

The Things of Italy That Can Be Told

Clayton sat at the top of the same hill as the woman but that did not mean he had a place of equality with her. Only time, not the fact that he had come upon her eating a homemade lunch, could determine that. He spoke an American English, befitting where he was from, while she held her perfect Italian in reserve to meet him in his native tongue. He didn't tell her she was beautiful—that was understood—but he did tell her he had been on a park bench in the town down below, and while it was hard to rank memorable moments, he said, it was also certain that the old men gathered about on a weekday morning, one wearing Nike sneakers, were a poignant reminder of things to come in his own life. Not that he was asking her to vitalize him—he had other resources for that—and, to be blunt, sexual favors were not the thing, since desires of that kind had begun to mitigate themselves in causal connection with increased incapacity. What he needed to say, and what needed the effort of a reminder, was that it was still important to be seen and heard, that much as he might like to be, he was not above the tourist hordes with their endless snapshots committing their lives to memory, that in fact he was not unlike anyone, that was how strong his affection for the truth had become, that just the previous night he had been in a restaurant within earshot of two couples of very different nationalities, and to hear them talk on the subjects of the day, to try to make contact where only the empty spaces reigned, was not eliciting of contempt but rather embarrassment, and in that way the trap gets sprung, we fail to find warmth on the

surface of things and yet cannot escape shame when we seek to go deeper. The woman—her name was Isabella—had no choice but to stay within her Italian essence, and she did it well, shaping and containing him in the way that a woman must, with her rich history to back her up. Clayton never once said he was in love with her, though clearly she could see it was so, the American man in his early fifties struggling up the hill and looking younger than he really was and adhering to the value that he placed on honest communication, if only he could chip away at the chatter to get to the deeper thing, which might only be that he had been alone so long that the touch of the flesh might seem like an aberration.

“The thing that you must understand, as you may have already noted, is that context appears to be lacking. Where are my friends? Where is my job? Where is my suitcase, for that matter? Am I simply a man wearing Eddie Bauer jeans and a casual jacket and dusty shoes? Where is the miracle, the stamp of approval, that anyone could so easily need in order to move forward to a place not of abortion but of culmination? I hear you saying that with your eyes and the very contours of your body. The message you give me is very clear—you are a woman, yes, but you are not ready to receive American imperialism. Your system is not built for that, as the joining would so clearly be that of an antic child with his mother.”

The woman offered a gaze of contemplative intelligence.

“So what is it that you do?” she finally said, seeking to understand why he had nailed himself to the cross of low self-regard.

“Do? Do? I work with words and seek to grow in the image of the Buddha in my presence.”

“What does that mean that you work with words? Everyone who can talk works with words. Are you a writer? Are you established in a profession?”

“I am an editor.”

“Does that mean you publish books?”

“No. It means I am a conduit of mercy where none existed before.”

“Non capisce,” she said, retreating fully behind her Italian essence now.

“It means my name does not appear on what I do, that I in some sense seek the anonymity of the grave.”

“Your talk is strange.”

“There is a need for strangeness, if by strangeness you really mean urgency. If nothing else, the earthquakes should wake us up as to what is real behind the images we effect.”

“As a scientist, I am seeking logic, not intuition.”

“Then you negate Einstein, whose theories derived from flashes of insight, not the steel trap of the logician.”

She had black hair and a thin body and all the features of beauty.

“I do not negate anyone. But the specific must have a place. We cannot simply have the anarchy of words flying around in space.”

“You are seeking to wrestle me to the ground. You are seeking to establish my pedigree.”

“Pedigree?”

“Worth. A quantification process has begun, as it must for all women.”

“For all animals, I would say.”

“So I will turn it around and ask what it is that you do, and how you come to fly so high while staying on the ground.”

“Research. How do you say it, meticulous research?”

“A question that needs no answer. Lightly declared, your words create a strong grip. So you have culture to shape you and science to define you and your womanliness to guide you. Thus you are a fortress and only the demographically sound can reach you.”

“You are a bitter man beneath your smile. You are angry and hurt.”

“As an Italian you are equipped for emotion and sleek passion.”

She batted away his words deftly with a gesture of her hand.

“Anyway, I don’t want what I left behind. That doesn’t mean I don’t miss it,” he went on. There was no need to say what she knew, what every woman knew and had it in her power to give, the tender touch, the stroke of the cheek, and all the rest that civilization flowed upon.

“Are you seeking pity?”

He now had his own hand motion of rejection to make. Sensing that all was lost (so he could live), he realized it was time to open up.

