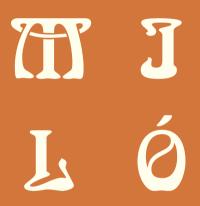




### GOLDEN BOOK HOTEL STORIES







NIKE - EDIZIONI







# TOTEL MJLÓ ~ LACERRA ~

The Miló is an imaginary Golden Book Hotel situated in the town of Lacerna, which is also imaginary, as are the characters of course.

However, the hotels that offer this story are not imaginary – for years now, our Golden Book Hotels have tangibly linked their image with the gracious gesture of offering a book to guests and friends.

The story is part of a series of episodes written by a number of our best authors, amateur writers whose work and literary talent we are committed to promoting. Happy reading!

> member of GOLDER BOOK DOTELS











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GOLDEN BOOK HOTELS





PROLOGUE



Lacerna, 1st July 2011

The Miló Hotel, recently appearing in the Golden Book Hotels, is an exclusive, elegant but very particular hotel. It is said that it is able to change shape according to its guests' secret wishes, and even to let them travel through time and space.

A mysterious legend surrounds the hotel concerning its builders, the Miló family, whose women were suspected of witchcraft. Not many people know the truth about the hotel, but I am among those who do. For years I worked at the reception desk, and if I had not resigned, I would certainly have been the next manager of the hotel. I left the hotel in the hands of Guido, the present manager, the young and inexperienced clerk Anna, and Pietro, the bizarre man Friday with an obsession for music. Together they will have to learn to live with the mysteries of the Miló hotel and manage its guests.

Do you think it's an easy job?

It's not at all, especially if you don't know the whole truth about the Miló.

Perhaps Guido, Anna and Pietro's responsibilities are beyond them, but – even if I can't be sure things will go as I have planned – I have faith in them.

It is a long story waiting to be told.



Mario





## GOLDEN BOOK HOTEL STORIES

I II L Ó

# Double room by Francesco Manzo









#### Francesco Manzo (1959)



An engineer, he works on industrial installations in the Mediterranean Basin. A voracious reader, he had never written anything, apart from a few technical-scientific articles, before entering and winning Eureka! Literary competitions with his brilliant stories and beginning his successful partnership with Golden Book Hotels. As well as travelling and reading, Francesco loves dedicating his free time to his touring bike, his wife and his two children, not necessarily in that order.





### Double room

Alberto will be here in a few hours.

After five years, he'll come down to the Miló hotel once more.

Ever since I saw his name on the list of reservations, I keep going back over the evening I met him.

It was the day when I rebelled against the rules and put my job and my future on the line.

Yet today I still don't know if Alberto guessed at my role in the episode that involved him. Nor would I be able to say if he ever knew my name or could remember my face.

I only hope that what I did for him was not in vain after all. But what's the point of wondering too much.

He'll soon be at the Miló.

I'll soon know.

The Miló. That strange building that stands where Viale Murata ends and the sea begins had always fascinated me. I would observe it from the beach during the long walks along the strand I took with my father in all seasons.

I'd grown up, and I had lost my father, but I still continued running on the beach, because doing so made me feel good, and to do so I had to feel good.

And the Miló was still there, reassuring me with its presence.

I knew that the five-storey building, with its sinuous façade and a roof that made me think of a sleeping dragon when I was a little girl, was a well-known hotel listed in all the tourist guides, but I only knew its outside appearance. On the other hand, I've always lived in Lacerna, and the hotels in your own town are the ones you never go into.

I was twenty the first time I happened to set foot inside the large room, just inside the main entrance, that constituted the hotel's foyer.

I should have left some accounts documents at reception and gone.

Instead, I stayed for over an hour that afternoon, entranced by the elegance and harmony of the décor in the reception area. The elegance was not intimidating, but invited you to relax and give yourself over to the hotel's hospitality. I thought it would be wonderful to work in that setting with its delicate colours and hushed sounds, and I was even more convinced when I saw Mario, the receptionist.

He was ten years older than me, and I didn't think he was particularly good-looking, even if he had regular features, very well-groomed dark hair and expressive, black eyes. I would probably not have noticed him if I had met him in the street.

However, behind the wide solid walnut desk, Mario struck me because he exuded self-confidence and competence. He seemed to be the affable controller of the destiny of whoever approached him for one reason or another. This definition only occurred to me some time later; there and then I just thought that he was the man I would like to spend the rest of my life with.

Perhaps he had been impressed by my blonde hair, or my emerald green eyes inherited from my father. He held out his hand and asked my name.

"Anna," I replied, and felt embarrassed that I was blushing.

I stayed chatting with him for a long time that afternoon. I also met Pietro, the night porter, an odd character with big glasses and bouffant, curly hair, who hung around the hotel also during the day. He joined us, showing off his repertoire of steps. In his syncopated, concise speech, he explained that over the years he had put together a huge collection of different footsteps and ways of walking, stealing them with his cassette recorder from the people he met. He claimed he could figure out people's character and dreams from their footsteps. He said the hotel was the richest mine he had ever found. Watching him affectionately, Mario said he had never known a night porter he could describe as normal.

"What about my steps?" I laughingly asked Pietro.

He made me cross the foyer several times, watching my feet at first with amusement and then with absorbed, serious interest. For a moment I thought I had unsettled him, but then luckily he started laughing and said "You have confident, harmonious steps. You could do anything in life. You could even become a perfect receptionist!"

The three of us laughed light-heartedly for a long time. Saying goodbye, they both invited me to come back. At home that evening, I thought that working at the Miló would be the best thing that could ever happen to me. I went back to my part-time job as a secretary in the



"I knew that the five-storey building, with its sinuous façade ... "

dusty office of an accountant instead, dreaming of a more engrossing job and a love that would have given meaning to my life, and cheered only by the long runs along the strand that I continued to do every morning, and which gave me the strength to go on.

In fairytales, the characters' dreams usually come true to restore the world to its proper order. When it happens in real life, it's only because sooner or later you have to pay the price.

A fortnight after my visit to the Miló, the hotel manager, who I'd sporadically had telephone conversations with about accounting matters, unexpectedly phoned me He needed an administrative assistant, and asked me if I knew one.

A week later I started the job, and everything was as I'd dreamed it would be. The hotel's hushed atmosphere was reflected in the mood of the employees and guests, creating a calm, harmonious environment. The work didn't weigh heavily on me at all; on the contrary, I enjoyed spending a large part of my day in an exclusive, cordial little world.

The only thing that turned out not to work well was my passion for Mario. I soon realised that I was enthralled

by his strong character, that I hung on his every word and copied everything he did, while I tried to spend most of my time with him. We always went out together. His enthusiasms and his hobbies became mine. He was interested in travelling and adventures and we talked for hours about the trips he would like to make. Until after a while, I realised that I had stopped doing the things that I liked, and I began to feel a veil of unhappiness enshrouding my spirit more and more every day.

I spoke to Pietro about it, because I felt that hidden behind his bizarre sense of humour was the only person who could understand me.

