

I

New York, September 2001

"Mulberry and Canal, please."

The cabbie looks at her in the rearview mirror while the car pulls off into the Broadway traffic.

"Are you a tourist?"

"No, I'm a New Yorker."

"But you were not born in New York?"

This puts her off. This really puts her off. Thirty plus years in this country and they still pick up traces of her Italian accent. Traces, mind you. It's practically all gone.

"Were *you*?" she asks, staring at the prayer beads dangling from the mirror. There is a note of irritation in her voice. The mirror sends back to her the liquid gaze of two dark eyes, now slightly sweetened with the hint of a smile.

"None of my business, miss. Just trying to make conversation."

Okay, he wants to be friendly. Let's be friendly.

"So, where are *you* from?"

"Afghanistan."

Image association. Amy sees flashes of Soviet tanks roaming the country, ambushes on mountain passes, destroyed cities and villages—the footage she used to see in the news twenty years ago. Then, she recalls recent humanitarian appeals for women executed in sport fields, their *burkas* looking like the hoods of witches burnt at the stake in medieval times.

"How long've you been here?" she asks.

"Since 1981. I was a kid. My family was among the lucky ones who made it. We loved our country, it was very beautiful. But then the Russians came, you know, they upset everything. And now a pack of mad dogs took power."

"Yeah, the Talibans. Is this what they're called? They're the ones who blew up those ancient Buddha sculptures, right?"

"I told you, miss, they're mad dogs. They say they rule according to sharia law. But this is not the Islam I know."

The cell rings. He picks up and starts an animated conversation. The cab fills up with harsh guttural sounds. He turns to her.

"Sorry, it's my wife. She wants me to take the kid to school today."

The conversation turns into an argument that does not seem to be going to end any time soon. Amy closes her eyes and dozes off, lulled by the traffic that rushes the car along like water in a stream.

It's a bright September morning. A quarter to eight, according to her watch. Amy hates going out that early, but this is the only time when she can have a quiet conversation with Rosa. At any other time, Rosa would be too busy with work at the pizzeria, all day long 'till late at night.

Rosa... Amy has known her for ages, since way back in Italy when she was a child and Rosa was a maid at Villa Flora, her grandmother's country estate. Here in New York they don't see each other often, only occasionally, when Amy feels like being pampered with a home-cooked meal and an outpouring of affection. But today she has to talk to Rosa about a matter related to work. She needs to verify a detail from the old times. It's for this manuscript she's getting ready for publication. A very special manuscript. The work of a childhood friend.

As the president of L&N Publishers, Amy does not do a lot of editing herself, not anymore. She has a dozen editors working for her. But this manuscript is really special. She would not entrust anyone with the job. It has to be her, because she's been so close to the author. They grew up together, they played together, they went to school together, and they spent the summer months together at Villa Flora. Amy and Stella, two inseparable friends. They even looked alike, although they had different personalities. Later, they went to the same parties, fought over the same boys, made peace, graduated in the same class, and moved to the States at the same time. Amy does not remember exactly when they first met. Stella has been there from the beginning.

Amy's family was not a regular family. She had an American father, and no kid with an American father was considered a 'regular' kid in Italy. Everybody looked at this circumstance as something exotic and very chic. When he came to visit, Amy would parade him in front of her schoolmates as a creature from another planet.

It was the end of the fifties, and Amy was ten years old. The planet 'America' was basking in all its glory. Images of smiling GIs entering Italian cities devastated by a brutal war were still on the minds of many, those indelible images from news reels that some fifteen years earlier had filled the movie screens and the pages of illustrated magazines. In those days, they had stirred deep emotions and feelings of gratitude among the people. And not only that, people shared a sense of awe for those guys who looked so strong and healthy and smart and outgoing compared to the gaunt faces and desolate looks of the local folks, an army of demigods with good white teeth, bestowing a cornucopia of chocolates, nylons, and ball-point pens upon a destitute population.

But for the kids of the industrial boom, who saw those war pictures as historical documents of a remote past, the planet 'America' consisted of the mythical Far West, cowboys and

Indians movies, Mickey Mouse and the Disney menagerie, chewing gum, baseball caps, Coca-Cola, and the latest musical craze—rock and roll. It was cool to look American, a popular song told them. It went like this:

*Tu vuò fà l'americano, mericano, mericano,
ma sei nato in Italy...*

Sient'a me, nun ce sta nient'a fà.

