which I have in a pocket of my jacket, trying to hide the tremor in my hand.

"Your identity card expired more than ten years ago," he says after a few moments. Now he's looking at me menacingly, and in the same tone asks Giovanni, "How is it possible you didn't notice when you registered this gentleman?"

Giovanni's eyes turn from me to the policeman and he offers an excuse. "...Sometimes our receptionists don't pay attention to these details, we trust our guests..." I'm sorry to see him in trouble, though it is definitely his fault if I'm now in this situation, but I like to think of him as the friend he could have been. I'm fond of this idea and even now I can't let go of it.

"Don't you have some valid identification?"

"Unfortunately I only have this with me..." Now I don't know how to get myself out of this mess. Perhaps I should tell the truth. It could save me even if I still don't actually know what has happened, but while I'm lost in thought, the first policeman begins speaking again.

"I'm sorry sir, but you'll have to come to the station with us while we make some enquiries..."

"A regrettable incident occurred in our hotel last night." Giovanni has recovered his dignity a little and begins speaking again. I turn to look at him, hoping that his explanation will give me the chance of an alibi. "A theft in one of the rooms right here on your floor..."

"We have been advised," the second policeman continues with a professional air, and I turn to look at him again, "that yesterday you spoke to a child both in the breakfast room and in the lobby, and it just happens that the theft occurred in the room occupied by the child and her mother. In addition, some strange behaviour on your part has been noticed during your stay at this hotel..." He leaves the sentence unfinished.

"It's been a week and he hasn't left the hotel since he arrived," it's my friend Giovanni speaking now, and as I look at him I can't help smiling. I'm almost happy that he finally has the chance to say what he has been brooding about for eight days and that he'd like to say

to me every time he sees me. "He wanders from floor to floor, chats with the staff, stays in the bar until late in the evening and yesterday evening he stayed out in the cold on the top floor terrace for a long time, plus he has no luggage. Excuse me, but I'd say this is all strange. Now let's add the fact that he has no valid identity..."

"And so I'm the thief?" I also think it's the most logical conclusion.

"We're not saying that," broke in the first policeman with his best diplomatic tone, "but we need to make a few checks."

"Yes, I understand. The point is that I am not a thief. It's true I don't have anything, but I would never steal from other people, at least nothing that can be stolen from a hotel room."

"Do you want to explain yourself better? As you can understand, we need some clarification..." my friend insists and I can only tell him the truth. That's what you do with friends I've been told.

"I have no luggage because I don't own anything – I mean nothing at all except the suit I'm wearing and the overcoat in the wardrobe. I haven't gone out of the hotel all week because I'm not interested in doing so. I'm not here to look around the town. I live in this town and believe me, I know it better than you. I've had no family for I don't know how long. Sometimes I don't remember if I ever had one or if I just imagine it when I have too much to drink. I don't have a house and I'm here..." I try to go on but see my audience looking increasingly perplexed, their eyes widen, and the lines of their mouths stretched into an expression of amazement. Giovanni sways gently, shifting the weight of his body from one leg to the other, and once again he cannot hold back.

"Excuse me, but are you saying that you are a..." but something stops him from going on, so I decide to give him a hand, finishing for him.

"A tramp or homeless. Yes, that would more or less be it. You can say it without qualms, I'm not ashamed of it – or at least not for the same reasons you would be ashamed, I imagine, and if you're asking what a tramp is doing in your hotel. The answer is I'm on a journey." Silence surrounds me, their eyes keep looking at me but I don't know if they need further explanation, it would be more than enough for me, but evidently not for them, certainly not for Giovanni:

"How were you thinking of paying for your stay at this point? It's a good thing I called the police, I don't understand what you were intending to do..."

"I had no intention of doing anything more than I have done," I defend myself. "I've had some luck for once in my life, that's my only fault. They sometimes give us lottery cards at the soup-kitchen and I played like I always do, but this time I won. I didn't believe it myself. I've never won anything, not even when I was a boy. I mean, I didn't win a lot, not enough to change my life, but it was still a lot for me, and I wanted to spend it like this, on a suit and a trip, a sort of trip. I wanted to know what it felt like to travel. I couldn't afford a real trip so I said to myself, why not try to be a real gentleman for

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once? A nice hotel where I could sleep comfortably for a week, eat and drink well and not be cold. I bought myself a holiday like everyone else, a normal life, and I haven't stolen anything."

Now I've finished speaking I feel really tired. I don't know where I got the energy for such a long speech, and perhaps it was convincing or because they don't want any bother, but in the end the police decide that the affair "is not their business", and they leave me alone with Giovanni. He looks at me for a long moment, then murmurs out of the side of his mouth as he leaves the room that he'll be waiting for me downstairs for payment, but the look he gives me is different now, no longer suspicious or aggressive, but incredulous as if he had an unknown species of animal before him.

I pick up my jacket and overcoat and slowly follow the usual route towards the chandelier and the soft Persian carpets. Giovanni is there, waiting for me. I don't think he's said anything to the rest of the staff because noone looks at me oddly or curiously, they greet me with a cordial smile as usual. Giovanni is strangely quiet; he hands me a receipt and I pay the bill to the kind, blonde girl standing next to him. I have the impression that I've paid less than I should have, but I'm not sure. I wouldn't be surprised if my friend had given me a discount, after all he could have handled things differently. Who knows if he had also thought that in another life we might have watched a game together. I salute him with a nod of my head and he does the same. As I walk towards the revolving door I look up at the sparkling chandelier once more; how many pendants had Caterina counted?

Outside it's cold, I can see it from the colour of the sky, from the passers-by who huddle into their coats, and the wind that's making hats and leaves fly. I place my hand on the glass door but stand still, I make no move forward. I see a man with a briefcase and an umbrella crossing the road and coming towards the entrance; he looks at me distractedly for a moment and then puts his hand on the handle of the revolving door and in a waltzing turn, he is inside and I am out.

I look from one side of the pavement to the other, deciding which way to go. Home again.



HOTEL CELIO

Roma www.hotelcelio.com

In a

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It could work by Massimo Sogni

HOTEL CELIO

Andrea was waiting in her room one floor below. Andrea, an odd name for a woman. If her parents had at least been French. Andrea, my Andrea. The woman who was worth risking everything for.

Moving back the curtain C caught a glimpse of a worried reflection in the glass. Tori Amos' "Concertina" played softly in the background on the MP3 player plugged into the room's sound system. Down below, the line of cars began to thin out, like a python that has begun to digest its prey.

"That's enough. You've got to choose between me and your family. This love in installments isn't for me."

Andrea had been clear.

Was it worth risking everything? To throw almost ten years of marriage and two children to the wind for what had started as a whim, a moment of madness during one of those frequent business trips the previous autumn?

MASSIMO SOGNI

C's thoughts were interrupted by a light knock on the door.

"Yes?"

"The whiskey you ordered."

Yes. It was just what was needed. C calmly opened the door and a middle-aged waiter came in pushing a cart bearing a bottle of Irish whiskey, a heavy-bottomed glass and an elegant crystal dish full of ice-cubes. C hated ice in whiskey, but understood the Americans' need to kill the awful taste of their bourbon by drowning it in cold.

"Thank you..." C said, pulling out a ten euro note and handing it to the man.

He took it with a courteous thank you. After a moment's hesitation, he added:

"If I may be allowed..."

"Yes?"

"Miss Andrea, I don't remember her surname, the one in room 514, seemed very nervy and impatient..."

"Excuse me?"

"Oh, you don't have to pretend with me. It's not the first time that you've been to this hotel and I'm not a beardless boy. And I've seen who pays the bills for both of you. Take my advice, leave the whiskey and don't keep her waiting any longer."

