

SOUNDING BRASS, TINKLING CYMBAL

“Quand’è che devi partire?”

Supine on the grass she looked quizzically up at him. In his tight black jersey shirt and narrow black trousers he stood, a hard-edged contrast with the soft brick-reds and ochres of the crumbling temple wall.

She replied with reasonable fluency in the same language: “End of the week. University initiates at the end of September, but I want time to relax after voyaging, before striking the books.”

She turned over onto her stomach and peered out through the ruined portal at the surrounding green Campagna, at the fieldstone house nearby, at Carmelo’s motorcycle parked in a long grassy scar, all that remained of the Via Appia Antica highway.

Dropping down beside her he put a hand lightly on her back, fingers dragging as he ran it down her spine.

“Then there isn’t much time.”

She turned back over, to look past him at the irregular patch of milky blue sky sealing the breach in the once-domed roof. “For what?” she asked, half-smiling. “Not much time for what?”

His hand had remained where it was, tracing a line round her body when she turned, now resting casually on her breast. Gently, she picked it up and dropped it on the grass between her and her purse.

He flushed. “You understand. For us. Before you return to America.”

“Oh.” Plucking a withered blood-colored poppy she inserted its stem between her teeth. She smiled provocatively.

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His face hardened, his voice was intense as he burst out “Is that all you say? ‘Oh’? Do you not understand how you make me insane? I love you!—I want to go to bed with you. I want us to make love, so that when you leave I’ll have at least that to remember you with!”

Such passion, she thought – and since yesterday. Did it really exist? At base it must be (she decided) synthetic, whipped up to show he loved her so she would scratch his itch. But by now he believed in it himself.

She negligently raised her left hand, where a blue-white diamond glittered. “Have you forgot I’m engaged?” Voice playfully argumentative she said “What would Richard say, if we did and he found out?”

His responding wolfish smile said that he knew where he was, when the prey argued in these terms.

“And how? Who would tell him?”

“I might. He wants me to be honest with him, always.”

He laughed outright. “You wouldn’t though – even an American is man enough not to put up with that!”

Anche un’americano... why did Italians believe themselves the only real men? Richard was a man, all right; strong, but gentle and considerate. And Carmelo... she tried to imagine sex with Carmelo; would it be savage, demanding, he tearing at her flesh, a driving pumping masculine machine that would leave her limp, exhausted, fulfilled...?

Or would he too prove a disappointment?

No! she bridled. That wasn’t right. Not at all. How had her mind even thought that? She and Richard would marry this June. She would have her Bachelor’s, he his PhD...his thesis was almost finished, he had written in his last e-mail. Only his oral remained. Then he would be an associate professor somewhere, teaching mathematics and doing research, and she would give a hand in the family business via internet. Her degree in philosophy offered no career she particularly wanted to follow. And a faculty wife? *Ugh!*

“*Che fai, Carmelo?*”

His glance was suspicious, as if he feared she were making fun of him. But he answered with dignity. “I am an automobile mechanic.”

She saw him coated with slippery grease, under a powerful Ferrari, thick muscles bunched beneath close-fitting coveralls as he strained to loosen ... what? A tight screw?

“And how much do you earn?”

“*Ottocento euro al mese.*”

A thousand dollars a month.

“*Sposiamoci*,” she said.

The scowl of astonishment that greeted her marriage proposal almost made her laugh outright. But she had surprised herself.

“Are you mad? I gain scarcely enough to maintain myself and Mamma. How could I maintain you? You cannot be serious.”

So much for the romantic, devil-may-care Roman. “No. I suppose I wasn’t.”

“You are rich,” he continued, voice self-pitying. “I am not. We could never live in Italy...” His face grew sly, eyes two gleaming points behind a veil of craft. “...unless you might mean that we go to America. In America, I could become rich. It is said that there even a mechanic gains three thousand each month...”

“No. We would have to live here, in Italy.”

“No. That is impossible.”

Impossible anyway, she thought, unreasonably depressed at the bursting of what she recognized to be a soap bubble, blown from the surface of a treacherously fluid language

His fingers played lightly over her breast, and when she did not react, became bolder. “Only in America,” he breathed.

The wheels turning in his head were almost visible: if I could lay this *americana*, give her a taste of real Italian love, she would trip over herself to marry me and take me to America...she rolled away, to lie again on her stomach. *Don't be a whore!* she wanted to shriek.

His hand had begun stroking her back, but now insinuated itself between the grass and her breast, to lightly stroke the thin layers of cloth covering her nipple.

And how easily he would make use of her: his grand passion did not disdain manipulating her as an object. One that would fulfil all his desires – or so he thought. She sourly smiled. She couldn’t fulfil her own desires, and he thought she could fulfil his.

There it was again! and what did that mind of hers mean? Every desire she’d ever had had been fulfilled. She’d wished love – she’d met Richard. A final fling before marriage – her parents had given her this trip to Europe. Sex? here was Carmelo. Really, she decided, she could wish for nothing in the world that she couldn’t have. So how could she be dissatisfied?