Okay, napoletà.

(You want to look American, merican, merican,

But you were born in Italy...

Listen to me, nothing to be done.

Okay, Neapolitàn.)

As a result of the Marshall Plan, Italy was catapulted out of a dormant economy still anchored in the nineteenth century, into the world of mass consumption. Where centuries of wars and occupations had failed, American culture won. It encroached upon tradition and marked the beginning of a huge transformation. The transformation was not just economic, but also social and psychological, as is often the case.

Because of her American father, Amy was considered privileged among the kids. But in a nice way. It was sort of an admiration devoid of envy. In fact, you can only envy someone who is like you, just luckier. Not someone who belongs in another sphere. They felt she was different, that's all. And, although they looked up to her and sought her company, they never felt totally at ease. And so, she had no friends. Only Stella.

One summer at Villa Flora, Amy and Stella were lying in the meadow outside the gardens, in the thick grass that would soon be cut to make hay. The hilly landscape of the Piedmont countryside south of Turin, renowned for its fine wines, was displayed before their eyes, like in the frescoes adorning the walls of the villa. The meadow was on a slope, rolling down gently to the bottom of the hill. Wild flowers

provided splashes of color on the green field, hundreds of nuances of purple, blue, yellow and white. Beyond the meadow were the vineyards, on smaller hills, one after another in an undulating succession, like the waves of the ocean. The sun was at its zenith. The heat energized the earth and made every color more vivid, every smell more intense, every buzz more vibrant.

"Are you really leaving next week?" Stella asked.

"Of course."

"But do you *really* want to go?"

"I can't wait. Dad said he'll take me all over the States and show me those places he sent me postcards of. I'm so excited. Why don't you come along?"

"I can't go."

"Why?"

Stella rolled over and lay flat on her back, then opened her arms to cover as much ground as possible. She took in a deep breath of air, dense with the fragrance of grass and the rich smell of earth.

"I feel like little shoots are growing out of my body and making their way down into the earth. Right here. It's the sun that makes them sprout. And I'm tied down and becoming grass and flowers myself."

"Come on! Cut it out. I know you're good in composition at school, but... the fact is you're just scared. Scared of going so far away from home. I bet the minute you get there you'd start crying because you miss mommy."

"Amy...!"

That was Rosa calling from the alley that led up to the villa.

"Amy...! Lunch is ready. Hurry up, don't make *signora* Amelia wait."

Signora Amelia was Amy's grandmother. Amy was supposed to be named after her, but at the last minute mother decided that Amelia was not good enough, and named her America. Yes, *America*. Was it a way to influence her destiny? She didn't know. But she liked it. She really did.

"Coming!" Amy shouted back, as she and Stella sprinted to race each other uphill.

"I can't go," Stella repeated. Meaning to America, not to lunch.

Well, Amy did go and had a great time. She had graduated from fifth grade that year and there had been some discussion in the family on whether she should enroll in an American school for a year abroad. But mother thought that she was too young and that a summer vacation would be more than enough for her first American experience. As it turned out, Amy never had her year abroad. She had other vacations, though, and eventually moved over there to enroll in graduate school. But that first summer in New York was memorable, and nothing in all the ensuing years could ever compare to it. Upon her return, Amy recorded that experience in her diary, a cute little notebook daddy gave her to develop her love for writing.

To be around dad was a lot of fun. He called me names I had never heard before and that made me laugh—sweetie, sweetie pie, sweetheart. I thought he made them up. But most of the time he just called me, girl. I loved that. Simple, direct, without sugar. It implied a rapport of camaraderie. Especially when he said it with a wink, as in: Alright, girl? Wink.

I thought he was very handsome, with longish blond hair and a mischievous smirk. And he had a way with women they found irresistible. In fact, it was almost impossible to have a private moment with him. There was always one girlfriend or other around, at home and at the office.