John Lennon began to sing "Working Class Hero".

C quickly slipped him a hundred euro.

"Oh, no thank you. I'm not a blackmailer. Take my advice. Don't keep her waiting. Have a good evening..." and he closed the door behind him with a slightly smug smile.

C knocked back two glasses, staring at the lights turning

on and off in the buildings opposite, at times frenetic, at times still, telling stories that would never be known. "Is our love so obvious that I'm the only one who denies it? Or is it just the frenzy of two bodies. Gasps, orgasms, fluids exchanged. All fleeting, like the flame of a candle..." "We can work it out" sang the Beatles.

C took a deep breath, looked at the city once more, and placing the almost-empty glass on the table with a certain violence quickly left the room.

Walking along the corridor, indifferent to the people encountered, C ignored their curious stares at such frenzy, not deigning to answer their polite greetings.

C hesitated for a moment at her door and then knocked hard.

The door opened and there stood a fragile, weary creature. Her mascara had run, proof that she had been crying. Her hair was blacker than ever if that were possible. "Oh, it's you..." she said, as if the instant it had taken her to open the door hadn't shown how long and anxious the wait had been.

"As you see."

"You've been drinking. Your breath smells!"

"I known. I'm sorry."

"So, have you made up your mind?"

"Yes."

As C caressed Andrea's face, their lips met.

The door closed behind them and when C felt the tension ebb out of Andrea, began to run exploring hands over the most interesting places.

They were a single soul. They went on for a long time,

MASSIMO SOGNI

like adolescents who after overcoming the first embarrassment had become aware of their own potential, until their satisfied, exhausted bodies collapsed, their arms around each other.

When Andrea awoke, she was alone in the room. On the bedside table were a white rose and a note.

"I told you I had made up my mind and I wasn't lying to you. I would never do that.

I've chosen what I understand. The tradition of the family instead of the passion of a lover.

When you read this I'll already be on my way. Don't try to contact me: this morning I cancelled my email address and soon I'll have thrown away my mobile SIM card.

Of course, you could trace me through my company, but I beg you not to. Let's part with the memory of the most wonderful night since that first chance encounter. Don't try to find me. We'll only hurt each other. You would hurt me, my children, my husband.

With affection,

Carla"

She heard nothing more about Andrea. At least not until the police came to ask her about a young woman who had thrown herself from the fifth floor of one of the capital's hotels.

But that is another story.





MASSERIA SUSAFA Polizzi Generosa (Palermo)

www.masseriasusafa.com

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Su Sa Fa by Daniela Cicchetta

MASSERIA SUSAFA

If you're about to immerse yourself into the lines of this tale, it isn't by chance, since you're probably one of the Masseria's guests or, perhaps, you're reading it on our website to understand if this reality may be of your liking.

If you want to, let yourself be virtually taken by the arm and walk with me and let me help you discover this brand new world called SUSAFA.

It has been a few years, but I can still happily recall that warm spring morning, when I ventured in the farmhouse to follow the reforestation works of the lot called "A Valata", it's hard to explain which kind of morning it was if you've never breathed in Sicily, and especially this zone. The Countryside, by a lucky combination of climactic events, released colors that remain indelible in the mind and the scenery turned itself into a painting of which you wanted to focus every tiny detail. In those moments, you wanted to grab the chair, as my great grandfather Manfredo used to do, to sit and contemplate the countryside that has its own voice and that can talk to you.

I was particularly lucky that day and, during my walk, I met a special storyteller: Benedetto, a man who bled Susafa's history, it was marked in his wrinkles and it rushed through his veins, for he was born at the Masseria. He had seen that light in the *vignere*'s (in Sicilian, someone who's responsible for the vines) tiny square house, located next to the fava bean cultures.

On the day of his birth, the mother, which was eight months pregnant, was woken up by strong stomach and kidney pains; unaware and unprepared for what was about to happen, she started walking towards the master's housings but, when the pains became unbearable, she felt the need to make a stop midway to ask the *vignere* for help and to rest at his house. At that point all the women ran to inform Donna Graziella La Lomia, the "Baronessa" – also my great grandmother – who was immediately on her feet and ready to mobilize all of the house servants.

"Mother Mary, help us!" she shouted as soon as she received the news, while calling out for all the women who could have helped her in that exceptional adventure. She then sent for the midwife but, while they waited for her, she ran towards the *vignere*'s house with multiple changes of underwear, many towels and the determination of a person who doesn't give up when confronted with an unforeseen hitch. She

had then crossed the fields with her skirt pulled up to her ankles and the lace boots in mid air, impatient to get there. She was then greeted by the village elder and by the screams of the woman who, at that point, couldn't contain the labour pains anymore; she came up to her, smiling warmly and wiping the sweat off her face, then urged her to breath slower and to regain control.

"Donna Maria, you need to stay calm, this is the Lord's miracle and we are all here to help you!"; the pregnant woman nodded, holding her breath in the midst of a stronger contraction. She was sitting on a straw mattress and Donna Graziella ordered for her to be transferred on the bed. When she stood up, her water broke and the pains suddenly became unbearable.

"Angelina, run to boil some water and make sure you use all the pots that you can find, we'll need them! Carmela, help me, we need to lay her down... well? What is it? Stop looking at me like that, hurry up! It won't be long before she delivers! Someone call for her husband, fast!"

In the meantime Donna Maria was looking at her with gratitude, she wasn't feeling alone anymore, but she was still scared since her man was in the fields and this child who wanted to come earlier than expected had caught her off guard.

"There was one more month left..." she had said, faintly, her eyes filling with tears.

"He's coming now because it's time, don't worry, everything is under control" replied Donna Graziella,

avoiding all formalities now, to shorten the emotional distance between them.

In the meantime the room looked like a busy ants nest, women running back and forth rushing and bumping into each other, pots of boiling water being constantly brought, a multitude of linens and towels stacked at the feet of the bed. The air was starting to get warmer, the women were freeing their heads from the *foulard*, rolling up the sleeves of their shirts to make themselves useful, while the pregnant woman kept yelling at an ever increasing rate, the contractions less further apart, more constant and stronger.

"I can't do it... I can't!" she yelled suddenly, her face disfigured from all the pain.

"Stay calm, it's exactly when you think you can't do it anymore that your child will be born!"

"Donna Graziella, the midwife is here!" my great grandmother heard.

"Good morning, Baronessa, I see you're already pretty far along" the *cummari*¹ said, without any sort of greeting, while lifting the pregnant woman's cotton underskirt, now soaked in blood, and checking the situation. They smiled at each other complicitly, with a worried look, but without letting any concern be apparent. The midwife looked around, focusing on the swarming of busy women.

"All of those who aren't mothers yet, out. Go handle the dirty rags, and shut the door!"

[1] Typical Sicilian word which means godmother or maid of honor.

There were four left, beside the woman in labour: her mother, the midwife, Donna Graziella and Rosina, the elder who that very morning had realized what was happening and had warned the Baronessa.

Outside the house, the air was getting heavier: the husband had arrived, panting, the face red, the hands still dirty from working the soil and the forehead dripping in sweat from the sudden run. The women had sat him down, forbidding him to cross the threshold. They were serving him some fresh water when he suddenly turned pale in hearing his wife's screams. Then, for what seemed like an eternity, silence filled the house. Nothing was coming from the bedroom anymore: not one noise, not a scream, not a movement whatsoever. No one had spoken a single word, the tension had gone through the roof and the wait had become unending. Suddenly, the door opened and Donna Graziella brightened the whole room with a contagious smile: "It's a boy!" She yelled, facing the new dad, who broke

down and started crying, followed by Benedetto, the new born, just entering into the world.