“If you take the art of Italy you have to take the turmoil underneath it. And what it can mean in volatile people that an angel appears and announces the coming of a baby, then the baby’s arrival, and finally depictions in many different poses in the course of the unformed nation’s obsession with the goodness of its own progeny. Because sometimes the child is arrogant, a little snot, and at other times peculiarity reigns in his visage. Suppose I was to tell you that in another lifetime I was the bambino and you were the

Madonna and we were fated to meet once again, whether the trains ran on time or not?

Suppose, just suppose, that were the case, signorina?”

“But you are clearly older than me.”

“We are talking historicity, not contemporaneity. Disregard the body. Disregard it entirely and focus on the affect that needs to be created here. A man is not asking to be taken care of. He need only be adored.”

“I must go now. You assault my senses.” And yet she stayed under the watchful, beaming sun.

“I find you defiantly strange within your walls of certainty.”

She laughed, but not in a friendly way. “Now I really will go,” she said, but again remained in place, seeking containment within the dimensions of her own thinness.

Clayton sighed. “Then I will have to win you over with my recent life experiences here in emotionally charged Italy. The first involved Salmonica Giusti and the turnings of her own mind as it interacted with mine. One has to take a stand against the perception of infamy in the eyes of another. The train I took was surely of superior stock but the seat I secured for myself did not meet the requirements for tranquil journal writing, a centering action for many worldwide. The obstacle presented itself in the form of two conversing passengers across the aisle in facing seats, and so my American nature led me to exploit the happenstance of a vacated seat elsewhere. I seized the moment with a logistical operation profoundly reasoned as well as swift to ensure that the tranquil space could be mine. So did the stage come to be set for the odd and potentially tragic experience that followed. At the next station a woman of great beauty boarded and seated herself across the aisle. Science has surely laid out in detail the process that activates the god or demon of lust in us, and perhaps you can speak to that later. Feeling such stirrings,

I countered with a disciplined aplomb, seeking the freedom that deep and focused breathing can bring. The, to demonstrate my detachment from her allure, I turned my gaze to the green and fertile earth of Umbria outside the window. To add to my innocence, I allowed my hands to dangle below my legs and to flick them back and forth, imagining this as an innocuous gesture. Turning back I saw that she had moved. The seat she now occupied was not facing but aligned with mine. A puzzling moment had arrived that slowly had its dark explanation. What seemed at first on her part to be a whim was some minutes later sensed to be a reproach, and as to the question of what I could have done, the answer soon followed. The hand gesture. It had something to do with the hand gesture. Good God, the woman thought I was a dirty old man. And if I needed any confirmation as to where she was coming from, her hard stare as we both departed the train told me what was occupying her outraged mind.

“It is not for me to dwell on injustice born of misunderstanding but to retreat into the safety of the self. Toward this end I had an ally. His name was Signor Alessandro Gracchi and his flashy jackets were in sync with the energetic music of his life. He ran one of the very best hostels, a converted mansion, in the Tuscan hills, and it was there that I could take refuge and flourish with a mind once again all my own.

“But a mansion attracts spirits from the past and present, including the demons of revenge; once a judgment has been rendered, they require no further questions. And so was I brutally woken from my bed by a chanting nocturnal mob with torches ablaze in one hand and sharpened spears and daggers in the other meant for my own fearful heart. There is a time for reason and a time for darkness, and when have the two ever jibed? The Italian men had their hungers, and if that was for my blood, it was only because the aggrieved woman had stoked the fire for vengeance in their veins.

“Wolves howl, dogs bark, and aging men can metamorphose, if they are lucky. No, I did not vacate the premises. I simply became a fly on the wall of love thanks to the elegant presence of Signor Gracchi, possessor of silk evening jackets that announced his spirit large. Have you ever been a fly on the wall as a posse of the righteous closed in on you with frothing mouths? Have you ever seen them rush to your bed with implements of destruction only to find that you’re not there? Have you ever experienced the delicious sense of safety that comes from such a thing? So it was with me, in an experience memory has committed to, the confounded ones finding an unmade bed still warm from the peaceful sleep of its occupant. ‘Vicino, vicino,’ they declared in unison, and twirled around, yes in unison, exhorting the very walls to yield the dreadful one’s secret, so violence of a frenzied kind could begin, as if their honor depended upon the hacking, gouging, the complete snuffing of the offending one’s humanity, if such it could be called.