And he didn't disappoint me. "I sensed it from your steps," he said with a slightly sad smile. "They've changed. You don't run on the beach any more."

I realised I couldn't go on like that any more and decided that at a certain point I would have to leave Mario, even if it meant leaving my job at the Miló hotel.

I would go back to being a part-time secretary in a dusty office, but I would have started running on the beach again.

I wrote a letter of resignation and waited for the right time to hand it in. But I couldn't make up my mind. There was a part of me that never wanted to leave the Miló, or Mario.

My unhappiness kept growing, though, and one rainy November morning I left home certain that I would find the strength to cross the foyer and deliver the letter into the manager's hands.

As often happens while we struggle to make decisions that seem so important, life takes turns that can make our anguish irrelevant in just a second.

That very morning, Mario was not at work. He had sent a letter giving in his notice definitively and without explanation.

According to Pietro, he had become tired of seeing others travelling, and with an unexpected leap had crossed over to the other side of the desk.

I was relieved and sorry at the same time, but my nagging doubt was whether I would really have found the courage to hand in my notice that morning. Fate had given me back my job at the Miló, but I was not sure that I truly deserved it.

The loss of his receptionist was a bitter blow for Guido. He considered reception to be a key factor in running a hotel. You start off in reception, and if you are good at it you can become hotel manager. Guido had chosen



"...and a roof that made me think of a sleeping dragon when I was a little girl..."

Mario to ensure reception was perfect, and perhaps, as was rumoured, to take his place when the time was right.

For the next four weeks, he rolled his sleeves up. He covered all the most important shifts at reception himself, while he also continued to be the manager of course.

We employees knew that the situation was not sustainable. Although the Miló was not very big, it still needed a proper staff. It was clear, however, that Guido was taking his time in coming to a decision. He was preoccupied, and we often saw him in the hotel foyer, lost in thought before the big window overlooking the sea.

We expected him to call experienced candidates to put through a shrewd selection process. Nothing happened for four weeks, though.

The wait for Guido's decision became spasmodic as the days went by. Rumours began circulating. It was said that the hotel was for sale, or about to close, and so it made no sense to look for a receptionist. Someone hinted perhaps that was the reason for Mario's sudden departure; he'd found out about the owner's intentions and hadn't thought twice about looking for a new position. Pietro also seemed to have become irritable, and that was saying something about someone like him. Without a receptionist, our lives seemed to have become uncertain.

At the end of the fourth week, in the early afternoon of a wintry day barely warmed by a weak sun, we heard Pietro and Guido talking excitedly.

I thought Pietro had caused some problem with a guest, but instead, he came out of the manager's office with a calm expression and smiled at me as he walked past.

I was about to ask him what had happened, but I didn't have time. Guido appeared at his door and asked me to come into his office.

The only thing about the Miló that had not captivated me at first sight had been Guido. He must have been almost sixty; some old photos he kept on his bookshelves told the tale of kilos gained and hair lost. The end result was seated before me; a tall, corpulent man, almost bald, with a severe expression. He looked like an austere university professor.

He asked me to sit down and said he had been watching me work for a long time. He had seen how easily I got on with suppliers, agencies and the rest of the hotel staff. He explained how important the role of receptionist was for the hotel to run well. There's a right room for each guest, he said. Small or large, looking right out over the sea or a bit further back, with a view of the town's rooftops, every room has its own personality, and it must resonate with that of the guest. Many guest came back to the Miló also because the expected to find "their" room, sometimes more welcoming than that in their own homes.

I asked him why he was telling those things to me of all people. He replied that he was convinced that I had the right qualifications to work in reception. Not a job but a mission, he said. He knew that I was maybe still too young, but was sure that it would not be a problem. As he walked me to the door, he called me by my name for the first time.

"Don't let me down, Anna," he said.

We spent many days going round the rooms and learning their idiom, made up of sizes, views, furnishings and colours. Those that impressed me most were situated in the west wing and overlooked the sea. I imagined how wonderful it must be, especially on summer



"...was a well-known hotel listed in all the tourist guides..."

evenings, to look at the bay, empty then of boats and bathers, and admire the long stretch of sand, the sea and the orange-streaked sky.

I saw a solitary figure running on the beach. It occurred to me that it could have been me if I'd found the will to put on my running shoes again. In reality, though, I hadn't been running for months.

"I would have thought that these were the most sought-after rooms," said Guido, interrupting my train of thought. "But it's not always the way. The sea can be frightening and intimidating. Not everyone can stand listening to its voice on a windy night. You need stable people at peace with themselves to put up with the sight and sound of the sea."

The summer arrived slowly as I helped welcome guests. I carried out the registration formalities, and in the meantime I asked seemingly routine, casual but never intrusive questions to get a feel for their personalities, if they were new guests, or their mood that day if I already knew them.

Then I handed them the keys to their room.

I was at his side, trying to get a sense of that complex, magical job, and every day I learnt something more. I accompanied the guests to their rooms, or at least to the lift, and I questioned them discreetly to understand the secret that tied them in some way to the room Guido had chosen.

And one day in July, five years ago, the time came when Guido had to resign himself to leaving me on my own. After many months, he went off in the middle of the afternoon for the first time. He had neglected his boat for too long, he told everyone with a smile. In reality, it was unlikely the mistral that been sweeping the bay for three days, making the summer day almost cold, would have allowed anyone to go out to sea.

I guessed that he was trying to reassure the rest of the staff, and probably himself too.

Pietro arrived at seven o'clock, four hours before the start of his shift. There was not much coming and going among the guests that evening, and few arrivals were expected.

Among these was a couple who having come into the foyer, stood to one side talking.

She spoke in an undertone, he nodded.

The girl was thin, tiny, with short, neat, black hair; she was dressed simply in jeans, shirt and a white cotton T-shirt open at the front. She was not beautiful, and seemed defenceless and determined at the same time. The boy, tall, brown-haired and blue-eyed, continued nodding in agreement with her words.

How do you give the ideal room to a couple? I felt as if I had forgotten everything I'd been taught for a moment.

Their names were Alberto and Rita I saw from their documents. They would be staying for two days.

They seemed a very close-knit couple. He did most of the talking, but with an awkward air, as if he was reciting a list he had learned by heart. They wanted lactose-free milk for breakfast because she had an intolerance; they would not be using the hotel's private beach because Rita didn't like sunbathing. Pietro came over to the desk too, drawn by the conversation.

I tried to reassure them as much as possible, explaining that we would do everything possible to meet their requests.

Reassure them, those were the key words I thought.

With a smile, I gave them the key to room 303. I remembered the delicate pastel green floors, the warmcoloured, simple, practical furniture and the atmosphere lighting that could be dimmed. I was sure I had chosen the right room. Pietro offered to take their luggage to the lift.



"...but I only knew its outside appearance."

"A special couple," he said after he accompanied the two guests.

He fiddled about with the computer behind the desk for a few minutes. Then a series of sounds with a fast, decisive rhythm were heard.

"Rita's footsteps," he said, "short, unhesitating, all the same, up to the lift."