I knew this tale from our family stories, it was passed down and filled with abundant details and lots of love. Since Benedetto was sort of the Masseria's mascot; I was rehashing it in my head while that man was walking fast towards me, his hand out for me to grab. When I was younger, I had seen him only a few times, but meeting him that day was almost magical; after greeting him and conversing cordially for a while, asking about his loved ones and whatnot, we started walking towards the center of the Masseria. We stopped at the reception to inform Giovanna we were going to sit outdoors, on the straw chairs around the big marble table, just outside the room with the oven, and asked her to send someone to take our order. The big walls surrounded us like an embrace, allowing us to see just the valley in front of us and to feel a breeze of tepid spring air; we took advantage of it and decided to bask in the sunlight, while listening to the sparrows that nest on the roofs, whose chirping becomes almost deafening later in the morning. Maria Grazia looked out the café's window and, in seeing us, started to walk towards us to ask us if we wanted anything to drink. And so, warmed up by a good glass of red wine, we started to recall, rewinding the threads of his life and those of my family.

"Your grandfather Manfredi, "the Saeli *commendatore*" used to always sit on one of these old chairs, although not here. He would sit at the center of his *baglio* and look around, proud of what he had managed to do in his life and of the rewards that came from it".

I nodded, confirming I was aware of it, but also to encourage him to continue, and Benedetto, of course, didn't need to hear it twice.

"You know, it was he who told me how this all started, thanks to your great-great grandfather Gioacchino. I still remember that day, when I approached him with fear; I couldn't have been more than ten years old at the time, the sun was setting and Manfredo was sitting

sideways on the chair I mentioned earlier; he had his arm on the back of the chair and stood right as an arrow, so elegant in his white linen shirt, with a look that could seem harsh only to those who didn't know him. "Come here, picciriddu! he said. I was little then, however I understood and was fascinated by his stories, that he told with teary eyes and a voice filled with the kind of pride that belongs only to those who have spent their whole lives working towards a goal they really believe in. He was the one who told me how his father Gioacchino bought the Masseria in 1870, when it was nothing but a 3000 acres feud, which had just been confiscated from the Christian Church, and merely consisting of a warehouse and an animal shelter. Those years were tough, he used to tell me, since only a few people worked in Susafa, with the exception of the families that lived at the "Old Houses". In order to live there people had to fortify the whole structure. Do you see those cracks? Well, those were used to protect from the brigands. He wouldn't miss a chance to remind me of all the times they were saved from their attacks. He would embellish each story, telling them in such a skillful way that it felt like I was experiencing them, and I was so scared. Every now and then he would mock me too... run Benedetto, run... here come the bandits!"

Yes, I thought, they told those stories to me too. It all started at the time of the Unification of Italy. In the beginning those bandits were a few groups of people opposing the Italian government, the oppressor, but then the phenomenon took on an entirely different meaning,

DANIELA CICCHETTA

an unlawful one, becoming an actual social plague the common people had to deal with, and defend themselves from. Susafa surely wasn't spared and back then, at sunset, they would seal all the main doors, so that nobody could come in or out until the following morning.

"Your great grandfather Manfredo was a special person, you have no idea of how many things he taught me! What wonderful memories! During the almonds harvest, at the end of summer, there was always a huge celebration. We used to go to the "Ciaramito", a place called that way because there were lots of ciaramiti, pieces of terracotta tiles, and an old furnace as well. That area was located at the feet of *d'o vaddune grande* (the big valley), at a considerable distance from the center of the Masseria. You needed to cross the hill to get there and, since the mountains gloomed over it, it was the sort of place where the sun set earlier than usual, and the shadows started to grow longer after 5 p.m. Basically, everyone went there, everyone! Men, women, the elderly and children as well. They used to give us long cane sticks, and told us to beat on the branches as strong as we could. Of course, as you can imagine, us kids turned those sticks into swords very quickly, starting to battle with each other, but we'd be called to order rapidly and actually start helping the adults, beating on the almonds still encased in their husk. We would place nets made of intertwined jute underneath the workspace and, whenever we'd fill one up, we would then roll it up and load it on the mule's iron saddle.

When we had gathered and loaded enough almonds, they'd attach the mules together to form a huge animal convoy, quite difficult to move around and therefore only the most expert men of all had the responsibility of driving it. My father had been chosen to do so at that time, and I remember I was so proud of him. Try to imagine more than twenty animals tied together, each with its net filled up and loaded on its back. They were transporting hundreds of kilos of almonds to the houses. What a show! Then the real party would begin. The women used a wooden log between their legs as a surface to beat the almonds open, forcefully, to free them from their still green husk. It sure was incredible to see how they could pick the right ones from the start. Imagine that those women took only one look at the shell and could tell apart the softer almonds (li mennuli muddisi) from the harder ones, ready to be dried out (li mennuli duri)! Then the older women would grab the soft ones, some wine and bread seasoned with tomato, oil and oregano, and they'd put together a snack. And then we would dance, you have no idea for how long! We would improvise dances at the sound of the accordion, and all that work would become something pleasant to take with us, forever".

I remember being part of something similar, back when I was a young boy. When school was over, during the summer, we would come to Susafa for the holidays; perhaps my experience had been a bit less captivating than Benedetto's, judging from the emphasis he adorned each narration with. Anyway both me and my brothers always had a ton of fun, so I could understand the kind of enthusiasm that brought into his eyes that childlike wonder and spark.

In an almost nostalgic movement, I stood up from the big table, and asked for some slices of real, homemade bread, leavened with natural yeast; I decided to season it with a bit of oil and to accompany it with some glasses of red wine. I came out with a tray filled with delicacies, carrying the unmistakable scent of the countryside, so typical of our land. Benedetto looked at me with curiosity, fixed his *coppola* (typical Sicilian cap) and broke the bread in half, then bit it, greasing his hands and his chin with a precious memory, an indelible one also for the taste buds.

"I should go" he told me "but I don't want to, today is a very unusual day, I'm glad I ran into you..."

"Why won't you stay for lunch then, we can eat something together and chat some more, uh?"

The answer to my question could be read in his expression. After calling his wife to warn her he wouldn't be home for lunch, we both started walking towards the restaurant like old friends.

Since you are reading this story, it is not only Benedetto and I who are about to enter the restaurant, but you too, dearest guest of Susafa. But still, only the two of us in the story will be able to see what was here before the transformation: before this warm, cozy environment was fitted with Sicilian *cotto* floors, masterfully renovated pointed arches and a big fireplace at the back

of the hall. Only two of us will be able to see the Old Granary.

Imagine being able to make everything disappear, the linen cloths, the dishes and the silverware, the big *balloons* used to contain the wine, the lamps and the candles that give the room that characteristic, smooth, dim atmosphere. Become a child again and take those steps with me, towards the top of a tall ladder, holding on to the rungs, and then fall into fine grains of wheat, into a golden pool in which you can sink halfway through your body, so much so that you will have to roll around to be able to free your legs.

The granary is the most suggestive building of the Masseria; it was a grand three hundred meters long warehouse which housed various kinds of grains. The whole space was internally coated with tar at least two meters high, in order to protect the room from humidity, and had a steep slope tending towards the center to facilitate the emptying operations of the warehouse. Its extraordinary peculiarity resided in the arches that could sustain the whole ceiling, instead of the wooden trusses they would usually build in those times. The warehouse used to be filled by hand, pitchfork after pitchfork, until the grain would touch the tip of the arches, although us kids mainly used it as some sort of pool, jumping freely and carelessly into it.