Cerebrating, she hadn’t remarked Carmelo’s hand travel up her low-cut blouse to insert itself between her brassier and her bare breast. It was now caressing her nipple in earnest. A dull flush of pleasure there tentatively warmed her. Along with dull pleasure she felt dull resentment, for his treating her as an object. For using her.

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Was that all love was, she wondered: just using the one you loved? A vision, horrific, sprang before her mind, of a vast mass of scummy humanity loving and busily and squalidly using those they loved.

Richard...?

The dull flush concentrated and flared to a sputtering red flame burning along her nerves toward her loins.

How would Richard use her? If she wanted it he would support her, demand nothing of her...

But there were things she wouldn't be free to do, once married to Richard. Like this; here, with Carmelo. One hand stroked her nipple, the other, all unawares, had infiltrated under her skirt and stroked her inner thighs.

But how would *Richard* use her? This was important, she decided. She must figure this out, while she lay here in a warm bath of pleasure...could she e-mail Richard asking?

Slowly she shook her head. A hand hesitated.

"Don't stop..." she moaned.

That would never do. He would e-mail back proving to her, no doubt mathematically, that love was mutual sacrifice, not mutual use. He talked a lot about the sacrifice of love, it struck her, as if love were a demanding religion and its act some holy rite performed with eyes upraised to heaven.

Fucking....

Voluptuously, she writhed on the grass, and turned over. She heard his gasp of passion and felt hands fumble at her panties.

"Not here." She heard her voice clogged. "They might see, from that house..."

"Where, then?" As if remembering who was in charge he stated more firmly "We'll go to your room – we cannot to mine: Mamma's at home."

Caprice flickered in her. He would use her? Then it would be on her terms. "No—" she gasped. "Like this – outside. Under the sun – on grass."

He glanced wildly about. "There are houses everywhere.. There is no place!"

"You'll find one," she asserted, again writhing voluptuously, her slick polished-cotton skirt slipping deliciously across her hips. "Let's take the *moto* and look..."

"*Si—si, la moto...*" he stammered, jumping up, jerking her up when she extended a hand.

Tremblingly they slid down the temple knoll and ran to the motorcycle. Jabbing the key into its lock he kicked the starter pedal. The motor roared. As she leaped on astraddle behind him he snapped in the clutch. The cycle lunged forward motor snarling to lurch bumping over

ancient paving stones. She bunched her tight skirt up over naked thighs and slipped arms around his chest, letting a finger play with his nipple. It protruded, hard, beneath his jersey.

They jounced from the abandoned Via Appia to meet the last section of the old road in good repair. She peered at it, visualizing the patches where the asphalt wore thin and the old, black, stones showed through.

They now roared down a cobblestone road, she thrilling each time he slowed to point to a grove of trees, as if asking “There?” Each time she shouted forward “No! There’s a farmhouse,” wishing more to prolong the quivering excitement of the search than to find a safely hidden glade.

Weaving dangerously they shot into a straightaway through a grassy valley with a pine grove, accessed by two ruts. Pointing behind them she shouted “*There!*”.

He squeezed both hand brakes and the cycle shrieked to a skidding halt. The motor died and he savagely stamped the starter. The cycle growled to life and he swung in a screeching U-turn. A Mercedes Benz flashed by, horn blaring. Abruptly he turned and they were bouncing in the ruts.

“Perhaps there,” she said, pointing.

The cycle bucked to a stop and they jumped off. He didn’t forget to lock it, she observed. He bounded ahead through high grass toward the pine grove, leaving her to trail behind.

“Wait!” she called. “Wait for *me!*”

Nettles in the grass stung her bare legs and she swore. Needles now hissed beneath her feet as she walked toward him. He was pulling off his jersey.

She, pointing: “But there’s a *house!*”

Jerking his jersey down he swung round to look. With the heel of a hand he struck his forehead a glancing blow.

“*Mannaggia all’Inferno!*” His oath was almost sobbed, she noted

He bolted off back into the grass. She half-ruefully followed. He was now running about in circles – like a maniac, she thought. Looking again she realized he was systematically stomping down the hip-high marsh grass to a glistening green carpet. She watched. Finished, he sank down, peeling off his jersey.

“Here!” he said with decision.

She crouched down. A solid wall of grass surrounded them. She wondered if she felt anything, now.

“Here;” she reluctantly agreed, unbuttoning her blouse.

Naked she lay back on her elbows to gaze at him. Hunkered, he was trying to put on his pants and falling over, cursing at each failure. She looked down to see a gluey trail of saliva-white semen trickle sluggishly along her thigh. Frowning with distaste she wiped it away with a swatch of grass.

And she hadn't even come. She wondered why, and decided he'd looked too ridiculous, stomping about in the weeds like a child looking for lost candy. If he asked, she would say she had. Richard always asked. She recalled now the anxious brittleness of his face, the scarcely-controlled tremor in his voice, as if he awaited with pent breath her judgement—

“Yes Dick, you are a real man” or

“No Rich, you weren't enough.”