He clicked on a second soundtrack. I prolonged, at times uneven rustle was heard. "Alberto," he said, "uncertain, reserved, dragging." He began to play with those sounds, mixing them together and synchronizing them with a music track from his collection.

"She is anxious but strong. A despot," he went on. "He's tall and robust but weak, a dreamer. She has taken him prisoner and drags him with her. He would like to escape, but he doesn't have the strength."

"Are you sure?" I asked.

"Footsteps never lie."

Pietro's words kept on running through my mind during the following hour.

Like Alberto, I'd been a prisoner of someone stronger than me, and perhaps I would not have had the strength to free myself on my own if chance or fate had not come to my aid. Would I be able to do something for Alberto?

Maybe I could, but the if idea that was beginning to take shape in my mind was successful, I would have betrayed my mission at the Miló.

Looking the other way was not like me, though.

By now it was after nine o'clock; I made up my mind, unhooked the key to room 105 from the board and headed towards the lift.

A quarter of an hour later I was back in the foyer and swinging the key to 303 before Pietro's eyes.

"I said we had a problem with the plumbing," I said, "and I moved them to another room."

"You gave them 105, the room nearest the sea," he said, looking at the board. Then he shook his head in disapproval.

On nights when the mistral blew, my father held my hand as we watched the sea from the beach. I covered my head with a scarf to protect myself from the sand driven by the wind and we stayed there watching that impressive spectacle that strikes your sight and hearing. That is why I know very well how a night when the mistral blows inspires the soul of dreamers who admire the power of the sea, while it breaks the ties that bind us to the rituals of every day. That is why I can imagine how a night when the mistral blows can intimidate despots and the intolerant, making it clear how futile and precarious their control over the world around them world is.

I stayed late in the foyer of the Miló that night five years ago, waiting for some consequence of my actions to manifest itself, while the mistral streamed howling through the funnel of Viale Murata.

At one in the morning we heard raised voices coming from the first floor. The voices grew louder until we saw Rita come out of the lift with her suitcase. She crossed the foyer and went out of the hotel door without once looking back.

As she left the hotel, I couldn't help noticing Alberto silhouetted against the open doors of the lift, in pyjamas and wearing what I thought was an expression of relief on his face.

I woke early the next morning. The mistral had given way to a gentle breeze. I felt an irrepressible desire to put on my running shoes and run along the beach. I ran along the shoreline until I was breathless, wetting my feet and breathing in lungfuls of the iodinecharged air. Passing in front of the Miló, I thought with a trace of melancholy of its guests. People the hotel offered a short break to, to catch their breath before they continued scrambling along the rocky road of life. As far as that mission was concerned, I had undoubtedly failed. And I would happily accept all the consequences.

But I didn't feel that I had failed in my responsibilities as a human being, and that is what counts in the end.

I crossed the threshold of the hall halfway through the morning.

Pietro was behind the reception desk. Evidently he had not gone home yet after the previous night's eventful shift.

He looked exhausted. A few days later I found out that he had spent a long time in the manager's office.

He managed to wink and give me a smile as I went to see Guido.

I went in and handed the manager my letter of resignation, the same one I had written months before.

He didn't bother to look at it. He tore it into four pieces and ordered me to go back to my post at the reception desk.

If you exclude the lines around his eyes and the stillbrown but thinner hair, Alberto hasn't changed so much. He has the same air of an awkward dreamer as five years ago.

The woman who accompanies him with quick, decisive steps is dark and tiny. She's not wearing jeans, but a short, apparently very simple skirt. Her name's not Rita, but for the rest she has a slight resemblance to her, and a determined expression like hers.

I look at Alberto and the woman with him, and I feel as if I've gone back five years.

I expect a sign from him, a hint that means he remembers me, the Miló and that night with the mistral when I tried to change his life.

There was a long moment of silence between us.

"Could you give me room 105?" he finally asked with an embarrassed smile.





## drawings by Rnna Parisi



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## GOLDEN BOOK HOTEL STORIES

III J L Ó

# Rebecca

# Roberta Minghetti

by







#### Roberta Minghetti (1969)



She was born in Ravenna, where she lives. She has dedicated her studies and her work to her two passions: microbiology and communication. She is a copywriter and does consulting in the advertising field. Often lost in the pages of a book, she enjoys writing short stories with the sea and succulent plants for company.





### Rebecca

I like listening to two types of story – those brought by time-wearied footsteps and those that have yet to be born.

I have a dead-weight girl in my arms and two wideopen eyes staring at me from the other side of the reception desk. Anna, the owner of the eyes, quickly recovers from her astonishment and starts to shower me with orders. "The girl has just checked in, her name's Rebecca, put her down on the sofa while I call a doctor, Pietro! Don't just stand there, try calling her name! Lay her down!" I'm paralysed by the events, and generally the presence of such a pretty girl a few metres from me would be enough to cause this effect. The fact that she is actually in my arms, even though she's fainted, should throw me into total chaos, yet what puzzles me most is something I noticed as she entered the hotel.

I try running mentally through the last ten minutes: I see myself in the doorway of the hotel, welcoming guests as I wait for my evening shift. I wait for clients to approach, to cross over the "magic line" and enter the hotel, only in that way can I catch the wonderful *climbing the steps-a pace-break* sequence.

Listening to footsteps has always been important to me, and it has been a subject of study for all the generations of my family. "Footsteps are the soul's way of making itself be heard and alighting on the world" said my grandmother. By listening to the sound a person makes when they move, you can understand much more than just by listening to words. My grandmother taught me that people's souls can communicate with each other when they move through the same space. She believed in many other things too, but perhaps most of them were just old wives' tales.

When I was small I devoted myself to footsteps because the pay was good – a fruit jelly if I managed to connect the footsteps to the person, and if managed it in less than five seconds, I also got the chance to play with the stamp my father kept in the second drawer of his desk. The exercise was this – I hid under the reception desk and whispered the room number so that Daddy was ready to hand over the right key straight away as he threw me a sweet with the other hand. As the years passed, and thanks above all to my grandmother, I learned to interpret those sounds, and now I spend a lot of my time recording footsteps that I then mix with music tracks to send to a D.J. friend of mine who plays in various clubs. I haven't yet worked out if the success of this music is due only to the singularity of the acoustic effects produced or if it really is that, because of the inclusion of footsteps, people find themselves unconsciously perceiving the experiences of other human beings, as if they were listening to the words of a song or reading the pages of a book. Perhaps it is all these things together.

A few minutes ago I was on the doorstep of the Milò hotel, because that is the place I most like to be; the threshold is magic for me, it marks the passage between the everyday and the new. Inside the hotel you are no longer surrounded by the noises and sights that form the backdrop to everyday life. Shapes and colours change... and the souls of those who come in are affected by a silent start which manifests itself as a break in the sequence of footsteps dictated by routine. I sense this change of rhythm as a laugh that somersaults out of the mouth in the middle of a speech, unexpected and sudden. I've always thought I was the only one to have no break in the transition between inside and outside the hotel – after all, the Miló is like another room in my grandparents' house for me. Today, however, my certainty crumbled. A few minutes ago, the girl I am now looking at as she lies stretched out on a sofa, walked past me like a manatee, without a sound, moving the air between herself and the ground as in an aerial dance. I remember following her to the reception desk, staring at her silent feet, and that is why I was in time to catch her as soon as she felt faint. I have no break and she has no footsteps; we are completely complementary.