"You've surely made it quite comfortable..." said Benedetto, preceding me, as I let him go first. The big fireplace was crackling happily, sucking the life force of each and every log, and the scent of mixed bean soup was floating in mid air, although in his eyes I could still see the old scenes:

"During the days of the harvest, the hours were marked only by those intense aromas, and by the sound of that *singsongy* dialect, brightening up the work in the field. You could hear men shouting orders to the cattle coming in and out of the *baglio*, while pulling carts filled with the harvested goods; I still remember those two huge, black and unbelievably strong oxen... Life flew by so simple, but filled with meaning, you know? The women baked the bread, then they distributed it to the men leaving for the fields. That bread was accompanied only by a bit of sauce and had to last them for the whole day. And days, they used to start so early...when the morning light was so different and the colors, the smells and the sounds were just... wonderful!"

I looked at him, fascinated; he was expressing the sensations I had always felt when leaving for a stroll right after dawn, when the light is still slightly white and the grass silvery from the morning dew that hasn't died off yet under the first rays of sun. The only sounds you can hear come from the old cowbells in the distance and their mooing, followed by the shepherd's shouts as they gather the cattle to milk it and push it to pasture. Then, there's the sun, the kind of sun that follows you the whole day, hour after hour, gifting you with the magic of a thousand different chromatic hues, so much

so that you actually believe you're in a different place every time. It's poetry for the soul.

We toasted to the new and old Susafa and ordered vegetables and fried fruit, a platter of Sicilian cheese, hazelnut risotto, grapes and Gorgonzola and, as dessert, fried bread dough with local jams.

At the end of the meal, I asked him if he wanted to visit the kitchen, which once was the stables for horses and mules, and his response seemed enthusiastic.

The building was narrow but deep and had wooden ceilings; the animals would have stayed on the right and a long trough would have run along the entire building. As soon as he came inside he waved to the Chef and the staff, the support brigade, while barely masking a laugh.

"What's happening, Benedetto?"

"Oh, nothing, just memories surfacing... there, in the back, on a mezzanine, was Serafino's accommodation. You could get up there with a tiny ladder, and there was a window overlooking the whole stable; through it, he could keep an eye on all the animals. The apartment was quite sober, with the bare essentials: a bed, a couple of wobbly wooden chairs with the seats made of straw, like the ones you used for the restaurant; a table where he would sometimes eat a meal, and a small closet. On a coat rack fixed on the wall there were mantles and, underneath it, a stool where he used to put his muddy boots. What a peculiar guy Serafino was! My father used to leave me with him quite often when I was younger! I was little and when dad, on Thurs-

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days, went downtown - on his caravan towed by the mules, to deliver the fava beans he had sold - he took me to that man who spoke very few words. He was so mysterious... It looked like he understood mules better than he did men, but he still laughed for everything that happened to me! I once accompanied him to the vegetable garden to grab some water for the Main House: that was his task here at the Masseria. He used to walk fast, I remember following him a few steps behind. He wore pants too wide - also, he was extremely thin - and a mat, woolen jacket the whole year, even during the hottest days. I remember trying to walk stepping on his shadow, always taking too long and uncoordinated steps though. He used to put his hand on the back of the first mule of the bunch, while checking that the terra-cotta jugs filled with water were hanging up right; he sometimes turned around to ask me if I was tired. I always said no, even though I had to respond by shaking my head, since the voice surely wasn't going to come out, as tired as I was from going uphill.

The dirt road was hard to walk; you needed to pay attention when stepping on anything, but I couldn't keep my gaze as low as needed, since I was particularly fascinated by the scenery: on my left I could see an enclosed grove of almond and ash trees, overlooked by the mountain covered in the typical Mediterranean scrub, the very one your grandfather Gino would have later turned into a natural reserve. Then, if I moved the gaze to my right, I could see this tiny hill with a vine-

yard slowly descending into the valley. Every time we passed through that place, he would point at the *vignere*'s wooden house, located right at the center of that piece of land, and say:

"There! On that morning, that's where you were born. We all still remember it, *picciriddu* (Sicilian dialect, meaning little one)!"

And that house... it still moves me. It was covered in Sicilian round roof tiles, it looked like some kind of turret, so marvelous! It was right in the middle of those tree lines that you couldn't count and that would stretch out indefinitely.

Basically, going back to that day, I remember that Serafino had a rifle strapped on him and, considering his passion for hunting sparrows, as he saw one he would stop and shoot; I would plug my ears with my hands, then he would send me to pick it up and to put it in the leather bag carried by the first mule.

"Picciriddu, you have no idea how tasty they are with hot sauce!"

"Yes, yes!", I would answer but, as soon as he turned away, I would sneer in disgust at the mere thought of it. He managed to catch five of them during that brief stretch of road. He was a good shot.

After a while we finally arrived to the vegetable garden and we met Calogero, the *vignere*, who approached and welcomed us.

"Serafino, aren't you tiring poor Benedetto too much?" "Don't worry, I'm having fun" I answered, still panting, my face red. "Come here, *picciriddu*, eat some of these tomatoes. I just picked them from the garden, they're still warm from all the sun!"

I took a bite of the red, juicy tomato while I rested, piggybacking a rock bigger than most, while my eyes and my nostrils where being filled with all the wonders that garden could give us. The women, their hair hidden in big scarfs and their skirts tied in a knot at their knees, worked constantly bent over the fields, picking up lettuce and chicory, spinach and beets, fennel and artichokes, carrots, beans and zucchini, and the few cabbages and cauliflowers that had survived the winter season. A rainbow of vegetables, hand-inhand with ripe fruit like apricots and loguats, apples and pears, cherries, strawberries that had just popped up and oranges and tangerines that, on the other hand, where made juicier and sweeter by the Sicilian sun, even though the previous winter had been brutal. The women would put them in big wicker baskets, under the trees' shade, ready to be carried to the Masseria and distributed to all of those who worked there. At that time Susafa was a self-sufficient community and my family, and all of those who resided there, felt lucky they didn't have to worry about finding food elsewhere, since they were isolated from even the nearest village.

Well, when the pleasant break was over, we would go near the *bevaio* (drinking trough) in order to fill the jugs².

^[2] Originally "fill the *quartare*", small vessels made of terracotta, used as water measurement units.

I remember I used to help him put them underneath the water torrent, but afterwards I couldn't hold them any longer when they were filled up, as my wrists would bend, and so he would help me pull them up to load them on the mules."

My dear guest, you must know that mules have been of huge importance for Susafa, there were at least twenty of them, while there were only six horses. Mules were much more versatile and safe, they were resistant and strong, suited for farming activities and absolutely necessary even for the transportation of the stones that were used to build, entirely by hand, the whole Masseria. The stones were selected from the near countryside and transported, on the back of mules, to the construction site where expert chiselers would cut each stone with mallets and, of course, chisels, encasing them in straight lines, so that they would all be of the same height. The Masseria was also peculiar since it had been built with hollow walls, which meant that the brickwork was made up of two facades, one external and the other internal, with the very stone scraps in the middle, that still allow for amazing thermal insulation, causing even the warmest summers to be not only bearable, but right out pleasant.

Meanwhile, Benedetto kept talking and I was looking at him with fascination, I was seeing him as a child, starting to look for his place in the Masseria, trying to be useful, since he wasn't going to school. Still, at that time there were only a few who could travel each day to the nearest town to receive an education.

He began talking again, heatedly: "I remember that, after loading the water, we had started heading towards the Main Building, leaving behind the Scialabba community, which was another tiny housing cluster where the shepherds would rest while overseeing the cattle, and then had passed by the *burgi*³, where my mother, standing outside the door, with her hands on the hips, had reminded me not to be late for lunch, for she had made me her cooked bread and fennel soup with those oranges I loved so much.

"Don't worry" Serafino had answered "I'll have him back to you before noon!"

