

THE AMERICANO

The *americano* who rents the seaside villa once owned by the nuns is a lonely man, the villagers think. There is sadness in the man's gaze, says the old fisherman, Pierpaolo. During his evening walk, he has often spied the *americano* staring longingly out to the sea, as if he is waiting for someone who has promised to return to him by boat, but knows that person will never come.

After three weeks here, the *americano* is no longer a stranger. He takes part most evenings in the *passeggiata*; but, though he cordially greets in Italian each of the villagers he encounters in the central piazza, he always chooses to stroll unaccompanied. And on those occasions when he stops at the *osteria* for a glass of wine before returning to his villa, he politely declines the invitations to join one or another of the groups gathered at the tables there. It is clear he prefers to be alone.

They accept his solitude because they believe him to be a writer of books. During the first week of his stay, the *americano* enlisted the young boy who assists Pietro, the villa's gardener, to help him move a heavy oak table out onto the veranda. So he can take advantage of the sea breeze while he writes, he told the boy.

"He writes religiously each morning for exactly two hours," Sophia mentions to the butcher as he wraps the razor-thin slices of prosciutto the *americano* prefers with his olives and cheese. She has been instructed, she tells him, not to interrupt the *americano* until she serves his light lunch on the veranda precisely at noon. As she lays out his meal on the table, he transfers the sheets with the day's writing effort into a leather portfolio which, she is fairly certain, he keeps locked inside the bureau in his bedroom. She has seen him fingering the key as he pushes

away from the table to retire for his afternoon siesta. “As if he fears I will steal his words,” she says to the butcher, laughing and waving off the inanity of such a presumption as she leaves the shop.

When the gardener’s assistant asked him if he was an *autore*, he lied and answered yes, he was a writer, knowing that neither his rudimentary Italian nor the boy’s simple English skills were adequate to communicate the truth, that he did not write books. That he is writing, instead, to unburden his guilt.

It is painful for him to be here. He knows he cannot magically flip back the pages of the calendar and set into action a different chain of circumstances, just as he knows he cannot atone for his transgression those many years ago. He has chosen this village for his final confession because this is where the girl had come. Where she died.

He has never trusted emotions and his attempts at relationships have all failed miserably. He has preferred, instead, to romance power lunches and adrenalin deals. He chose to wrap his arms around ambition, and found out too late she is a cold-hearted bitch, unable to comfort you when you are dying, leaving you lonely and heirless in the end.

Only now, at that point where he’s become acutely aware of his own mortality, is he able to allow himself to feel remorse. It is an alien feeling. He does not pretend his words will absolve him of his past indiscretion. He writes for the satisfaction of feeling guilt and regret fill a long-empty emotional void within him. In this sense, he realizes, even his confession is self-centered.

Anna-Maria hefts the basket of neatly pressed and folded bed sheets onto her shoulder. She is getting a late start this morning and will have to hurry to deliver the basket to the nuns if she is to return home in time to prepare Pierpaolo's mid-day meal. She knows he loves her like he would his own daughter and will worry about her if she is late. That he dotes on her as if she were still a young girl is not surprising, for it was the fisherman and his wife who raised her after the nuns were no longer able to care for her. Now that he is old and widowed, she is grateful for the opportunity to reciprocate and care for him as a true daughter would.

The new convent – she still thinks of it as new, though it has been over twenty years since the nuns moved – is a long walk along the bay road, much further than the old convent, the villa the *americano* now rents. As the number of the Poor Clare Sisters dwindled, the Order, out of economic necessity, had sold the villa to a rental agency in Genoa and relocated to the smaller old abbey a half-mile beyond the village.

Oftentimes she rests for a few moments on the stone wall of the villa's expansive garden, in the shade of a row of cypress trees, before continuing to the new convent. When she closes her eyes and smells the fragrant honeysuckle and lavender blooms from the garden, she can picture herself as a young girl again, playing on the lawn under the watchful eyes of her mother and the nuns. The memory is bitter-sweet, though, for it is here, too, that her mother died.

Today she cannot linger, but pauses long enough in front of the villa's wrought iron gate to glimpse the impressive lawn sloping up toward its veranda. There, in the shadow where the late-morning sun cannot reach, she sees the *americano* intently scribbling on the sheaf of papers in front of him. As if sensing he is being watched, he looks up from his writing and, his pen still

in hand, waves at her. Afraid he will think she is spying on him, she returns his wave then quickly steps away from the gate to continue her trek to the convent.

He hears the blaring horn and the screech of tires against the hot asphalt of the bay road just seconds after he has waved to the woman who does laundry for the nuns. Thankfully, there has been no sound of metal crashing against metal or scraping the stone of the garden wall. The instant of relief turns to fear, however, when he notices the woman is no longer standing at the gate.