I am still lost in thought when I realize that the doctor is talking to Anna about our guest's state of health. He thinks it could be a slight panic attack, maybe brought on by the stress of finding herself in a new place. He says some homoeopathic drops could be useful. In the meantime, the girl sits up, not at all surprised by what happened.

"How are you feeling? Is there perhaps someone waiting for you in Lacerna who you'd like to get in touch with?"

- are the first words that come out of my mouth.

"Everything is fine, thank you. Yes, there's someone I



"Inside the hotel you are no longer surrounded by the noises and sights that form the backdrop to everyday life..."

have to meet, but it's not time yet." Her mouth widens in an impatient smile.

I help her up and I realize with surprise that she has no luggage with her. I decide to put my arm around her waist to help her stand and we move towards the lift. Anna runs over and puts the keys to the room into my left hand: it is number 302. "Well done" – I think, looking at the number. The room is all white, from the furniture to the shiny white marble floor. All this monochromatic space could seem cold and unwelcoming, but Anna knows very well that she has made the right choice. And it is so.

Rebecca stops just inside the door and looks around almost euphorically. She frees herself from my grasp and bends over to touch the icy floor with the palm of her hand, closes her eyes, smiles and asks me "Can I ask your name?"

"Pietro, I'm the night porter, if... if... you need anything... don't... don't hesitate... to..."

"Pietro" she interrupts me without standing up and without looking at me "do you mind if we call each other by our first names?"

"No, of course not. You see, I..."

"Pietro, don't worry about what happened. I'm fine,

it's just my way of preparing myself for a special encounter." She sits down on the end of the bed, takes off her shoes and begins to rub her bare feet on the floor. I don't think I've properly understood the meaning of what she has just said to me, but on the other hand, I haven't understood much about what's been happening for almost an hour. I'd like to ask her endless things, but I realize that now her feet are moving in the same way I saw my mother's feet fidget as I hid under the kitchen table to avoid a telling-off. I hold back all my questions, rolling them around my mouth and swallowing them down past my tongue. It's clear that it's time I was on my way.

"I'm going now. If there is anything, please call me at once."

"Yes, thank you".

At the bottom of the stairs, Anna's sarcastic, sly tone reaches me: "Ah, Pietro, so you didn't get lost, you've been ages...She's pretty, our guest, don't you think? Come on, tell me... is she feeling better?"

"It seems she's feeling much better, and I have nothing else to tell you, unless... unless you want to tell me something about a certain Alberto who comes here with his girlfriend of the moment and has now started calling you by your first name and greets you with that knowing little smile every time he sees you," I say with a smile.

A look of understanding puts an end to any further comment from either of us.

The night is my favourite time. The guests are already back In their rooms, the dragon's back shape of the hotel roof seems to be curled around a yawn and my field of vision seems to reveal one thing at a time,

One footstep at a time,

One thought at a time.

I see a shape pass quickly in front of me, move away and stop a few steps past the door of the Miló. It went out with such urgency that it seemed swept along by such rapid thoughts as to be forced to hurry to keep up with them, or perhaps the attempt was to shake them off.

"You can run out of a door, but not out of the night" – who knows why I say that to her.

At my words, Rebecca turns with a start, her head wobbling on her slim, chilled neck and her lips pursed in the grimace of someone who is probably already regretting having given me permission to call her by her first name, "Pietro, you've startled me".



"Shapes and colours change... and the souls of those who come in are affected by a silent start..."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to, I'll go away immediately if you like. Is everything all right?"

She turns her back to me, dropping onto the last step outside the door and resting her head in her hands. Then she straightens her back, and still without looking at me, whispers: "To answer you I'd have to tell you something a bit strange. You wouldn't believe me."

"Perhaps I won't believe you, but I'm sure I'd like your story."

The girl smiles silently and begins in a whisper:

"My life started suddenly, but it was a pretence. My parents imagined me already grown up, missing out on my present as a child. I spent my first and last months shut up in my father's legal office with a boy shorter than me and with manners as dry and dusty as my Latin dictionary. He did nothing but smile at me while I pored over those books full of laws, which were so forbidding to me, just to see if there was a way of getting away with it in the event I managed to get rid of him for good. My parents trapped me, my future and my desire to travel in that office, and satisfied only their own expectations. When I arrived here today and saw my room, white as ice, shiny as ice and cold as ice, I realized what my inner desire to travel is linked to. I want to be an ice-skater and compete all over the world. My only problem now is how to tell my parents, and seeing that I certainly won't be able to tell them straight away, I have to hope I won't forget and will have the strength to do it when the time comes."

Her voice is becoming more and more excited, worried and happy. She goes on, "Professional killers take drugs to slow down their heartbeat because they want to shoot between one beat and another. For my start, though, the real one, I'll wait for the space between two breaths."

The ringing of the reception desk telephone brusquely interrupts the story and I run to answer.

"This is Mr. Giusti in 204! We need an ambulance. My wife's waters have broken! Hurry! We're coming down to the foyer!"

Lacerna is a small town and the hotel is not far from the hospital. They've assured me that the ambulance will be here in five to eight minutes. The Giusti couple are already in front of me – he red in the face and short of breath, his forehead sweating; she with her hands on her stomach, trying to breathe evenly, without success. She makes smothered moans as she grinds her teeth, clutching her husband's hand in a grip that cuts off the flow of blood in his hand. With a snarl she asks me where that "f\*\*\*\*\* ambulance" is. Shocked by the lady's unexpected manner, I answer almost frightened, "It will be here in front is just a few moments, keep calm, everything will be all right. Will it be a boy or a girl?"

Almost relieved at the chance to chat to relieve the tension, her husband answers, "It's a girl".

I don't know how to make myself useful; I turn anxiously towards the outside steps to see if the ambulance is here, but there's no sign of it, and the girl I was chatting to has also disappeared.

Mr. Giusti starts a chant that is totally useless for his wife, but not for me: Breathe dear, breathe... breathe..." I smile and ask slowly, "What name have you decided

on?"

"Rebecca."



### drawings by Rnna Parisi



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# The Saint in procession by Andrea Cattaneo

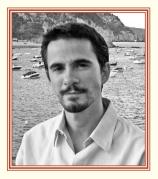








### Rndrea Cattaneo (1979)



Born in Lodi, where he still lives. He has always combined an interest in graphic design (which eventually became his profession) with a love of writing in all its forms. Ideas for his work come from mythology and folklore. He has been working in advertising for some years now.





### The Saint in procession

He arrived at the Miló from Bali at five in the afternoon, with five hours jet lag and a swarm of bees buzzing in his head. At the airport, he had waited at baggage reclaim for three quarters of an hour before discovering that they had lost his bags. All he had was the photographic equipment he'd carried as hand luggage, but he was too tired make a fuss and anyway, he would be able to replace it all in Lacerna.