We arrived at the Masseria in the middle of the morning, and I was absolutely fascinated by the almost palpable enthusiasm. The housings' windows were open, welcoming the sunlight; the women wore long, black dresses as low as their ankles, hiding thick black stockings, but showing their laced working shoes. A myriad of different scents caught my attention, enticing me. The kitchen aromas were merging with the scent of lavender, and the fresh smell of clean came from wideopen windows; this allowed me to spy on the inside, where the homemakers looked like busy, unstoppable ants, doing "cosi di fimmini" (women's stuff). It was nice

^[3] Small shelters used by the workers, circular in shape and made of drystacked stone topped by a roof made of small wooden beams intertwined with straw.

hearing all those voices coming together, improvised choruses singing from one side of the house to the opposite one, reminding each other of all the chores they still had to do, asking for each other's help. I stayed in the *baglio* while Serafino went in to pour the jugs' contents into the terra-cotta amphorae. It would've been the women's job, later on, to replenish the washbowls in the rooms, by changing the water used for personal ablutions."

Benedetto burst out laughing, and his eyes teared up a bit, then he continued.

"That was the best bucket of water on my head I ever received in my life, and it taught me that curiosity could prove to be fatal".

"What do you mean!" I asked, casting a puzzled look.

"Well... I sneaked by, closer and closer, through lightly dancing curtains, exiting the outer frame of the window. I had already seen the women beating vigorously those rough linen sheets, or retrieving stuffed pillows – made of wool from the Masseria's sheep – that they had previously placed on the windowsill to let them soak in the sunlight. My own curiosity would have been my doom, but it also made me brave. I peeked in and, being exactly through one of the main walls, I got hit by such a large amount of water to be soaking wet from head to toe. Since she hadn't noticed that I was right outside the ground floor window, one of the women had poured down the washbowl's water of the room she was tidying up from the window right above me. I looked around, in fear that someone could've seen me, I thought not, so I ran off to hide in the shadow of the porch, waiting for Serafino's return. When he arrived he didn't ask me anything, I joined him without uttering a single word while he checked out the big water stain in the middle of the *baglio*, my clothes soaking wet and my hair dripping, something I was trying to hide by pulling them back with my hands. Without commenting, he started to walk, then stopped, he pulled me up with his big strong arms, despite his overall thinness, and placed me on one of the mules. After a few hundred meters he turned around, inspecting me, and then said in a distracted tone:

"Curiosity will play tricks on you" and went back to looking onward, cackling quietly. It was only when we arrived in front of my house that he told me:

"Hurry up, go get changed, otherwise you'll get sick... Plus, that water is dirty!" And walked away, slowly, while I watched his shoulders bounce at the rhythm of a spontaneous laughter".

And while recalling it, Benedetto did the same.

"Would you like a coffee?" I asked him at the end of the meal.

"Sure. Add a bit of zammu (Sicilian liqueur), please".

"Let's move to the bar, then" I suggested.

"Very well" he said, ironically "lets grab this coffee in the *palmento* (fermentation tub)".

In fact, the space where the café and the living room are today was the old fermentation tub, a place where wine

was made through a process quite similar to the one used nowadays. Only that back then the temperatures were so high that the wine tasted more like vinegar, but it was produced for private use only and distributed to the workers who would go weekly to the Masseria to fetch supplies. As you came in, on your right you could find big barrels, and on your left the tools used to decorate, and the tiny glass flasks.

Benedetto took a curious look around, as now it was a truly warm, inviting environment. The coziness created by soft couches was emphasized by the fireplace, which gave the whole room a welcoming and homely look, and the collection of photos on the walls, a charming testimony of the Saeli family history, looked like frames of an old black-and-white movie about the Masseria, a movie Benedetto had watched a few times.

We sat on the couches, but only after he finished touching lightly the many displayed photos, while I made sure he got his coffee with anise liquor, while I ordered a *Moscato* sweet wine. Before resuming our conversation, we stayed still for a few seconds, in silence, listening to that place talk to us through its old, huge barrels, now fallen into disuse, and the big jars where young, now ancient oils were resting, ancestors of the ones we use nowadays, all thanks to the many olive trees that still grant us a marvelous harvest in October and November, one our guests can take part to. I was staring at Benedetto, who his head and allowed me to see more details I already knew: the majestic wooden counter, decorated with artisanal ceramics; lamps that had been made out of one-of-a-kind bottles, on which elegant hats were placed; brown curtains slithering softly down the ancient walls, gathering on the floor, on those cold, stone slabs; the solid wooden tables and chairs, slightly country-looking; the terra-cotta pots and the hard wooden stipes those open windows were made of, through which the Sicilian sun was shining, without asking anyone's permission.

It was at that time that I wondered who was giving what to the other. I then convinced myself that, instead, an inexplicable exchange of emotions was taking place, something we would never forget for the rest of our lives.

"Let's go for a walk, shall we?" Benedetto asked me, abruptly.

I ordered some more Moscato, offered him some too and, before leaving for a walk, we exited through the terrace, the glasses in our hand, remembering that right there, once, they would lay down the harvested almonds and tomato sauce. In those days the tomato sauce was left out to dry in the sun, spread out on wooden slabs in order for the water to evaporate; then they would scrape it off with a flat shovel and make a pile of it, a dark, dense red pile of it. Quite an inviting sight. At that point the sauce was preserved in oil so that it could last the whole year round and, whenever someone needed some, they'd simply add water to rehydrate it back to its usual smooth, creamy texture. The strong, dehydrated tomato sauce is still used nowadays

for eggplant-meatballs, one of the most beloved dishes of our culinary culture.

Still, let's go back to that moment with Benedetto, when he and I looked at each other, complicitly, for the scenery we were admiring from the terrace, one we knew quite well, but that still managed to leave us speechless.

Benedetto lit a cigar: "in my old age I have acquired this habit, I had never smoked before in my life and now I dedicate it to the most special moments".

While going out, we passed in front of the calf stables, which was situated right behind the fermentation room, nowadays consisting of three suites. The building could host almost a hundred calves, and the process would involve separating the calves from their mothers right after their weaning, in order to leave some space in the stables and focusing on raising them. The building used to have a trough on the side, a water duct and a scale on the wall, called *bilico*, for fast, easy and most importantly precise weigh ins.

We proceeded straight ahead until we reached the Ballroom, on the other side of the structure, with its outer walls almost entirely covered in ivy and American vines. It was once made up of two parallel rectangles, one the former barn and the other the former cow stables, now merged into one big structure approximately twelve meters high, ten meters wide and forty-five meters long.

We walked in shyly, in total silence. The majestic hall was completely empty, there were only the tables and

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the chairs destined for the receptions, stacked in the back, and so we were filled by its history. The floor, covered in long wooden slats arranged horizontally towards the entrance, in order to accentuate their elongated shape, was creaking under our feet; the thick stone walls outlining the border to the outside world... suddenly, we found ourselves thrown back into the past, where straw chairs, linen tablecloths and reception tables left room for an already seen movie.

We found ourselves in the old barn, our backs turned to the big old stables, where the hay was loaded, starting from the entrance door until the whole warehouse was stuffed left and right, and once all the spaces where filled, they would keep stocking the hay by putting it through the tiny window up above, shutting the main door and filling the room until the roof was reached. Then, when it was time to empty the warehouse, the process started once again, but this time it went the other way around. Afterwards, the hay would come out of that room and go to the adjacent one, to become the cows' sustenance and later allow for the making of cheese and dairy products, used inside the Masseria.

We lifted our eyes towards the ceiling and its trusses, and when we looked back down, everything was filled with black and white spots, as we could almost hear the scattered bellowing of the cows. Now, for us, since we were taking a dive into the past, there were more than two hundred and fifty cows, and the hay was filling up the whole barn; we followed the custodians path, while he raked up hay with his pitchfork to fill up the two

huge troughs on both sides of the whole building, and suddenly we saw a cow collapsing.

