



# The Saint in procession

by Andrea Cattaneo

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### hotel miló

#### ~ LACERRA ~

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## I M

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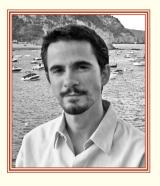








## Andrea Cattaneo (1979)



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.











#### 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.





#### 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.

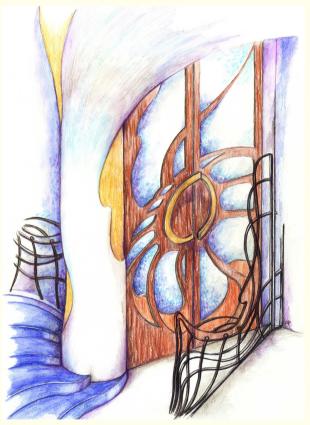
The phone rang.

"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, over-

coming 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 blood-thirsty, 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 har-

bour 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 close-

up, 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.

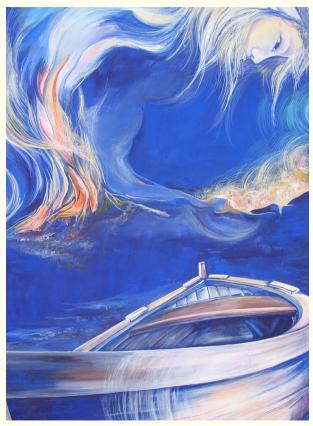
Should he do something?

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 facade of the Miló, and went into the fover. 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".

Appointment at the Miló in the next story:
"A Majorelle blue heart"
by Silvia Seracini











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