Home for him was a large penthouse on two levels on the Upper East Side with a view on the park. He lived on the top level which had huge rooms, floor-to-ceiling windows, and even a swimming pool on the deck. On the lower level were the offices of L&N Publishers. Dad was the boss. Actually, he was the founder and sole owner. Why L&N then, I asked,

what does it stand for? He said that L stood for Lawrence/Larry, which was his name, and N, for None in Particular. It just sounded good. Dad was like that, he liked to tease. But I thought that, perhaps, he needed someone to stand by him.

A private elevator opened straight into the reception room arriving from the lobby fifty floors below, in fifty seconds. To me, that elevator was sort of a fair ride. And I would go up and down up and down, just for the fun of it. The office suite was very busy, with its team of tweed-jacketed, pipe-smoking editors—the intellectual type—engulfed in loud discussion with each other, and a large staff of pretty women. After work, colleagues would show up in the living quarters for drinks and conversation. The one that came upstairs most often was Molly, the only woman editor. She had a great athletic body—she had been a swimming champion in college—and on weekends she spent hours in the pool doing laps. When she was done, she would give me lessons. At the end of the summer, I was an expert swimmer. I liked her a lot, and so did dad.

But at times, dad felt that he needed a break from Molly, the pretty staff, the office, the authors, the critics, the book launching parties, and the many demands on his private and public life. At those times, he would look at me and say: Now we're going to disappear. Just the two of us. Alright, girl? Wink.

Once we disappeared for two weeks. Dad kept his word and took me to all the places I had seen on postcards, "from sea to shining sea." He sang for me while driving his Corvette convertible toward the Rocky Mountains and beyond. We went as far as California where he grew up and where he still had the Santa Barbara mansion he inherited from his parents.

All this was dazzling for a kid her age. But even in her enchantment she would, at times, think of mother back home

and feel a sting of nostalgia. Amy wondered why she categorically refused to come and live here. Anna, that was her name, said her life was in Italy, especially her life as an artist, because she could not grow and express herself outside of her own environment. She had achieved some recognition as a young artist, and now her works were internationally known. At the beginning of her career, she had a show in New York. It was on that occasion that Anna and Larry met.

The gallery owner had commissioned the catalogue from L&N Publishers, and at the opening he introduced Larry to the artist. Larry was a big hit with women. Anna was very beautiful. Tall and slender, she moved with the grace of a reed wafted by a light breeze, and her classic features possessed an inner radiance. Larry was smitten. So, that night the two of them ended up in the penthouse. Anna did not leave the next day, as she was scheduled to, or the next week, or even the next month. She stayed in New York much longer than she had planned. When she finally left, Larry followed her and spent several months in Italy. He went back after Amy was born, when he became convinced that Anna would never agree to marry him.

When Amy returned from that first summer vacation, she was bombarded with questions—Tell me about America. It must be fabulous over there. What did you see?—And she must have repeated her story a hundred times, about the swimming pool on the deck, the fifty-floor elevator, the tropical greenhouse in the lobby with its parrots and streams, surfing in the Pacific Ocean, and other marvels. Stella, in particular, wanted to go over the details time and again. They practiced English together, spending long hours on their favorite bench in the rose garden at Villa Flora, reading a wide range of novels from Jane Austen to Mark Twain. Amy was pretty fluent by then. She made a lot of progress during her summer months in New York, and, of course, it helped that she had an English nanny as a child. On the other hand, this contributed

to her strange accent, an odd combination of native Italian, stylish British, and ordinary New Yorkese.

"Here we are, miss. Where should I drop you off?" The cabbie wakes her up from her reverie.

"Can you pull up by the pizza place, over there? D'you see the sign, Santa Lucia?"

"Lucheeeah...is this how you say it in Italy?! It sounds pretty. Isn't it misspelled on the sign?"

Jeez, something's lost in translation, Amy thinks, and I don't have the time for a language lesson.

"Here, keep the change. And go take your kid to school."

"Thank you, miss. It's nice of you..."

...and something else she can't hear. She's already running, always on the run.

She catches a glimpse of her image in a shop window. She likes what she sees. Slender figure, good legs, bumpy curls, a focused gaze, a smart designer outfit... Overall, a youngish, sexy woman. She'll turn fifty-four in a month and she looks even better than the glamorous boomers on the cover of AARP Magazine. I'm gonna have a big party, she promises herself.