Whatever, she did not want the man she was marrying to look like a child who, seeing a precious gift dangled out of reach, bravely struggles to keep his underlip from quivering. That precious gift, she sardonically thought, her approval.

Approval! She almost laughed aloud. *That* was what Richard used her for! He wanted her blind approval. Of his performance in bed, of his appearance when they went out (“I think this yellow tie goes rather well with my purple shirt, don't you?”). Even approval for having gone on for his PhD. Not that he would ever alter his actions by a hair to win her approval, she realized. Only, by withholding it she could sap the joy he derived from what he would already have done – or increase his guilt over it.

It was, she dismally thought, power of a sort.

She delicately slipped on her panties. Carmelo had solved the problem of his pants and was lighting two cigarettes; he inserted one between her lips. She nodded with a shallow smile of thanks, though averting her eyes, and puffed. The Italian cigarette tasted like burning worms. She sighed and put on brassier, blouse and skirt. She slipped feet into shoes and glanced about.

“Carmelo. Have you seen my purse?”

“No. Have you not brought it with you?”

“I don't know.” It irritated her that her voice exposed her anxiety. “I don't recall. Look around for it here, please.”

Ten minutes of fruitless search forced her to admit other possibilities:

“Perhaps I left it at the temple.”

He scowled. “I doubt it. I didn't see it.”

“Nevertheless, we must go back. It has my passport.”

“*Mannaggia!*”

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They trudged back. She glared at Carmelo, walking slouched just ahead of her. He clearly didn't want to go back for her purse. Well, too bad! Now, she furiously thought, now he had satisfied himself, now he had used her, he had no further interest in her. She irrelevantly cursed herself for having lost her purse.

He started the motorcycle and silently awaited her. Humiliated by seeming to beg a favor, she snapped "It displeases me *terribly* to inconvenience you, Carmelo. But I must have that purse. If you don't care to take me to the temple, I'll walk there."

As if carrying out her threat she continued on past, hating him for her own absurdity.

He shrugged. "Of course I'll take you. It is only..." He paused.

"Only what?"

"Only, it does not please me to return at once to a place where I have been."

"Superstitious?" she mocked, faintly smiling.

He shook his head. "If one has been to a place, one has done something there. And to go back to that place is to..to undo what one has done."

"Take a different route...?"

She straddled the cycle and they eased along the ruts. In gloomy silence they retraced the same road. Back on the abandoned Appia Antica Carmelo bumped slowly along it, as carefully avoiding ruts and holes as he had recklessly driven over them before.

She clambered up the temple knoll. He stood meditatively at the base.

Crossing the threshold, she spied her purse. Sighing with relief at one burden lifted she withdrew from it her instruments, comb and lipstick and compact. She arranged herself, an elbow clutching the purse to her side.

Finished, she looked out through the arched window at the Roman countryside. The sun hung low in the sky, throwing long melancholy shadows from fences and trees; a line of funereal cypresses, like a file of gaunt pallbearers for the day, glumly stood nearby. Inside the temple, shadow fell blue across the grass, pierced by a single elongate arch of tired yellow light. A stray puff of breeze rippled in shuddering waves the grass and the few faded wildflowers. Suddenly, bleakly, she felt a sense of failure, as apparently sourceless as total and terrible. She slumped down to sit awkwardly. Feeling tears run down her cheeks she dug in her purse for a tissue.

Carmelo entered. "You found everything?"

She nodded.

He did not remark her tears. Sitting down beside her he moodily gazed off over the fields too.

After a pause she said “I didn’t think you’d want to enter the temple again.”

“It is better so,” he muttered.

“What do you mean?”

“I showed myself an incompetent to you, back there. And it all began here.”

She was silent, proposing and discarding. At length: “How did you know?”

He snorted. “I would be more fool than I am, if I didn’t know when a woman is faking!”

“Strange,” she said unreflecting. “...I’m surprised it matters to you.”

“What—? But of course it matters!” he spat. “If it did not, I would have no need of *you*.

This hand would serve!”

Glaring at her he savagely extended it, fingers clawed; she felt her face redden.

“Oh,” she said, voice small.

He had used her, she thought in confusion, but she had been of no real use. She had failed even there as, she realized, she had somehow known already. She had got no pleasure from him – and he had got none from her. Could she have given him pleasure, she wondered, *only* by obtaining it from him? Was it a law of love that, in being used by the one who – no matter how transiently – loved you, you must, inextricably, use him, and, in fact could *be* of no use otherwise?

Then, how did she use Richard? No, she corrected herself. The question should be, did she need to give him her approval? And if not, could it, contemptuously conceded, really be of any use?

She sighed. She would think it out on the plane. On her answer would depend whether she married him. She thought she knew it already, though, now she’d asked the question.

“Well,” Carmelo said, following some vein of thought that now outcropped in words, “I would have found it difficult anyway, to leave my country...” He gestured to the sun-gilded and shadowed Campagna.

She nodded and they rose, each to resume a different life.