The girl at the reception desk stared at the bags under his eyes with pity. "Can I help you?"

"I have a reservation in my name," he replied, searching his pockets for the necessary identification. "Here you are". A man at the reception desk with the girl watched him guardedly. He seemed jealous of his colleague, but tried not to show it. The girl's name was Anna, it was written on an elegant name-badge pinned to her chest. She wasn't bad – regular features, a sweet smile and a clear gaze – but she wasn't his type.

What was his type, though?

Well, there had been Kazumi and seven years living together, but then things had finished with her too, just like all the others. They got fed up with a vagabond who was only interested in his work; one who woke up in Tokyo and went to bed that evening in Moscow. They put up with it for a few years, but in the end they gave up. But he only knew how to be a photographer, and even if he had wanted to – and he didn't – he could not have changed profession.

"Your room is number 315," said Anna. "If you don't mind, I'd like to give you this **book**; it was written especially for our guests".

"Thank you," he said, slipping the book into his bag. Since he had no luggage apart from the carryall, he refused the offer of a porter and someone to accompany him; he wanted to be alone for a while.

It was his first time in Lacerna and the Miló hotel had been recommended to him by a colleague. He had been told that it was comfortable and close to both the Gothic quarter and the St. Lestari cathedral. It was ideal for the photos of the procession he had been commissioned to do.

The lift set in the stairwell was a little jewel of retro mechanics, all iron and polished wood. As he pressed the button to go up, he thought back – without quite knowing why – about the years in limbo, when no-one knew who he was or wanted to pay anything for his photos. Then he'd had the right idea – to follow stray dogs wherever they went, day and night, eating what came to hand and sleeping rough. He had documented everything they did, and the places they went in the countryside of the south. In so doing he had discovered corners forgotten by man. In those two months with the dogs, he had become convinced that true beauty was where humanity had become just a remote memory. But when he tried to explain this, he was just made fun of and pitied. Kazumi had been the first to tell him that it was a crazy idea, but it didn't matter any more. Kazumi had gone just like all the rest.

The stray dog photos had allowed him to buy an apartment in the centre of Milan.

The lift stopped at his floor and the doors opened onto a corridor of sinuous shapes that seemed to come from a dream. He reached room 315 thinking, for the umpteenth time, that perhaps Kazumi was right – he was antisocial. Being surrounded only by colleagues, most of them were even crazier than him, he hadn't been able to ask anyone else's opinion. He threw the carryall on the bed, slipped off his trainers and launched himself onto the mattress. He found himself staring at some engravings hanging on the wall; in the typically cruel style of sixteenth century prints, they showed a heretic being burned at the stake and the St. Lestari procession. The witch, who looked like a doll with beautiful black hair in the picture, was enveloped by the stylized flames, and looked up at the sky smiling as she burned.

The phone rang.

"Excuse me, but you forgot your passport," said Anna at the other end of the line. "Shall I have it sent up to your room?"

"Don't worry, I'll pick it up when I go out. Thank you," and he hung up.

Anna wasn't bad at all, and he could well understand why the guy working with her had a crush on her. It was obvious that it was not one of those crushes that happened to him. No, this was something clean, something to be envied. Lucky devil!

He went into the bathroom, had a quick wash, looked at the ever-deeper expression lines in the mirror for a while and then went back to bed. The bees were buzzing more slowly, and now, seemed like big bumble bees



"The lift set in the stairwell was a little jewel of retro mechanics, all iron and polished wood."

he'd smuggled in from Indonesia. Kazumi wouldn't wait for him, she'd said so calmly and in a way that brooked no argument. He had yelled and raised holy hell, but it hadn't done any good. As she threw him out of the house, the Shishi-odoshi in the garden spilled the water it had accumulated and then sounded on the stone as it returned to its original position. That sharp, hollow sound had followed him for months, he heard it everywhere he went, he even dreamt it.

The sound of a car horn caught his attention, and he got up and pulled the curtain. He went back to bed and that time in Calcutta came to mind, when he had been crossing a bridge on a scooter to go outside the town to photograph the untouchables. It had been hot, and even on the scooter his shirt had been sticking to him. A dozen kids had chased him from one end of the bridge to the other, begging for money, cigarettes, anything. He had given them some unused rolls of film (they were still used in those times) and all the change he had in his pocket. As he moved away, he had seen them fighting like tigers over the miserable haul they'd collected. A funeral was being celebrated in the slums, and the people had gathered around a modest funeral pyre. He had stayed as long as possible to watch the ceremony, overcoming the instinct to run away and the nausea from the horrendous, indescribable smell. He closed his eyes and fell asleep without even realising it.

He opened them with a start when the alarm on his mobile started to ring. The procession was about to start, and he'd have to get a move on if he wanted to photograph it. He pulled on a t-shirt, took his reflex camera from the carryall, slung a zoom lens over his shoulder and left the room. The corridor was completely empty, and in a flash he was in the lift going down to the ground floor. The foyer was empty and neither Anna nor her colleague were at the reception desk. There was no-one there and no way to get his passport back without wasting time, but he had his identity card with him and had to be satisfied with that.

The smell in the street was very different to the one he had smelt on his arrival in Lacerna. It was a combination of an imprecise number of smells – from food to the salty air and things that usually ended up in the sewers. He ran down Viale Murata at breakneck speed and then took the alleys that led to the Gothic quarter. He took the Town Hall as a reference point; according to the Lacerna guidebook he had read through quickly, the procession would pass by there. There were more than a thousand people in front of the Town Hall. They were all disguised and their costumes were extremely accurate; it was just like being transported back to the sixteenth century and surrounded by peasants and shopkeepers. The first photos he took were of the people: they were very interesting subjects, faces burned by the sun, full of healthy tiredness, shy smiles and evasive glances.

A child pointed to the reflex camera: "What be it, Master?"

"What did you say?"

"Quiet," said his mother. "Forgive him, master, he's nosey".

"What? Oh, don't worry".

"Oh, here comes St. Lestari," cried the woman, standing on tiptoe to see better.

He attached the zoom lens and framed the giant canopy emerging from an alley, carried by the arms of dozens of men who marked the rhythm of each step by chanting a deep "Domine vobiscum". Above the canopy he saw the colossal statue of the Saint, tied to a pole and wearing the ecstatic expression of a martyr. At her feet was a pile of straw.

Someone pushed him; the crowd was getting excited

and here and there cries of enthusiasm, that seemed out-of-place in a procession, could be heard. After the parade of priests following the canopy, came a cart pulled by an ox. The attention of the faithful seemed to be all on the cart. He focused the zoom on it and saw a woman standing perfectly still in the back of the cart. She wore a filthy smock, her black hair was tousled and her face was that of someone who has not slept for days. He took a volley of shots, fighting against the pushing and shoving of those around him.

The woman was dressed exactly like a prisoner; all those people seemed to have escaped from a Hollywood movie. He had never seen anything like it.