The door to the pizzeria is locked. She has to go in from the parking lot in the back. Rosa is surprised to see her.

"Hi, beauty!" She actually says: *Ciao, bellezza*, because she prefers to speak Italian to her. They hug and kiss. "What happened? Did you fall off the bed?"

"Sort of. Way too early for me. Last night I worked until 2 a.m."

"You need a good cup of coffee. Real Italian espresso."

Rosa goes behind the counter on which a massive Illy coffee maker towers in all its glory of shiny chrome, black levers, bending tubes, hissing spouts, and steam puffs. As a result of her skillful operation, the machine releases a precious drop of concentrated coffee in each of two tiny cups. Rosa brings them to the table and they sit down.

The dining room is large and bright, with tasteful Mediterranean decor—white walls, terracotta floor, dark wood furniture, and ceramic panels with landscapes of the Amalfi coast imported from the region. On one side, French doors lead to a patio lined with potted lemon and orange trees. On the other side, a wood-burning oven is in full view.

“I had not seen it after the renovation,” Amy says, looking around. “It’s really nice. Simple and elegant.”

“You should tell Chris. He’s the one who designed it and supervised the work.” Chris is Rosa’s son, a successful architect and the owner of a hip design studio, the first in the family to graduate from college. Rosa continues, “It took him a long time to convince his father that the place needed a facelift. Joe didn’t want to hear of it. He liked it the way his parents set it up fifty years ago, with Formica table tops and an electric oven tucked away in the back of the kitchen. But now, he too is happy with the results. Business has been terrific.”

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Stella's Story: Chapter 1

Los Angeles, 1967

The light filtering through the venetian blinds woke me up like every morning. I looked out the window. The sun was already high, painting our backyard in bright colors. The avocado tree—so green; the hibiscus flowers—so red; the water in the pool—so blue; the fence around the lawn—so white. Another sunny day. So predictable.

It was November. At this time, the hills around Villa Flora disappear in the fog, and down in the valley a light mist that smells of truffles covers everything. My skin, my hair, my mind longed for a quick dip into that mist, just to absorb new sap.

Jim was still asleep. He slept until late in the morning and nothing would wake him up, not even a temblor of the San Andreas Fault. He tenaciously clung to that torpid state as if he dreaded to face the beginning of a new day.

From the living room, the radio reminded me that "*it never rains in Southern California.*" Too bad. I put on a bikini and went for a swim. Not in our pool, the size of a soup bowl. In the ocean. The ocean, out there, frightening and majestic.

We lived in Venice. That is, Venice, California. The house was right on the beach. In those days Venice was a funky neighborhood, a favorite hangout of the Flower Children who drifted south after the Summer of Love in San Francisco. But also students and junior faculty with no money lived there. Small run-down bungalows and overgrown yards lined the streets

parallel to the beach. Other streets with the same bungalows and cracked sidewalks crossed them perpendicularly, creating a symmetrical grid. Some lots looked abandoned. They were empty, except for a lone gas station or an occasional convenience store with a big sign in the front. Others hosted used car dealerships, festooned all around with a line of red and blue fluttering tags. The closest supermarket was ten blocks away, by the ramp to Highway 1. Huge billboards broke the flatness of the landscape, rising above the roofs and pitching their products in deafening colors. I never really liked it there. I found it difficult to blend with the environment.

I closed the bedroom door behind me. The house was empty. Everyone had already gone out, leaving the breakfast dishes on the kitchen table. Hamlet trotted toward me and rubbed his nose against my legs. He almost threw me off. Not a frail creature like the melancholy prince, this Great Dane was a huge beast, his head reaching above my waist. His dish was the only one still clean. They forgot to feed him. I poured in nondescript brown balls from a 20-pound bag of dog food and added some water. I went out the front door, not bothering to lock it. Door keys were not an item in use. Nobody ever locked the door, day or night, and thefts were a rare occurrence. It was more likely to find a stranger sleeping on the couch than to find something missing. I crossed the front lawn cluttered with folding chairs, sleeping bags, and children's toys, and stepped on the boardwalk.