Oh, yes! I could see it clearly, thanks to Benedetto's story, who had all of a sudden gone back to that time, when he was a child, becoming some sort of veterinarian, or more accurately the custodian's helper.

"When Carmelo, the custodian, ran to call my father, in the middle of the night, to help him with this adventure, I woke up and I prayed that he would take me with him; he was against it in the beginning, but then my mother intervened on my behalf".

"Come on, take him with you! It's good for him to understand what it means to come to life!" She said, while covering my shoulders with the woolen mantle that belonged to my father, making me feel older already.

We ran fast in the middle of the night until we found ourselves on our knees, next to the cow, mooing at a fast rhythm, almost asking for our help.

Carmelo stopped us and said: "let's allow nature to do its course first, I know if and when to intervene..."

That's when I saw Rosina, the cow I named personally in that exact moment; she was laying on her side, her belly huge, while bending to what her labor demanded of her, waiting for her calf to be born. At first, some liquid came out, but then, very slowly, we started to see the top of the head pop up, and immediately after, miraculously, one of the anterior hoofs as well.

"Everything is going splendidly" Carmelo said "its coming out the right way! Benedetto, get ready to see something you'll remember for as long as you live".

That's when, filled with excitement, I watched an actual miracle happen. It looked like the calf knew exactly what to do, it even pushed out with its second leg, as I could see clearly its tiny white face coming out, an eye surrounded by a black spot. It then started to thrust with its back, while its mother kept laying still to allow for that special first meeting. Suddenly, Carmelo tied the tiny legs together with a rope attached to a stick, so that there could be a firm grip, and told my father:

"There, here we go, now, help me pull, but be careful! We need to be both delicate and strong..."

In a few seconds it was all over, the whole body came out. The calf was gorgeous, with the typical black spots; I wanted to pet him, but Carmelo gently stopped me.

"Let its mother do that... there, you see, now it'll stand and she'll clean it with her tongue".

And that's what that loving mother did, licking the whole body to remove the afterbirth, starting from the legs, rising up higher, until she reached the two-toned small face I thought was so odd. It almost looked like they were exchanging some sort of affection when her knowing tongue started to lick the still-shut eyes, the snout and the mouth that would have soon been attached to the teet.

Afterwards, my father and Carmelo cleaned the area around the two, while creating a tiny bed of fresh hay for the veal to rest on, a veal that was called...

"What do you want to call him, Benedetto?", he asked me swiftly.

I thought about it for a bit, then said: "Susafino! Yes, yes... I like it!"

The next day I went back there to look for him in the stables, and I found him strongly standing on his legs, trying to drink his mother's milk. I ran into Serafino, who had just known of that night's adventure, and began by saying:

"You named him Susafino! Did you really have to give him a name that sounds so much like my very own? Mooooooo!"

We laughed together, in unison, leaving that magical place to go for a long walk through the wheat fields, accompanied by herds in the distance, that looked like they were following our path.

In those days the wheat shined, bright green, like the one you can see in some of Millet and Van Gogh's paintings; sometimes you just wanted to lie between those soft spikes, to pass the time doing absolutely nothing, but breathe in the subtle smell that tastes like a magic spell. We did that, and I even took off my shoes and my socks; with a blade of hay tickling my cheek in between my lips, I asked Benedetto:

"What do you know of The Rape of Proserpina?"

His elbows rose as he lifted his back, looking at me with a weird expression that encouraged me to proceed.

"It's one of the most famous myths of the pagan Sicilian tradition, a wonderful legend tied to nature. Proserpina was Ceres' daughter, allegedly her name derives from the Latin word *proserpere* (to emerge), referring to the growth of wheat... Pluto, the Underworld Lord, fell in love with this young maiden while she was picking up flowers on the bank of lake Pergusa, in Enna; in seeing her so bright and ethereal, he decided to kidnap her and take her with him in his dark world to bask in her natural light and in her love. Proserpina's mother, clearly desperate, asked Zeus to free her, and he granted her that wish, but only as long as she spent six months each year with Pluto. And this is how the Greeks and the Sicilian make sense of the changing of the seasons".

Benedetto lied down until his head sank in the bright green, and added:

"Well, now that it's spring, Proserpina is about to come back into this world..."

"Yes, do you see how the light and the colors are changing?"

"Honestly, I had never heard that... Still, since I am very religious, I have found out that wheat is quite common in many Bible passages, and I know that its grain is a symbol of rebirth, hope and future prospects, and it is not only a divine gift and a sign of abundance, but also a symbolic feeding of the soul."

I looked at Benedetto with an ever-increasing interest, as that man who looked humble at first sight was gifting me with pearls of wisdom. He was right, the wheat had been the greatest gift my family and that land had ever received.

"You know, when I was a child and then for the rest of my life, what fascinated me the most was the harvest-

ing of the wheat. It was nice to see the spikes almost asking to be picked, right around June or July, bending under their own weight. Actually, in my days the harvest was a generous gift, an event everyone participated in; we would spend several days, from dawn till dusk, sharing any emotion we usually kept bottled up. The men would wear their coppolas (caps) tightly secured on their heads, so that they'd be shielded from the strong sunlight. I still remember when they would cut down the wheat by hand, tie it together and bring it to their carts, carrying it on their heads or on their shoulders. It was only after a while that they started to use iron mowers pulled by oxen and, later on, handguided motorized mowers, until nowadays' technology allowed for an even easier harvesting. Still, the real joy was seeing everyone together, working hard, giving their personal contribution. The women would come later on in the day, in their headscarves and ankle-covering dresses, carrying wicker baskets that held the best bread, protected by a thick piece of fabric; and that bread was made with natural sourdough and accompanied with that tiny bit of sauce, an almost unnecessary addition, since the bread tasted good on its own".

"You're right" I replied, agreeing with his theory.

I remembered snacks that were made using the bread Benedetto was talking about, since the old technique had stayed the same. Bread in Susafa was still being made once a week, although back then they used to bake it in

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a great oven - its traces can still be found today - which could host a maximum of sixty-four loaves of bread. In the eyes of the five-year-old boy, which I was, those round loaves looked gigantic! Verduzzo, that was the baker's name, was a small but large man with a round face and red cheeks perhaps due to the one too many glasses of wine; he had a very peculiar way of slicing the bread... I still remember that gesture: he would put it on his forearm, cut some slices using a switchblade held with the other hand, and slice through the base of the loaf towards his chest. Susafa's bread smelled of a very hard to describe fragrance, it simply smelled good. Plus, it was round, with a thick, dark and crunchy crust, while being soft but solid and high on the inside. It was kneaded in a huge wooden maidda, and the rising happened because of the quality sourdough used, which was called "growing" yeast, originally derived from fruit fermentation, but this is all I know, and there are only a few people who know more, since it was almost some sort of secret to hand down, from generation to generation. Once the dough was ready, a tiny piece of it was kept on the side, so that it would acidify, in order for the rising agents in it to multiply and allow for more dough to be made, and so on. Truth is it was extremely precious, all the towns would have their own, passing it from house to house and preserving it in a burnia4; also, since the secret was so well kept by all the women, the original method has been lost.

^[4] Jar or container in glass or terracotta with a lid.

"Is everything all right?" Benedetto asked me, as I had seemed absent while reminiscing.

