

SPOLETO AFTERNOON

by Joseph Gueron

It was a hot mid afternoon at the end of August 2004; Spoleto was overrun with visitors attending the art festival of "Two Worlds". The sidewalk café attached to the Hotel Charleston in Piazza Collicola was packed. The joyful "Brindisi" aria from La Traviata, served as a splendid anthem for that place at that moment. A cacophony of conversations in Italian, English, French, and Spanish filled the air, playing a perfect counterpoint to the music.

There was a kind of festive excitement, fueled by cool Prosecco in the tone of voices. It was justifiable, their senses and minds had been

jolted by their recent exposure, in the multiple festival venues to thrilling and eclectic panoply of music, paintings, photography, ballet, and opera.

Amid the festive crowd the lonely figure of a young woman sitting in solitude stood out. A carafe of white wine almost empty, a small plate with olives pits and lupini beans, and an ashtray full of cigarette butts indicated she had been there for some time. She would glance at her watch occasionally and then go back to writing on paper napkins.

Anna, 31 years old, was petite, with nice bronzed legs, she liked to show, emerging from a short khaki skirt and small breasts she liked to hide with oversized peasant blouses, leaving her shoulders bare. Her dainty feet were encased in sandals with long, wrap around laces, gladiator

style. A pair of sunglasses resting over her head, ready to cover her eyes as soon as the need to hide her feelings was required.

In English, with a slight accent difficult to pinpoint, she asked the waiter for more lupini beans. She loved their salty semi-bitter taste and the pleasure of unwrapping their thick skin with her teeth and tongue.

Her studied indifference hid an incomplete education punctuated by bits of knowledge harvested randomly from her different lovers, and whatever books they may have recommended to her. Full of contradictions, she liked to write poems on paper napkins, and since she seldom shared them, no one had ever told her they were mostly bad.

While close to her Venezuelan mother, who lived in a recluse drunkard state in a large house in Bethesda, MD, it was with her American father, now retired, in Bangkok, searching for young women, whom Anna saw sporadically, that she shared, with reservation, some of her thoughts and feelings. Even though she knew it was his sense of guilt rather than love that motivated his sporadic attention.

Bored, Anna started one of her internal monologues.

"I loved those red shoes; I may let him buy them for me."

Anna's thoughts were interrupted by a group of young people, carrying small gym bags, they appeared to be dancers. One of them, a girl, with a Roman nose and large mouth glanced at

Anna, smiled and then turned to speak to one of her companions.

Anna was mesmerized by the graceful movement of the young woman's hands as she spoke in Italian Anna's monologue continued

"Lovely hands and a nice body, it's a pity, she should not wear those pants so long, so unattractive the dirty ends. Nice tush though. Her mouth reminds me of Laura's, but Laura's breasts were larger. Sweet Laura, sweet stupid Laura who claimed she loved me; I wonder if that conceited pillow queen is happy now, with that bitch, that despicable bulldyke... God I hate her, well they deserve each other..."

Anna's attention drifted to the gorgeous young man sitting two tables away, holding an open newspaper which he ignored as his attention wandered around studying some of the people

sitting at nearby tables. Anna liked his looks, sunglasses hanging from his open shirt collar, blue sweater wrapped around his shoulders, and fine leather loafers with no socks. Anna's monologue continued

" God! He is almost the caricature of a beautiful Italian man, but his eyes are amazing. I'm jealous, why couldn't I have those eyelashes! I want his eyes... I want his mouth. Why is he not looking at me? I bet he is a good kisser. I want him to notice me. These stupid chairs, I cannot cross my legs. Maybe if I open my legs a little,... oh no I can't, I am not wearing the right panties. God, I miss Charles' hands. The bastard, I'm going to teach him a lesson, how does he dare to think I'm at his beck and call."

Anna reached took another sip of her wine

"I should not have agreed to meet him this weekend, but Robert was gone anyway. Oh, well, I'm glad I came anyway. It's a lovely town, with so many great shoe stores, and such gorgeous men and women Ah at last! He is looking at me. What a lovely smile. Yes, Charles, I'm going to fuck this lovely man, you bastard. Yes Charles, you pompous ass, I'm going to fuck this young man with the gorgeous eyes. Yes Charles, I'm going to do it, because I love you, because I want you, because I need you... And because you always make me wait for you, and I hate waiting, and I hate myself for waiting."

She rose from her chair, and slowly, very slowly made her way to the back of the café, searching for the restroom, all the while looking at the young man, smiling and murmuring

softly as a mantra " *yes Charles, yes Charles,*
..."

On her return to her table, Anna waved at the waiter as she started rummaging through her purse. The young Italian man rose to approach her. Suddenly he stopped and stood still. Anna was surprised, she was getting ready to welcome him, when she felt a hand lightly touching her shoulder, then she heard Charles' voice:

"Sorry, we started lunch very late!"