The boardwalk was narrow, lined with palm trees. It was not commercialized, there were only a few vendors of hot dogs and *chili con carne*. The glamour of Hollywood was miles away. Sunset Boulevard ended up on the Santa Monica beach, well north of Venice.

I found myself a spot on the beach where I could have some privacy, and laid down my towel. Young people in tattered jeans and colorful rags hung out there, strolling leisurely or lying on the sand, their manes blowing in the wind. Bead

necklaces, bracelets, anklets and headbands completed their look of urban refugees in an imaginary tribe of noble savages. There were no boom boxes on that mythical shore, only guitar playing and singing—*If you're going to San Francisco/be sure to wear some flowers in your hair.../If you come to San Francisco/Summertime will be a love-in there.* That was not Scott McKenzie, but it was good enough to fill the late morning atmosphere with languorous daydreaming. The smell of pot was heavy even in the open. The vastness of the ocean could not absorb it. But the cops rarely showed up, and when they did everybody made the two-finger peace sign—“Peace, man”— and moved a few yards away. There was no confrontation, no violence. At least, not there. Not yet.

Cindy and Ken were sitting in a group nearby. They shared the house with us and a few others. Cindy saw me and waved, signaling, “Come and join us.” I waved back, “Later. I want to go swimming.” Cindy shook her head, “Bad idea.” She braced herself and shivered, “The water is cold.” I gestured back, “I don't mind.”

I got up and ran toward the waves, long waves rolling onto the beach with a splash of white foam. They were tall and powerful, and the impact was strong. One wave rolled me over. It was not a pleasant swim, it was a struggle with Nature, and the water was frigid, good for the seals that lived along the coast. Not for me. I am a creature of the Mediterranean, where the water near the coast is a primordial soup that soothes muscles and worries alike. Two minutes later, I ran back to my towel.

It was a bad idea, Cindy was right. Why did I do it? Not just to prove to myself that I was brave. I guess I did it to have an excuse not to join the group. I felt like I didn't belong with them. I didn't smoke, not even regular cigarettes. So, I couldn't simply sit in their circle and say no thanks I pass... Ridiculous.

Cindy came up to me. She was pretty, a fresh flower

blooming in her hair. Long, blond, straight, silky hair. The kind I liked. The kind I wished I had. But mine was short, wavy and light brown with golden highlights.

"Am I bothering you? If you'd rather be alone, just say so."

"On the contrary, I enjoy your company. Please, sit down." I was sincere. I truly liked her.

Cindy sat down on the edge of my towel. "You've got goose bumps. I warned you about the water."

"Yes, you did. But I've been here for only three months and there are many things I've got to get used to."

"Like what?"

"Like corn flakes for breakfast and square bread in plastic wraps. And especially the academic system, which is quite different from the one back home."

"Why aren't you at school today?"

"I've classes in the afternoon. I'll have to leave in a short while."

"And Jim?"

"What about him?"

"D'you have to get used to him as well?"

I was surprised Cindy would ask me such a personal question. But I was also pleased because I needed a friend, someone to talk to.

"I guess so," I replied, "things are not going smoothly between us."

"How did you two meet?"

"It's a long story. We met in Italy, during the campus occupation at the University of Turin, my hometown."

Trouble had just started. Those were the first signs, well before the Red Brigades came into existence and terrorized the country for more than a decade. The students had occupied the administration building, a stately Baroque palace in the heart of the city. A banner hanging from the façade said in big

characters: UNIVERSITÀ OCCUPATA. The massive portals were closed and guarded by militant fellows with red armbands. They would let in, by a small door, only those who could show the proper credentials. A large number of students crowded the portico in front of the building and spilled out into the street, blocking the traffic in both directions.

I was in the crowd with my boyfriend, Giorgio, mainly to find out what was going on. We didn't belong to any radical movements and hardly knew what their demands were. An animated discussion was taking place right in that spot. A student in a Che Guevara beret was haranguing those who gathered around him:

"No more grades based on an unjust evaluating system. We demand political grades for all. Equality of grading."

"What's a political grade?" someone asked.

"We maintain that you should be evaluated not on the basis of false knowledge inculcated on the masses by the hegemonic professorial class, but on the basis of your belief in the cause and your involvement in the struggle."