When he arrives at the roadside, the woman is on her knees, gathering the now soiled laundry and stuffing it into her basket. She is crying, but appears to be uninjured. The fresh black tire marks on the pavement and the distant high-pitched whine of a gear change are the only other evidence of the near disaster.

“Are you alright, *Signora?*” he asks, offering his hand to assist her to her feet.

Between sobs, she tells him she is physically unharmed, but fears she may have ruined the convent’s linens and will lose her job as a result. “My father and I depend upon the extra income,” she explains.

“I’m certain the Sisters will be understanding,” he assures her, “and thankful you have not been injured.”

As he consoles her, he is surprised to find that she is much younger than she had appeared from the vantage point of the veranda, perhaps little more than thirty years of age. Her plain blouse, full skirt and heavy black shoes had been misleading from a distance, as they

resemble those of Sophia and the other older women of the village. That she does not dress in the modern styles of the younger women suggests a life that has afforded no luxuries.

When he says he will speak to the nuns on her accord and offers to have Pietro drive her back to the center of the village, she raises her face at last to his and impulsively kisses him on both cheeks out of gratitude.

“*Grazie, Signore,*” she says. “You are too kind.” Tears begin to well in her eyes once again, and he is struck by a haunting familiarity in her wide, dark-brown eyes. They are Gabriella’s eyes.

He knows there was a daughter. The letter that arrived several weeks after the mother’s death noted that his was the sole address among Gabriella’s meager possessions. As there were no known next-of-kin, the convent was writing him in the slim hope he was the child’s father; or, if not, perhaps he knew of family somewhere who could provide for the orphaned daughter. The details of Gabriella’s death were vague, only that she had tragically drowned while bathing in the sea in front of the convent.

At that time he’d had no regrets for abandoning the mother, and the letter had gone unanswered. By then he was too rich and too powerful to bother with the consequences of a summer romance in Europe a decade before.

The *americano* has informed Sophia he will be leaving the villa this week. The news is not a total surprise to her. He no longer writes in the mornings and is now frequently away from the villa for several hours during the day. She knows he has been to the abbey just beyond the

village, to admire its medieval architecture, she guesses, since no one in the village has seen the *americano* at Mass since he arrived here. It is generally assumed he is not a Catholic, perhaps not even a spiritual person.

There have been other signs of his imminent departure, too. Three mornings ago he shocked her by announcing he had invited the attorney, *Signore* Armand, to lunch with him on the villa's veranda the following afternoon at two. To her knowledge it is the first time since his arrival here that the *americano* has chosen not to dine alone.

He requested she prepare the local seafood specialty, sautéed scallops served over risotto with a rich *aragosta* sauce, and had personally selected the bottle of Vermentino to be poured with the meal. During the meal the two men spoke in a hushed tone, as if discussing something confidential, and when she appeared to clear the dishes from the table and serve their coffee, they halted their conversation until she was back inside the villa.

Later, as she was turning down the *americano*'s bed for the evening, she also observed that the bureau compartment he always kept locked was open and empty.

He has called at the convent on Anna-Maria's behalf as promised, and the Sisters have confirmed what he already suspects about the young woman. The girl was orphaned, the Sisters tell him, when her disgraced and depressed mother drowned herself in the sea. Uncharacteristic of her compassionate order, one of the nuns, a novice when Anna-Maria was a child at the convent, professes her hope that the man who was responsible for the mother's mortal sin is now, himself, suffering eternal damnation in Hell. Suddenly aware of the piercing glares of the other Sisters, she crosses herself and rushes from the room. Unknown to her, though, her message has

penetrated its target and, feeling his guilt will betray him, he mumbles an excuse to the Sisters to justify his own quick exit.

There is no reason for him to remain here any longer. He has entrusted to Mr. Armand his written confession and paid him three times his normal fee to assure the necessary legal documents are drawn up urgently and delivered to the daughter, Anna-Maria. “She will, of course, know that I am her benefactor,” he’d told the attorney, “but the details of my relationship to her must be kept confidential for now.” Handing the attorney his confession, he added, “Present her this only after I have departed the village.” He’d carefully assessed the attorney’s character during their lunch together and is confident the man, as promised, will keep the leather portfolio locked in his safe until then.

As if to convince herself it is real, Anna-Maria clutches tightly against her chest the envelope *Signore* Armand has delivered to her earlier in the evening.

“There must be a mistake,” she’d said when the attorney revealed the envelope’s content and recited a sum of money, an amount so great it staggered her imagination. “Perhaps the *americano* means this for the convent and wishes me to take it to the Sisters.”