The prisoner smiled brazenly, seeming to want to challenge everyone with her disdainful silence. Her hands were tied behind her back and they hurled stones and insults at her. Santa Lestari's canopy turned towards the harbour, followed by the cart and also the crowd, chanting a litany of saints' names. The people moved like a tide, invading Viale Murata and down towards the sea. Four monks dressed in snow-white habits that stood out against their black capes were aligned behind the cart with the pretend prisoner. A void had formed around them; It seemed no-one wanted to get too close to them. He hung his camera round his neck and elbowed his way through the crowd. he wanted to get some details of the statue, but especially of the pretend prisoner. He had to find a quiet place; the light was going and soon he would have to use much longer exposure times. Without a stable support he risked taking blurred, out of focus rubbish.

He had seen an infinity of processions during the course of his career, and many were pretty bloodthirsty, but he had never seen such an elaborate mise en scène. The whole of Lacerna seemed to be involved in the recreation of a medieval scene; even the lampposts had somehow been removed and the only light was that of the torches handed out to the faithful. None of the houses was decorated with candles or suchlike, the buildings had disappeared into the shadows and only their stone outlines could be seen.

He was starting to like Lacerna, and he was extremely curious about the woman on the cart. Perhaps she was a theatre actress; maybe during the year she worked in some little local show or went on tour around the region with a company. He had to meet her at the end of the procession. He would ask the organizers for information. Yes, he had to meet her, but



"The whole of Lacerna seemed to be involved in the recreation of a medieval scene; even the lampposts had somehow been removed..."

he wanted to enjoy her performance for the moment. "Excuse me" he said, stopping one of the faithful who was wearing a floppy beret on his head – he didn't seem very bright but he would have to do. "What is the woman on the cart supposed to represent?"

"Who, she? She is Hecate Miló, a godless witch and famous sorceress".

"Oh yes? And what do you want to do to her?"

"We'll burn her at the harbour," the man seemed intrigued by his camera, "Strange gorget you have there my good sir, would you sell it to me?"

"No, I need it for work," he cut the man short, moving him aside to get past; the procession was leaving him behind.

"Sorry, I have to go".

If he had understood the guy with the floppy hat's strange accent, the actress was acting the part of a witch and a bonfire would be lit at the harbour. He took a side street. Lacerna was an easy town to find your way around; two roads ran down from the mountain towards the sea connected by a number of streets and alleys. He just had to cut through the alleys that led to Viale Bolso, go down it and he would be at the seafront. From there he could make his way to the harbour and avoid the mass of shouting people blocking the whole of Viale Murata and making it impassable. He began to run, even though his head was spinning. He had not eaten anything for several hours, and his camera equipment was pretty heavy. Added to that was the heat, which had intensified even though the sun had gone down. He dug in his pockets and found only a packet of gum bought at Bali airport; he popped one into his mouth, hoping that at least it wasn't sugar-free. What a hell of a life he led; every meal had to be enjoyed as if it was the last, he could never predict the next time he'd sit down to eat.

Too bad. It was his life and he liked it – better than rotting behind a desk doing the same thing day after day. He chewed voraciously on the gum as far as Viale Bolso, which was dark and deserted. Even though his thigh muscles were hurting, he could not slow down or even stop. He stepped in a puddle, splashing the water and scaring off some stray cats, who hissed at him in protest. At the bottom of Viale Bolso, where buildings as black as pitch stood menacingly shoulder to shoulder, he could see a moving, spreading light – it was the sea reflecting the flames of the procession. He quickened his pace, reawakening the old ache in his left hip, and he started to get a stitch in his side. Although he pretended it wasn't so, he was no longer a lad; his "eternal adolescence" was one of the things Kazumi had thrown in his face before telling him goodbye.

He reached the beach. The flames of the torches carried by the faithful lit up the fishing boats pulled up on the beach for the night. He was in time, the people were still chanting; he could find a place on the beach, lean against one of those boats and shoot undisturbed. The position was perfect, he couldn't have asked for better. He got as far as he could without giving himself a heart attack. He slipped off his sandy shoes, threw his bag on the ground, and kneeling behind a boat picked up his camera and leaned his elbows on the gunwale.

He framed the scene. St. Lestari had come to a halt and lit by the flames of the torches, towered above the golden canopy.

The woman was no longer in the cart. He looked for her through his zoom lens until he spotted her tied to a pole that seemed to grow out of a straw bush.

The crowed had fallen silent.

The woman shouted something and tried to free herself, doing a really good job of acting the part of a witch. He pointed the zoom lens at her, wanting to get a closeup, and when he managed to frame her, she looked straight back at him. For a second that seemed to last a lifetime, she looked straight into his eyes as if she could easily see him in the dark, even at that distance.

She smiled, and she was beautiful.

He swallowed hard and wondered if he was imagining it all.

No, it was just the power of suggestion, it was impossible.

They lit the fire and the straw blazed up immediately. This was the most interesting part; he wanted to find out how they would release the woman from the stake without hurting her and without ruining the show.

The flames rose higher, and a plume of grey smoke filled the sky above the fire. Where had she gone? She was still there. How had they done it? He tried to spot the trick, focusing every which way, but he could only see the supposed witch still tied to the stake, her head drooping on her chest as if she was resigned to the inevitable end. Her shabby clothes burned like paper, leaving her at the mercy of the flames that sprang from the pyre. This was a show like no other on earth, there was no doubt about it.

Then he smelt the odour, and a terrifying association

of ideas formed in his head – Calcutta, the untouchables, funeral pyre, horrible smell.

Should he do something?

What nonsense He smiled and began shooting again. It was all the fault of the tiredness that was making him impressionable.

"Imus omini," said someone behind him. "We're missing the burning".

They were fisherman, and they did not see him in the dark. They pushed him, and he lost his grip on the camera, which hit against the boat and switched off. He switched it back on, and heaved a sigh of relief as the usual words appeared on the screen. Good, the procession was almost finished. He waited until the canopy began its march back to St. Lestari's Cathedral, and photographed the last minutes. He stayed watching until the statue had gone back into the church, where it would stay until the next procession when it would be taken around the medieval town and then back into the cathedral.

Once the doors were closed, the crowd stayed to hear mass and the quickly broke up. He made his way back towards Viale Murata. He could not forget the face of that actress; he wanted to see her up close, to hear her voice.



"The flames rose higher, and a plume of grey smoke filled the sky above the fire. Where had she gone?"

The smell of the pyre, though, he hadn't liked that at all. Up ahead he saw the unmistakable façade of the Miló, and went into the foyer. The atmosphere was much more pleasant and reassuring inside. The reception desk was still empty, but it didn't matter a bit, he just wanted to leave his equipment in his room and go and eat. And that's exactly what he did – lift, third floor, room 315. He closed the door behind him, left the lens and camera on the desk and got into the shower. He stayed under the jet of hot water for a while to clear his mind and start again. He had seen a very strange show, and a vague sense of disquiet sill clung to him.