"I agree, school must be radically reformed," another said.

"No, not reformed. It should be abolished. The whole bourgeois educational system must be overthrown," still another replied.

A guy a few years older, who did not seem to belong in that crowd, managed to make himself heard.

"We don't want to abolish the school. We want the right to go to school. I am a metal worker and represent the Union. Some of you guys asked me to come to this rally today to see whether we can make common cause. But the Union disagrees with your demands. I was not able to go to school. I had to go to work as a young boy. And I don't want my little brother to have to do the same. I want him to get an education."

"The working class has sold out to its masters," shouted the Che Guevara guy.

"This is a provocateur," said a student pointing a finger at the Union man.

A scuffle erupted, and the man would have been badly beaten if the police had not been on their way. At the sound of the approaching sirens, the crowd froze and then frantically tried to disperse. But the police had already surrounded the area.

Many were clubbed and many were arrested. A few managed to escape. Tear gas was rapidly filling up the street. Giorgio and I got separated. I was swept along the portico that extended for the entire length of the street by a stream of panicking students. All the stores were locked and looked empty. I stopped in the doorway to a bookstore to catch my breath, choking on the gas. I must have cut a rather pathetic figure. Suddenly, the door opened. A hand grabbed me by the arm and pulled me in.

"It looks like you can use some help," the guy said with a sly grin. He had a foreign accent—definitely, American.

"What makes you think so? I was just window shopping," I answered in the same vein, freeing my arm. I hurriedly wiped my tearing eyes. As my sight cleared, I took a good look at him. He was handsome, longish blond hair, a square jaw, blue eyes sparkling with a roguish smile.

"If you're interested in books, this is the place. I spend the good part of my days in here and always find what I look for."

"And what're you looking for?" I asked staring at him intently.

"You mean, other than books?" He held my stare and for a second we weighed each other up. Then, we both laughed.

He extended his hand, "I'm Jim Welsh. Let me buy you a cup of coffee."

"Impossible. All cafés around here are closed."

"We don't have to go out. BarbaGian keeps a fresh pot of coffee in the back for the regulars all day long." Jim pointed to the old man behind the counter.

"Is this his name?" I suppressed a burst of laughter, looking alternately at the name written on the store window and the man with big round eyeglasses, his nose buried in a book.

"Why? Is it funny?"

"Yes. It means UncleJohn in the local dialect, but it's also the name of an owl species."

"Well, then it's quite appropriate for a book lover."

In the small lounge in the back, I learned that Jim was a Fulbright fellow with a PhD in film studies. He took one-year leave from the university where he taught as a lecturer to write a book that he believed would propel his career. The book explored how early Italian movies influenced Hollywood silent epics. That's why he learned Italian. He chose to do research in Turin because at the beginning of the century this was the movie capital of Italy. There were twenty-one film production companies in town, which competed with the Rome studios, and gained the upper hand abroad not only for artistic creativity, but also for their commercial and financial organization. It was in Turin that movies became an industry, and that a model for 'movie making' developed and was then adopted worldwide. Jim found a lot of valuable materials, texts and pictures, in BarbaGian's innermost vaults.

"I'm particularly interested in Giovanni Pastrone, producer, director and stage designer," he told me after BarbaGian brought us two steaming cups of coffee and a tray of patisserie. "In his masterpiece *Cabiria*, which came out in 1914, beside the superb scenography of the temple of Moloch, he introduced special effects to represent the eruption of Mount Etna, brought live elephants to the Alps to shoot the scene of the descent of Hannibal's army into Italy, and created an enormous faceted hexagonal mirror for the Sicilian episode in which Archimedes sets fire to the Roman fleet."

"Is it true that Griffith's set for the Babylon episode of *Intolerance* displays architectural features similar to *Cabiria's*?"

"No one can deny it. Just look at those frames side by side—the gigantic elephant-columns, just to name one. Pastrone was the inventor of the 'colossal,' with hundreds of extras and complex scenes of battles and catastrophes. He was

not content with small scale models. For *The Fall of Troy* he had an enormous wooden horse built from scratch." Jim became more and more animated as he talked. It was obvious that he identified with Pastrone's creative genius.