"Yes, I was still breathing in the scent of warm bread..." "Well, when the women joined the harvest everything would gain color. We would stop for lunch, lay embroidered cotton tablecloths on the recently sealed bales of hay, under a tree's shade, and we would sit around, talking and eating homemade dishes cooked with humble ingredients, but rich in tradition. Those were meals everyone had contributed to making. We wouldn't stop for long, since we had to finish the day's work before dusk; then, after the meal, the women would start helping too, getting the wheat ready for the threshing. Still, the best part of the day, the one that repaid us from all the work and managed to make it seem less tiring, was when, at sunset, we would all gather around the big marble table, just outside the oven room, where we were this morning, and we would make and eat dinner all together. There was a big wood burning oven, and a kitchen with three chimneys where you could cook various pots at the same time; there wasn't much to eat overall, but what was there was enough. Then we would drink wine, yes... the same one that tasted a big vinegary, but considering we had cast-iron stomachs back then, it wasn't an issue: we enjoyed everything and wouldn't throw away anything. Can you imagine that right outside the door there were the dogs bowls, each one with the name of the owner, and they would put in it some old bread softened by the water used during the preparation of the meals. Then, at the end of the dinner, someone would pull out a musical instrument, usually the accordion or a flute, or yet a *marranzanu* (Jew's harp) or a tambourine, and would start playing. Sometimes we'd improvise the *ballu a chiovu* (Sicilian dance similar to the famous *tarantella*), a series of jumps with the legs spread open, that would cross when touching the floor. During those dances they would play pranks on the women, with various moves and curtsies, then they would start going from one spot to the other, and they would hold each other's hands. Like this!"

In an impetuous, sudden movement, fed by remembrance, he jumped up, offered me his hand and started skipping here and there, while I managed to keep up with him for a few seconds, but we stopped almost immediately, caught in a complicit burst of spontaneous, pure laughter.

"Oh, Benedetto, you sure gave me a day to remember!" "I have to go now, though, my old lady is waiting for me and I promised to take her for a walk before dinner time. She was waiting for me at lunch, but when I told her I wasn't going to eat with her, she said she was glad I was going to be here, with you..."

"Of course, it's fair, but promise me that you'll come back to visit soon, you will be my honored guest, and the same goes for all of your family."

He was clearly moved by those words, I noticed that because he appeared to be tearing up a bit, but also because I could feel his hand slightly shaking when I grabbed it to say goodbye.

"Thank you. I have no words" he answered, with the most heartfelt tone.

I accompanied him to the parking lot and we gave each other a warm hug but, as he turned away to go home, I impulsively called him back, to ask him the question that had been on my mind for a long time, one to which I hadn't found an answer yet:

"Benedetto, please excuse me, do you know what Susafa means?"

He turned around and looked at me with a kind smile and a vaguely inquisitive look.

"SU SA FA! ... *Su sape fare*!" he said emphatically with a hint of naivety and the sort of tone only one aware of being indisputably less educated has, a typical trait for humble people, and acting almost mortified to be the one to tell me something I didn't know.

I looked at him in disbelief. He had just answered my question regarding the meaning of the name of the Masseria with such immediacy and such spontaneity, and in such a disarming way! I had looked for it all over! I even tried to track it back to the 13th century, initially presuming it had Arabic origins, but being proven wrong when faced with the actual archive and its documents.

"Si sa fare! (It can be done)" I repeated in a whisper, enlightened.

He pressed his cap on the head with a typical Sicilian move, by holding the back with a hand and the front with the other, and looked back a couple times before getting in his car, leaving me with an indelible smile on

DANIELA CICCHETTA

my face and the confident certainty that the choice we had picked had been the right one.

Yes, me and my brothers could do it too!

My dear guest, it is not by chance that until now I still haven't told you my name. I wanted to leave to Benedetto, and to all our friends who have walked along with us so far, the protagonist role, but now I believe it is time to introduce myself.

My name is Manfredi and I am the second born of four children. Giulia is the oldest, Tommaso and Sara the youngest, and we are descendants of Gioacchino Saeli, the fifth generation of Saelis.

Benedetto is a real, existing character, and he is still alive, now one of the last people who has actually lived in this place, who ran away in the 50s for the love of a woman who asked him to move to the city, although, deep in his heart, he has always been tied to this Masseria, one that saw him grow up and become a man.

For us all, he represents all the residents and all the workers of Susafa, to whom we'd like to say thank you for the devotion and love that turned this micro-cosmos into an unforgettable reality.

After our great great grandfather Gioacchino, the great grandfather Manfredo and grandpa Gino, with their respective wives, all decided to move back here eventually, my mother Maria Grazia and my father Mario decided to do the same, to go back to their origins. Us kids, we were still very young and, after I finished my studies, I had an obvious thirst for adventure, and the

need to explore the world. I moved to Canada, where I met my wife, then we moved to Belgium and it was right there, while living in a less contaminated reality than the city one we were used to, that I re-evaluated our past and the opportunity for inner growth, which could be achieved only by managing a place as magical as Susafa.

I've always thought that you need to be free to leave in order to be able to come back. My brothers and I, grew up with my mother's stories of the Masseria; she managed to pass on to us a sense of belonging, one that can be understood only by those who had left their life here, in such a unique and uncontaminated place, where time seems still, or at least slowed down by emotions, although perhaps, to understand it, you need to miss it in the first place.

Susafa, when me and by brothers started managing it, making ecological, natural and environment-friendly choices, was the result of adding up what four generations had done, and us, as the fifth one, we can finally feel proud to have been able to revive those traditions, taking a step back into our history.

The talk I had with Benedetto simply made me understand that we were on the right path, that our mission was to renew that slow pace of both the work and the life, allowing for the full enjoyment of good food and nature.

Spending time in Susafa, my dear guest, is not only a hotel experience, but also going back to a more natural and healthy life rhythm. It's a connection between the past and the future, in a moment that couldn't be more present.

It's reevaluating customs, sharing simple and natural experiences. It's a warm welcome, nourished by the nowadays so rare social connections.

It's walking in the fields and seeing the olive trees being pruned; it's breathing in the scent of lavender wrapped up in linen, whenever you open up your room's closet. It's picking seasonal produce with your very hands, accompanied by the same chef that will handle that food, and then participating in the cooking; it's making an herbal tea with the sprouts you yourself found in the herb garden. It's sipping a glass of wine in front of the fireplace, telling and listening to stories, or it's a swim in the pool while admiring the scenery all around you, seemingly expanding beyond the horizon. It's mounting on a horse or riding a bicycle, forgetting about the concept of time and with that being able to find your true self.

And to conclude, I'm pretty sure you will be able to tell me yourself what it meant to you, at the end of your stay, when we'll hug each other with a hint of sadness, waiting for the next time you'll be back as our guest. Manfredi, Giulia, Tommaso, Sara and *Susafa*.





HOTEL VILLA DUCALE Taormina (Messina) www.villaducale.com

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Ragtime by Marilisa Vumbaca

HOTEL VILLA DUCALE

She had left Rome early. At six-twenty she was already on the ring road and a little later she was southbound on the highway of the Sun. Every time she got in the car to leave Rome she felt particularly free, in control of herself, of time and of space. If she went south, like this time, she already felt herself brimming with the hot sun of Calabria and Sicily, and this made her cheerful after having traveled only a few kilometers.

She had to make a couple of stops for work: Naples and Reggio Calabria, but her destination was Taormina, where a week of sun and sea was waiting for her, an entire week devoted all to herself, to recuperate, to rest, but above all to speak with that part of herself that she didn't manage to listen to in Rome, because every time it surfaced, she felt her stomach tightening, her anxiety mounting, and she felt bad. But she was certain that in Taormina she would be able to let her feelings and thoughts come out, to make things clear for her-

MARILISA VUMBACA

self, to decide what to do with herself and about her relationship with Carlo. Because Taormina was a symbol for her soul, where she felt better and where she recovered that feeling of peace that she only managed to desire elsewhere. And this time she would pass the week in a special place: the Hotel Villa Ducale. On the website she had read that the hotel was accommodated in an "authentic Sicilian aristocratic villa", immersed in nature and situated so as to "join the convenience of being near the historic center with the peacefulness of being sheltered from the confusion of the city". This mix of finery and nature, as well as the call of peacefulness had attracted her, she had hurried to make a reservation, and now she was already dreaming about the hotel terrace, its spectacular view of the sea and the fragrance of lemons and orange blossoms.