“Suddenly a voice cried out, ‘Your madonna is a great big whore. She dances in a strip joint in downtown Roma. Check her out.’ The offended young woman uttered a malediction that sounded like ‘marone’ and then ran her finger across her throat and chomped her teeth most savagely. Oh, a fly on the wall can be a beautiful thing. It sees the brutality of the human condition and marvels at its own brief safety. The regiments for the resurrection of justice were stalled, unable to find an outlet for their cleansing wrath in the confines of the room. No one died amid the gnashing of teeth, but when quiet returned it was with an air of disappointment that they hadn’t been able to complete their assignment.

“The next morning Signor Gracchi brought forth Giulietta di Carmenstanza, born Joan Smythe, in the town of Worcester, Massachusetts. Her face was streaked with the

tears that can come at any age but they didn't prevent her from bringing her performer's personality to the dinner table, where she expressed her hope that something could be effected for her on the world stage and rescue her from her austere room. Signor Gracchi nodded sympathetically as she waved a thin arm in dismissal of a world gone wicked without her even as he held out hope that others with their American dollars would be attracted to the former mansion. For emotional balance she relied on long solitary walks, sensing that new terrain was needed to replace the ground that she had once walked on, that in the plainest terms she must think not as a dancer but a choreographer if her life was to proceed on her charted track of destiny, a word that in the moment appeared to me to be the hidden fact of all reality. Still, she had her womanhood and the flashes of connection that would come sitting at the dinner table prepared by Signor Gracchi, the idea of family coalescing around this gathering of the far-flung *seeing how little they could spend on foreign soil*. No one asked her to come tumbling out of her hillside exile, but I did suggest that we take a walk the following afternoon. She talked the language of the funny in response.

“Only if you promise to be quiet and walk behind me,” she shouted, in hysterical reaction to the rapprochement of sex and desire, there being a time in Italy for activities other than eating.

“I took my leave from the table, harboring not merely a sense of rebuff but also of *peculiarity*, the possibility that the lady from the states was manifesting attitudes central to her character. Nevertheless, I simply said, ‘Yes, my lips will be hermetically sealed and I will tail far behind,’ and dragged myself off for a night of sleep, for early retirement ensures the gift of early rising. But it came to my attention in the course of the night, my journey through unconsciousness now interrupted, that there was activity on the floor

above of a tormented, pacing kind, and it became further apparent owing to visualizing intuition that the pacing party in a shabby robe on the floor above was none other than Giulieta di Carmenstanz, a butcher knife half the length of her leg held faithful to her side. I saw in that vision of threatened annihilation the great tumbings of the world that I had conjured, saw, that is, myself as perpetrator on the one hand and victim on the other, with women as both my targets and the wrath of God upon me. What I saw, of course, was that to interact with women was to invite death, and that adumbrations of this fate permeated my existence. The time, of course, quickly came for action of the dramatic variety. Once again I underwent a metamorphosis, and from a lintel atop the door I waited, a tiny winged creature wrapped in an intense feeling of safety. I first heard the outer door open and then the inevitable footsteps full of menacing stealth and then her entry into my place of sleep. It is beyond me to describe the terror I experienced or the savagery of her assault, the repeated thrusts of her knife into the mattress and the accompanying facial expression which the light of the moon revealed, most outstandingly the fact of her tongue clamped between thin lips as she pursued the mission she herself had named Operation Revenge or the rage that same face expressed when it became clear that steel was not meeting flesh and bone.

“For that one night I slept in my adopted form, the lintel making an excellent accommodation, and fell into a dream that featured a German shepherd with a close resemblance to a loathsome wolf. Because in a moment of impulse I had woken him from his slumber, someone *I could not see* cautioned me that this was a dog that savored snacks of human flesh. No, I cannot tell you the outcome of the dream, only that the snippet presented for my consciousness was enough to impact on me as one of life’s most powerful and, you would think, obvious lessons, that being, let sleeping dogs lie.”

Isabella now was surrounded by armed guards who ushered her from this site where she was no longer content to linger, their reassuring presence ensuring the proper digestion of her meal.

Clayton meanwhile stayed in place and began to chant. For hours and hours he sang his syllables in a level voice, and when he could take it no more, he did cartwheels over the grounds to celebrate his liberation, before he too made his unheralded descent, no choir of angels in evidence. But that was outside the realm of significance for him in that moment as he headed toward the older men of Italy on the park benches far below, down where the town dared to live.

Isabella appeared shortly, exiting her four-star hotel. The guards had fallen away, but the man of her life had not. He showed himself distinguished in his American blue jeans and a tailored jacket he wore with a white shirt open at the neck. Off they drove speaking the language of pure science in his black luxury car.

Clayton followed the red taillights along a curving road lined with cypress trees before turning in surrender to the slow rhythm of the older men of Italy.

“Once upon a time,” he began, in a language his new friends did not speak and had no way of understanding.