"Your book won't be popular in Hollywood," I teased him.

"Perhaps. In any case, it'll stir some controversy. I'm ready to debate anyone. And there's more. Pastrone was a great innovator. He invented the 'tracking shot,' which forever changed the way to make movies. Now, the camera moves, it's a dynamic agent that adds points of view and emotions to the story."

"I didn't know Pastrone held that distinction."

"Yes, he did. But Hollywood was interested in Pastrone not just for his shooting techniques. Pastrone ran his studio, Itala Film, as an industry; to the production division he added a distribution network and a chain of movie theaters. It's not excluded that the Italian model inspired the 'integrated vertical structure' of the Hollywood studios."

"You're going to challenge the status quo."

"That's my intention."

"But with hundreds of controversial topics to choose from, why did you make this particular director the focus of your research?"

"I admire creativity. Besides, this is such an interesting piece of history. And, possibly, a good editorial scoop."

In the weeks and months that followed, I spent long hours at BarbaGian's, browsing the stacks, leafing through dusty manuscripts, going through original editions of scripts and scenarios, reading reviews and opinions on the cultural pages of old newspapers collected by year and tied together with a string, and copying by hand all the excerpts we considered relevant (this was before the Xerox machine). I neglected my own studies in order to spend the days with Jim.

In the stacks, he would suddenly approach me from behind, put his arms around me pressing his body against mine,

seek my neck with his lips, and move slowly upward toward the ear. His tongue would swirl around with a slow movement tracing every bend and nook inside that live seashell, triggering electric waves that traveled down the spine and died there with a spasm of desire.

After work, we would stop at a *trattoria* on our way to Jim's place. The *trattoria* was popular with the students living off campus. Two waiters with napkins hanging from their left arms ran back and forth among the tables in the smoke-filled room, carrying large trays overloaded with orders—minestrone, polenta with beef stew, and onion frittata, simple dishes at an affordable price. The owner would seat the guests and make sure there was a bottle of house wine on every table.

One evening, the militant group I saw at the rally was dining in a corner behind a partition. Their loud voices filled the whole place—slogans, declarations, rebuttals.

Jim tilted his head in their direction. "Your comrades're having a cell meeting tonight."

"My comrades? I don't even know them."

"They're idiots."

"Pard'me...?"

"Yes, idiots. They are caricatures of those who in the course of history have believed in a noble cause."

"Perhaps they have a point, our society is stagnant and corrupt..."

"Idiots don't have a point. They're dangerous. They can cause a lot of trouble."

"You don't understand because you're American."

"And what's that supposed to mean? That we Americans are dumb when it comes to understanding the great sophistication of the European mindset? I have a PhD and two Masters, one in history and one in philosophy. I did my homework, and I know what I'm talking about. Besides, we have our share of idiots as well. But those are different, the opposite of your militant activists. Those are 'gentle people' who want to change the world through 'flower power.'"

"Here there's a lot of admiration for Martin Luther King and his struggle for civil rights."

"Who's the one that does not understand now? You're comparing apples and oranges. Dr. King's a great leader, an enlightened mind, and a true transformational figure who has achieved the unthinkable. He had the courage to challenge an unjust system with the sheer strength of his convictions. And now, the Civil Rights Act is law. But he worked hard for that and continues to do so. You won't see him hanging out in Haight-Ashbury smoking pot and weaving flower wreaths."

"There may be a difference in style, but in the end it all boils down to love." I resorted to the proven slogan that was supposed to win the argument and close the case.

Dinner was over. The waiter brought us two shots of grappa. Jim dipped a finger in his glass and touched my lips.

"*This is love,*" he said.

I sucked his finger with relish.

Our eyes locked.

"Let's go home, darling," Jim said in a deep voice. He took me by the hand and led me to the door.

That night, like every night, while we walked the few blocks to Jim's apartment, the world gradually lost its contours. Like through a zoom lens, my vision was funneled toward a focal point that became larger and larger as we reached our destination, while the peripheral field faded out—the street, the building, the apartment, the bed, we in bed, we together, we becoming one. Our intertwined bodies were the fusion point which included the whole universe.