The weather in Taormina would already be welcoming during the month of April, while it had been raining for days in Rome that year and the north wind hadn't succeeded in sweeping away the dark clouds that were making everything so cold outside and within the soul. She put on a Scott Joplin CD, *Ragtime*, with its powerful, clear and lively notes, it was the music that corresponded most with her emotions at that moment. She knew that this trip wouldn't be just a vacation, but a real chance to get away from negative things and emotions, to fill up on that energy that only the lands of the South seem to possess, in their brilliant colors, in their distinct landscapes, in their intense fragrances.

Every once in a while she thought about Carlo, atten-

RAGTIME

tive only to himself, to his personal care, to his wellbeing. If others, and she was included in these "others", weren't doing well, it wasn't his problem and he wasn't worried at all. His world was made up of objects, not of people, and whenever she had a problem she had learned that she couldn't talk to him about it, he wouldn't understand, first of all because he wouldn't even listen. He would look at her as usual with a bewildered look, simplifying everything, saying that he didn't see the problem, that she was making it up inside her head and that she always got everything mixed up, when everything was so simple. In short, he made her feel like a madwoman, and in the end she believed it, up until recently. "Maybe it's true, maybe I'm the one seeing problems where there aren't any." That's why she finally couldn't take it anymore and she had gone to a psychologist. Who had listened to her finally someone who listened to her! - who had helped her - finally someone who helped her! - to make things clear for herself and to realize that Carlo was a man of little importance and that even their marriage wasn't worth anything.

But now that's enough thinking about all this. She was almost to Naples and had to see to her job. She had several appointments for organizing cultural events, and it was important for her to conclude some agreements that would strengthen her position within the company she worked for.

Between one appointment and another, she allowed herself an exquisite hazelnut coffee and then got back

on the road and drove all the way to Reggio Calabria. She slept there in order to be fresh the next morning for the work meeting that awaited her, and so that she would finish early and be able to cross the strait and arrive in Taormina.

She liked Reggio Calabria, she loved seaside cities, and Reggio had a special charm: its wonderful waterfront, the strait and Sicily before you, bare and imposing, calling to you like a mermaid, inviting you to go to her.

At noon she was already in the car on the way to Villa San Giovanni, just a sandwich, not to waste time. The closer she got to Messina on the ferry, the larger Sicily seemed, and her emotions rose like the tide. It was like this every time she came to Sicily and experienced this slow passage across the sea from one land to another. The bridge over the strait would join two lands together, instead of making them carry on a dialogue as the water now did.

She decided not to stop in Messina, in order to arrive in Taormina with daylight. She wanted to enjoy it first with all its colors, and only afterwards with its nighttime lights.

She arrived early and, as she wanted, greeted Taormina with the sun. The city hadn't spared itself this time either, the green of the plants was bright, the jasmine full of perfume and the bougainvillea full of color, white, orange, red and violet.

The Hotel Villa Ducale welcomed her, keeping the promises made over the Internet, the place was even more beautiful than it appeared in the photos on its

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website. The deep blue of the sea was visible from the terrace as far as the eye could see, and in the other direction Etna, with its hidden fire, was imposing and fascinating.

In her peach-colored room, a delicate *trompe-l'œil* branch of oranges came forth from a basket of real, ripe oranges; another branch hung next to the glass door; and outside was the sea. On a small table, there was a bouquet of fresh flowers of the same shade as the room. It was a delicate and elegant composition, that made her feel good and suddenly rested in spite of the trip.

She went down to the Mediterranean garden, caressed the southern flowers and plants and started to think about what she would do the next day. Sea and more sea, then a walk among the Arab-Norman houses in the town center up to the Teatro Greco, which she loved above all toward evening, with the last light insinuating itself among the ruins.

She realized that the day's program didn't include even a hint of reflection about her relationship with Carlo. She told herself that she had to get used to the place first and that there was time. She didn't want to ruin these first moments with a knot in her stomach.

The following evening as well, she was surprised to think that the "Carlo problem" hadn't come to mind all day. And so it was the next day too. On the morning of the fourth day she decided that she was restored enough by then to confront it. But perhaps it was better to put it off until the afternoon, after the sea. She would go down to the Mediterranean garden and collect all her thoughts, even though she now had a clear sense of where they would take her. On the other hand, she couldn't put it off because she had to speak with Carlo when she returned to Rome, and she had to prepare herself well for the speech because otherwise, as usual, he would flood her with his river of words. She wouldn't know anymore what to say and would feel like the usual nitwit.

"But for now that's enough thinking!" she told herself over breakfast on the hotel terrace and before the mosaic of sea, land and vegetation, which she saw from her table in the corner. She always sat in the corner and looked into the distance because she didn't like to meet the gazes of the other guests while she was eating. All things considered, she was enterprising while at work, but in her private life, at thirty-six years old, she was still rather shy and reserved, and it wasn't the easiest thing for her to talk to someone she didn't know. Therefore, better to avoid the possibility. She tasted the Sicilian specialties prepared with care and experience. She began with the sweets, cheerful in their colors, silky in their softness and passed to the salty delights only later. Much later, because she wanted to savor everything attentively and this required time - the time that Carlo never had, and the time that the hotel waiters never denied with hurried looks, but on the contrary accompanied and even suggested with their light movements. And it was then, looking around for an instant to see if she was alone on the terrace, that she saw him.

A tall man around fifty, elegant in his light colored suit,

RAGTIME

who was watching her attentively, leaning against the rail with his back to the sea. He made her think of the notes from *Ragtime* – powerful, clear and lively – corresponding to her emotions.

While she was asking herself how long he had been there watching her, he turned and walked away.

All day she thought about that man. She couldn't manage to think about anything else. She looked for him without finding him, and her desire to see him became ever stronger.

He wasn't in the hotel, but she waited for him on the terrace until nighttime. He didn't come.

She began to think about Carlo and the fact that with him she had never experienced these sensations and this desire she was feeling for a man she didn't know.

Everything was predictable with Carlo, nothing was new, nothing was dreamed. Everything was concrete, even too much so. Little by little she put together her recent thoughts and understood that only far away from him did she feel like a person, and this awareness put an end to her reflections about their future together. As she had imagined, this place had helped her to to make things clear to herself, and now she was sorry to return to Rome. And to go away in the end without seeing that man again, without knowing who he was. What she feared was the imaginary, the thought of a man that she would never see again, and that in the following days she would pass over as something left unfinished that could have become so much more.

She had to leave, but this time she didn't feel like driv-

ing. Now that she had made a decision concerning Carlo, she felt free and didn't need the car to feel in control. She decided to take a plane. Leaving the car would give her an excuse to return in two weeks to get it and to enjoy two or three days of the May sun in this wonderful hotel.

She arrived on time at Fontana Rossa airport in Catania. She got in line for the check-in, and then she saw him again. He was in line in front of her with his ticket in hand. All her shyness went straight to heck. She did it without thinking. She pushed her trolley forward, running right into him. He turned around, and surprised to see her he didn't say anything. She started apologizing immediately, but he put a finger to his lips and said quietly "Thank you." He took her by the hand, and then he said, "Let's go back, please. We must have breakfast together on the hotel terrace".





HOTEL BALCÓN DE CÓMPETA Málaga ~ Spagna www.hotel-competa.com

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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

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.