He got dressed in the same clothes he'd been wearing before having a shower, put on his trainers and saw they were full of sand. How weird, where had he picked up all that sand?

He could not remember.

He tried to think back: take off from Bali airport, flight, seven hours time difference, bees buzzing in his head, landing, taxi, Lacerna, Miló hotel, then perhaps a nap and a shower. His things were spread around the room and he couldn't even remember taking them out of his bag; jet lag played terrible tricks. He picked up the camera that he'd put down on the desk and turned it on – the screen read "card empty". He felt exhausted, as if he had run for hours. He must be getting old. Kazumi was right about everything.

He left the room and went down to the reception desk. Anna smiled; she was pretty, no doubt about it. "Here's your passport".

"Thank you. I'm absolutely starving" he said, trying to be charming. "Could you tell me If there's a restaurant nearby?"

"If you want to have dinner here in the hotel, the restaurant is open," replied Anna. "Otherwise you'll find a lot of restaurants in Viale Bolso, the street parallel to this one."

"I don't think I could make it as far as Viale Bolso," he said. "I'll eat here".

"Good, I'll ask them to get a table ready for you," said Anna picking up the telephone. "If you want, you can watch the St. Lestari procession after dinner. The canopy with the statue will pass right in front of the hotel." "What did you say?"

"Hello, it's Anna. I have a guest who's starving, can you take care of him?"

"What did you say?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"What were you saying about the procession?"

"I said," replied Anna as she hung up the phone, "that it will pass right in front of the hotel. But don't worry, you've got plenty of time to have dinner. You're a photographer, aren't you? You've come for the procession I suppose".

Yes, the procession," he said bewildered. He had the feeling he had forgotten something important. "I'm having something like a déjà vu".

"It often happens to me too," replied Anna with a smile. "Don't worry, it's probably just hunger".

"You're right. Is the restaurant through there?"

His mobile rang announcing the arrival of a text message.

It was Kazumi, he smiled and went to dinner".



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## drawings by <mark>Rnna Parisi</mark>



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## Majorelle Blues <sup>by</sup> Silvia Seracini

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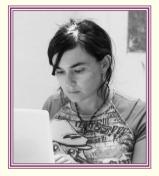








### Silvia Seracini (1971)



She was born in Ancona where she presently works as a librarian. She has a degree in Economics and a Master's degree in Cinema and Television Writing from the Istituto Superiore di Comunicazione, Rome. Some of her stories have won literary competitions and been published in anthologies. In 2006 she founded the <u>RaccontidiCittà</u> cultural association.





## Majorelle Blues

Flashing. First, a rustle like that of distant fronds, then a less and less shrieking hiss from the few centimeterswide metal mouth that gradually faded to silence, though remaining wide open. A long, long curve, whose gold and steel arc had illuminated the whole city for what could have been no more than a fraction of a second. But why then had it seemed an endless corner of the eye vision of a shooting star sucked from a fifth floor window of the Hotel Miló to the few resistant couples still entwined on the benches along Murata Avenue?

It had all started on a beach and it was all coming to an end on a beach at Beluga, together with the last bonfire dying among the dunes at one of the Lacerna townsfolk's favorite places to have fun. It had been right on a Mediterranean beach that Mostafa had taken part in his first fashion competition. His Middle-Eastern charm, his amber skin, and his almond smile had bewitched an international panel of judges. There on that beach, surrounded by the wildly flashing eyes of the cameras, the captivatingly handsome Moroccan had taken his first steps towards success in the glamorous world of fashion.

Although she was on vacation, Dana Fox, Britain's most acclaimed designer, did not let this magnificent virgin prey escape her. There were very few models in Mostafa's home country who had embarked on that profession without being drawn into the sticky web of prostitution.

And so Dana had taken to draping that perfect body with neutral-colored clothes that, according to her, highlighted the gold in his silky skin, the soft folds of his fleshy lips and the dark shade of his eyes.

First, however, she had stripped him bare, since she hated the brightly colored clothing which had always represented vitality and wealth to him.

In the beginning it had been mostly about the parties and the celebrity for Mostafa, that and the money with which he supported his family in **Marrakesh**. Then came the daring games she liked to play with ropes and riding crops, and the expensive gifts with which she rewarded his docility. Such as that steel and gold ring the designer had commissioned from a celebrated goldsmith. She had given it to him on the beach and he had taken it as an engagement ring.

How naive. She had laughed at him for that.

His long eyelashes filled with tears because he was truly docile and loved Dana, who had given him so much. He had often felt the cut of her sarcasm, but this time the wound would not heal.

He had just left the exclusive party on a yacht moored in the Lacerna marina when he saw the little girl.

She came down the side of an ancient Gothic cathedral reddened by the last rays of sunset and ran along the edge of the strand towards him, smiling. He was surprised to see her alone, given the time of day. She did not seem afraid however, rather her emerald eyes had regarded him trustingly once she had drawn near.

Suddenly she stopped and dusted ashes and opalescent fish scales – dragon confetti? – from the filthy undershirt, that hung to her knees and had gaping arm holes that left her pink armpits and part of her chest bare – as if she had stolen this piece of clothing from her mother or an older sister – before beginning to run again, now in the opposite direction to the sea. He had the urge to follow those footprints that happily dotted the beach, so he trailed her like a stray dog. All the better, given that he had no idea where to go and certainly the little girl would lead him to someone who could tell him the way.

After having hesitated for a moment upon the threshold, the little girl made a peculiar hop through the entrance of a hotel where sinuous lines on the facade outlined marine animals, reptiles, and shells – Hotel Milò he seemed to remember having read. She crossed the lobby with sure, harmonious steps before disappearing into the deep central atrium that housed the elevator and the staircase.

"On vacation with her parents," Mostafa had thought when he intercepted a brief exchange of friendly, conspiratorial looks between the girl and the bizarre looking receptionist wearing large glasses and peering out from under a bouffant, curly hairstyle.

"May I help you, Sir?"

He's a dreamer. He would like to flee, but he doesn't have the strength. Room 105 would be perfect for him, but he has



"... and with him the moon, be swallowed up by the blue flower of the bed."

asked for a room on the top floor, close to the moon. Room 302? No, it's all white with a cold marble floor.

Still intently peering after the girl child, his tapered hands were pleasantly surprised at the unexpected warmth of the key that the boy behind the counter handed him.

Approaching the elevator that was already waiting and opened emptily as soon as he pressed the button, he had given one last look at the stairs that wound upwards, deserted.

There was a salty odor inside the limited space of the cage. And an odor of ashes. The gears of the hoisting mechanism ticked like an antique clock.

Steps like those of a wounded gazelle that echo millennia of trodden earth.

Pietro – so read the name written on the tag affixed to his breast – had written, hunching his shoulders over his notebook:

... steps restrained by the din of centuries of chains...

The large, finely-wrought iron bed in room 513 opened to receive Mostafa like a blue petaled flower.

A glimpse of the colors of the *suq*, together with the odor of cumin and the nauseating one of leather,

hurled him backwards in time into his hometown's covered market.