Words were not necessary. Jim knew how to talk to me with his hands, his kisses, his entire body, in a seductive language that made me follow his lead. And the surrender was sweet. Sweet and intense and desperate, because I knew the end would come soon.

Jim rented a small apartment in a stately building on the bank of the Po River, on the top floor. Practically it was

a garret under the roof, but the view from the dormer was splendid. To reach the dormer one had to climb two steps, and from there the eye would soar and dance in the sky like a kite, taking in the details of the landscape, starting with the red tiles on the roof, moving down to the yellow-green strip of the river that looked absolutely still from that distance, encased in granite walls softened by a line of sycamore trees, a brush stroke of new green foliage, and beyond the trees, the dark-green slopes of the hills that bordered the city from the south-west. On the other side of the hills was Villa Flora, and further on in that direction was the sea, and then the ocean, and on the other shore, America.

Another month and Jim would be gone. I could not stand the thought of it. That's why, when he asked, I agreed to go with him.

It was not that simple, though, and if it were not for Amy I may have probably decided otherwise. Amy had been my closest friend since we were children, always pushing me to be bold, to love the adventure, to follow the heart. We debated this issue back and forth. "I would have to interrupt my studies just one year before graduation," I'd say. "But you can enroll in graduate school over there. They'll give you credit for the work you've already done here." "What if I won't succeed?" "You will succeed. We've already decided to go to grad school in the States. Dad has agreed to arrange for everything when the time comes. He lives over there and knows what to do. So, what's the difference?" "The difference is that if I leave now I'll be on my own. He won't help. This is scary." "C'mon, Stella. Don't be a child." "And then, there's Giorgio. He loves me, and I don't want to hurt him." "He'll find himself another girl and forget about you." "Oh, that's painful." "But you love Jim, don't you?" "Yes, I do,"

Mother did not try to stop me, although she was worried about this reckless adventure. One thing is to go to graduate school with a solid degree already under your belt—she'd

caution me—and be accepted in advance by the university of your choice. But just to follow a man to a place you didn't choose, and then apply when you're there, and leave everything to chance... it's not wise. And besides, Jim is not reliable. He's charming, I give you that, and has a Romantic aura around him... I understand the way you feel. And I also realize that professionally you'll have better opportunities over there. So, I will not discourage you. But be prepared to face reality. You'll have to make it on your own with no help from anyone.

I would reply that I'd give myself six months, and if I see that I cannot make it, that I'm not strong enough, then I'll come back. But she would disapprove of this plan as well, saying that this would be a cop out. Choices have consequences, and one should face those consequences responsibly. At that point, I knew that she expected me to be brave, strong and successful, and that to come back in defeat would have been too great a humiliation for me.

"Wow, what a story! You should try and sell it to a Hollywood producer. They like love stories with a happy ending," Cindy said.

"Well, this is only the end of Part One. Now Part Two has started, and the ending's not necessarily going to be a happy ending."

"Oh, what a pity. D'you still love him?"

"Of course, I love him. But I'm not sure I like him these days. He's changed. He's depressed, unsociable, and angry all the time. Even at me."

"He must be unhappy."

"Yes, he is unhappy. But it's not my fault. He's unhappy because his book project has not been well received in the academic community. He's not got the expected endorsements from the senior faculty, and therefore two university presses have already rejected the proposal."

"So sorry. But I've got positive vibes about the two of you, and I'm sure everything will work out beautifully in the end."

"Thank you for the rosy forecast. Time for me to go. I've classes in an hour and I can't afford to be depressed. I must be super-efficient."

I picked up my towel and started back toward the cottage. Cindy stood there for a minute, a concerned smile in her eyes. She waved me good-bye, "Take it easy!" she yelled after me. I turned around and waved back.

Twelve o' clock. I had to quickly change clothes and be on my way. Jim was still asleep. I raised the venetian blinds with a sharp pull. A beam of light burst into the room like a punch. It hit him full-on.

"Whadda fuck you doing?" he muttered angrily, raising his head.

"Come on, Jim, get up. I'll fix you some lunch."

He turned to the wall, making disgruntled sounds, something unintelligible, "... and shut the goddam blinds," he concluded. That, I distinctly heard.

"Shut 'em yourself," I snapped back.

I slammed the door and was gone.