“I promise you that is not the case. I have personally seen to the transfer of the funds per the *americano*’s instructions. The money is yours.” To dispel her doubt, the attorney pulled from the inside pocket of his suit jacket a similar envelope, this one clearly addressed to the convent. “As you can see, I have here a check of an equal amount that the *americano* has instructed me to deliver to the Sisters tomorrow morning. There is no mistake.”

“But why does the *americano* wish me to have this money? I don’t understand.”

Signore Armand assured her she would soon receive a full explanation. “The *americano* has entrusted me with an additional document for that purpose,” he said, “a rather lengthy one in his own handwriting that he’s asked me to have translated before presenting to you.”

“At the very least, I must hurry to the villa to thank the *americano*.”

“I’m afraid that’s not possible, for he has been called away to take care of some urgent personal matters. As I promised, you will have the answer to your question soon,” he’d told her before wishing her a good evening and showing himself out the door.

Anna-Maria’s mind is still swimming from the attorney’s visit. She knows she and Pierpaolo will no longer struggle to make ends meet as before, that there will even be money for a few luxuries that had previously been out of the question – a color television set for Pierpaolo, perhaps, and a new stove for herself. Hers has always been a simple life. It is hard to imagine much beyond that. She is anxious to share their sudden good fortune with Pierpaolo, but knows he will stop for his usual glass of wine after his evening walk. It will be late when he returns. She finally settles into sleep, not fully grasping that she is now a very wealthy woman.

The moon is full, creating a shimmering silver ribbon across the sea. It is much like the night he met Gabriella. It was the summer after he’d received his MBA from Yale and was squandering his graduation gift from his father in the bars and casinos along the Mediterranean.

Gabriella was cocooned in her sleeping bag. He’d staggered across the road to the beach from a loud, smoke-clouded club for some fresh air and had nearly stumbled over her. He’d

noticed her eyes – wide with fear – before he noticed the girl, the way the moon’s reflection seemed to swim in their darkness. Sitting beside her on the sand, he’d gradually wooed her from the sanctuary of her sleeping bag, charmed her into his hotel room, and enlisted her into his summer holiday hedonism.

They were unlikely travel companions: he, the son of a wealthy industrialist, and she, a runaway teenager who carried everything she owned in her backpack. But after he had purchased her some stylish clothes and offered her the luxury of the best hotels along the coast, she carried herself with a poise that could easily have passed back home in his upper-class, country club society. Dressed up, she was a stunningly beautiful young lady. When they walked into a casino or a restaurant together, he savored the attention they drew as a couple and basked in the envy he imagined the other men in the room to have for him at that moment, as if he’d just trumped their egos by driving up in a more expensive automobile than theirs.

Perhaps, she misunderstood his attention to her, took it to be something deeper and more permanent. He did not intentionally delude her, but erroneously assumed she could see that his life was already planned out and that theirs was nothing more than a summer’s interlude in its grand design. When she had cried and begged that it be otherwise, he had acted the coward and slipped away from her in the middle of the night, leaving her pregnant and alone.

He knows *Signore* Armand has completed the promised transactions and has delivered a check to the daughter this very evening. He is unburdened now and will go to Gabriella finally tonight. If, as the Sister has suggested, her suicide has separated her from God, he will fulfill the wish the nun expressed to him and join the mother in Hell. He knows he can now allow himself to love Gabriella.

When Pierpaolo spies the *americano* crossing the road from the villa, he quickly crouches in the shadow of a fishing dory that has been pulled up onto the beach. He does not want to intrude on whatever it is that the *americano* yearns for when he gazes longingly out to the sea. He is surprised when the *americano* does not take a seat on the bench at the top of the beach as he usually does, but continues to the water's edge.

He has heard from Sophia that the *americano* is leaving soon. Perhaps he has decided at this late hour on a final swim, or has come to the beach to admire the full moon over the sea one last time.

Without pausing to remove his leather sandals, the *americano* wades into the sea at the point where the moon's reflection touches the shore. When he is waist-deep in the water, he leans forward and begins to stroke towards the horizon, still following the ribbon of moonlight.

The old fisherman is surprised at how strong a swimmer the *americano* is. He is nearly half-way to the horizon when, his strength apparently sapped, he disappears beneath the silver surface of the water.

Responding with the instinct of one who has spent a lifetime on the sea, he attempts to push the dory to the waterline. But the tide is out and the boat too heavy to be launched by a single man across the expanse of sand. The beach is deserted at this hour and the nearest neighbor to the villa a half mile down the road. Rescue, he realizes, is hopeless.

He takes a final look toward the sea and offers a Sign of the Cross for the *americano*'s soul before turning and continuing his walk along the coast road back to the village center.

Inside the *osteria* there will be *vin santo* and spirited conversation. There he can muffle the drowning with wine and village camaraderie. If the subject comes up, he will simply say that he has watched the *americano* depart the villa and is certain the man is no longer lonely.

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