The intensity of that memory made his heart ache at the thought of his body imprisoned in the absolute absence of colors that characterized Dana's designs, and his eyes glistened with tears in the night.

"You are the color of milk and I of amber, you are rich and I'm poor. You are always looking for a taxi and I for the stars. You give me a steel and gold ring and I, to you, my desire to care for you for the rest of my life. I ask you again, Dana, will you marry me?"

She and her friends exploded with laughter.

"Rather, it should be me asking you, my dear. But don't worry, I will leave you free."

Her friends had continued to smile and chew on the straws in their cocktails and he had wandered away with his heart broken.

No, she hadn't followed him to ask his forgiveness. She never did because she was sure he wouldn't be able to go far without her.

An unusual perfume of orange blossom permeated the air and intensified the image of the moon between the curtains at the windows of room 513. The whole room was completely blue, except for a peculiar, dark red, stuffed cushion with a partly rounded and partly pointed shape that was ensconced on the bedspread.

"Just the moon keeps me company in my room, only I can't sleep by myself," Mostafa tortured himself while clutching the cushion to his breast. That moon kept telling him stories to keep him awake.

"Rather, it should be me asking you, my dear. But don't worry, I will leave you free."

He had hurled the ring at that stupid satellite, which continued to mock him from behind the curtains, trying to wound it. Finally, exhausted, he let himself, and with him the moon, be swallowed up by the blue flower of the bed.

Aicha, the little girl he had dreamed of marrying when he was small, was playing at embroidering the fates of her suitors with blue silk thread in a **garden** flourishing with cactus, lemon trees, and bougainvillea in the new city.

"You are nice, Kamal is richer than you, Nabil is very intelligent..." all the while circling him. In the end, he found himself with his hands tied behind his back and



"... the little girl he had dreamed of marrying when he was small, was playing at embroidering the fates of her suitors with blue silk thread..."

the other children taunting him with a singsong, "How stupid you are, Our prisoner are you..." while gall rose in his throat, preventing him from making any retort.

He awoke at dawn's first light, with bags under his eyes and a parched throat, to the voices of children bickering outside. Then it wasn't a dream after all! Clutching the small cushion, which was all wrinkled by now, he approached the French window that opened onto an unexpected garden. Again that tormenting perfume of orange blossom and almond paste.

The little girl from the beach was sitting next to a boy of her age on a crooked swing under a soaring blue Art Nouveau arcade in the garden from his childhood. The boy was in penumbra and his face could not be discerned, though his voice sounded familiar. The two kept sliding to the lower side, squabbling over sweets typical to his native country.

At the same time they spelled out the words letter by letter as they read uncertainly from a book that was much too large for their sugar-sticky hands.

"I soon realized that I was enthralled by his strong character, that I hung on his every word and copied everything he did [...] Until after a while, I realized that I had stopped doing the things that I liked, and I began to feel a veil of unhappiness enshrouding my spirit more and more every day." >> (N. 1)

"My parents imagined me already grown up, missing out on my present as a child. I spent my first and last months shut up in my father's legal office [...] My parents trapped me, my future and my desire to travel in that office, and satisfied only their own expectations." >> ( $\mathbb{N}$ . 2)

"... true beauty is found where humanity has become just a remote memory: I learnt this following stray dogs wherever they went, day and night, eating what came to hand and sleeping rough." >> ( $\mathbb{N}$ . 3)

"Unkept promises ... "

"Or, maybe, when you give up something that you like doing to because of someone..." went on the little girl, sliding her finger along a different line in the big book that reddened her knees with its weight.

"Unkept promises and disappointed hopes, I was saying..." the little boy was trying to take up the theme again but was continually interrupted by his little companion swinging at his side. Or rather, they should have been swinging together given that they were seated on the same swing, but an imperceptible dissonance rendered their swinging awkward. Only upon looking more carefully did Mostafa realize why the swing was uneven: one of the two chains suspending it had an extra link. It was a ring that glinted gold and steel grey. The same ring he had rid himself of only shortly before.

He felt a pang pass through the cushion he clung tightly to and remembered vividly a precious wish from his childhood. With every sip of mint tea he renewed his promise to himself never to abandon his search for a love as pure and intense as the blue in the heart of that garden, where among the palms, bamboo, banana trees, and azaleas, he had dreamt of marrying Aicha.

"Don't worry, it doesn't finish that way!" the girl had reassured him, indicating a line with a small finger. "You are still in time to choose your ending," she said with an infinitely sweet smile.

Having become as young as Aicha again, he imagined brushing her lips with his and he truly tasted almonds, orange blossoms, and mint tea.

With that imaginary kiss, he had put the little girl to sleep, and with her, her mysterious companion.

He had rested during that intact moment in which the hands of time stood still, before jumping ahead or diz-



"... one of the two chains suspending it had an extra link. It was a ring that glinted gold and steel grey. The same ring he had rid himself of only shortly before."

zily spinning backwards to recover past dreams and passions buried under the sands of the merciless hourglass. But no, time doesn't work that way at the Miló. At the Hotel Miló, time is guided by the desires of its guests. That is as it should be. Forever.

Feeling as if he were still swinging, he had awakened from what seemed to him a reawakening, and now the sunlight filtering through the open window of his room lit up his amber skin.

Outside, Murata Avenue was slowly coming to life. Like him. Like **Jeema el Fna** plaza, that took on the colors of the vendors' stalls, the street musicians, and the snake charmers every day.

He smiled.

It wasn't true that he had no place to go.

"May I help you, Sir?"

"Anna" was lettered on the tag she had pinned to her breast.

"I found this book on my window sill. I don't know how, but a little girl who is staying here with her parents must have left it."

"Thank you, Sir. But there are no children among our guests at the moment."

With a smile and without further ado, he left the Hotel Miló, barefoot, the splendor of his skin revived by the Majorelle blue bedspread he had draped around his statuesque body.

"He's a very handsome young man, don't you think?" as she replaced the book in a space under the reception desk.

The healed gazelle regains his springy step and sets off again to the rhythm of his heart.

A curly-headed boy sitting under the reception desk switched off his small recorder and stamped another page of that book while sucking a little vexedly on his umpteenth fruit jelly.

"Thanks again for having covered those two hours for me yesterday evening. I really needed to stretch my legs a bit," Anna whispered to him as she slipped off her jogging shoes, kicked them under the reception desk and replaced them with a pair of elegant pumps whose heels crunched on grains of sand.

Flashing. First, a rustle like that of distant fronds, then a less and less shrieking hiss from the few centimeterswide metal mouth that had gradually faded to silence, though remaining wide open. A long, long curve, whose gold and steel arc had illuminated the whole city for what could have been no more than a fraction of a second. But why then had it seemed like an endless corner of the eye vision of a shooting star sucked from a fifth floor window of the Hotel Miló to the few resistant couples still entwined on the benches along Murata Avenue?

But it's well known that lovers tend to believe anything. The ring, on the other hand, ended up in an envelope in the lost or left property room, together with an elegant colorless linen suit.



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## drawings by <mark>Rnna Parisi</mark>



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