Charles, in his mid-forties, was dressed in a well-cut dark gray business suit, wearing an exquisite red silk tie, and carrying an expensive leather briefcase. He planted a kiss close to Anna's ear as he continued:

"I could not be the first to leave. You understand, don't you?"

By coincidence the music stopped while Anna did not respond. Charles took the chair next to her, and tried to hold her hand. She pulled her hand back and in anger very slowly in a very low tone of voice, almost whispering responded:

"No, Charles, I do not understand... I don't want to understand! You said you were going to take the 2 o'clock train. I wasted a lovely afternoon, just waiting for you!"

Charles, smiling hesitantly, extended his arm in a silent plea to hold her hands. Anna reluctantly allowed him to do so, but kept her eyes focused elsewhere, refusing to return his glance.

"I'm so sorry, Anna, please, look at me.

You know I love you. I'm crazy about you."

Charles brought his head very close to Anna's and murmured in her ear.

"During the whole lunch, it was so difficult to focus on the conversation and look interested. I kept thinking about you... I had a terrible hard-on."

Anna forcefully reclaimed her hand as she rose from her chair, and for the first time since his arrival looked directly at Charles and slapped him on the face. He looked at her in surprise, mouth slightly open.

Anna leaned over the table holding her weight with both hands, brought her head very close to Charles and murmured,

"I am not your whore, you bastard,

You know what I'm going to do?"

Anna turned her head to the direction of the young man she had been flirting with.

"You see that beautiful man? I'm going to join him and if he is nice I'm going to fuck him."

Charles, in disbelief with Anna's unexpected outburst and not knowing how to react, exclaimed with some impatience,

"But what about tonight, don't you remember I got the tickets for the new Japanese opera?... They were quite expensive." Anna responded with a petulant voice "You go!"

She turned her back, walked away, and approached the young Italian man Simultaneously both men stood up from their chairs frozen in suspension.

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His name was Benedetto. Anna liked the piney smell of his aftershave, even though it did not

cover a faint smell of garlic. She was surprised that his first suggestion was to visit one of the specialty shops dotting Spoleto.

The high-end food shop shelves were full of expensive bottles of olive oil, and exotic Balsamic vinegar, and packages of multicolored pasta ready to decorate the perfect kitchen, and never to be cooked. Benedetto offered her a small comfit fig dipped in chocolate, and then softly cleaned with his tongue a small chocolate smudge Anna had on one finger.

They continued exploring the town in silence. Anna, realizing his English was minimal, and her Italian almost non-existent, decided to let their pheromones carry their communications, hoping the result would be pleasant for both.

As the sun was setting he suggested going to see a modern dance group at the old Roman Amphitheater. Anna, not wanting to sit for hours, suggested she would rather go dancing. They took a taxi to a small hotel bar overlooking the Roman Aqueduct close to the town.

As they entered the bar, it was dusk. A large window offered a spectacular view of the lighted aqueduct. A small number of couples occupied diminutive tables admiring the view. One couple was dancing to the soft sound of a bolero on the small dance floor.

Benedetto ordered a bottle of Prosecco. Anna, liking the song being played, extended her hand to Benedetto inviting him to dance.

He held her, keeping a certain formal distance; Anna laughed, and in a brusque movement, wrapped

her arms around his neck, while firmly pressing her body against his, swaying to the beat of the music. His arms were around her waist, while she caressed the back of his head.

Suddenly Benedetto slowed down and was getting ready to speak, but she quickly put her index finger on his lips and shook her head while smiling and looking into his eyes. He smiled back as he began to understand the rules of the game she had set.

One of his hands began caressing her neck close to one ear, as his other hand migrated below her waist caressing her ass.

Anna sighed. The music had stopped, but they continued dancing in silence.

As they returned to the table, the music resumed, with the French song, "Je T'aime, Mois Non Plus". The syncopated beat of the music

inspired Benedetto to caress Anna's legs timidly at the beginning, afraid of rejection, gaining courage, as she did not push him away; instead slightly opened her legs.

As the song progressed, so did his caresses, slowly moving up her thigh, and reaching his goal, one hand now fully occupied in pleasuring her. Their bodies echoing in perfect harmony the beat of the music. At a certain moment, Anna brought her head down, resting her forehead against the top of the table, unable to repress a climatic moan, her hands grasping the table.

They remained silent, as Anna slowly regained her composure and Benedetto, pleased with himself, smiled. Anna, thirsty, emptied her glass. Looking at him with a shy smile, showing some

embarrassment, and tenderness. Then raising Benedetto's hand, still resting on her thigh, she started kissing gently the tip of each finger, catching a whiff of her own smell. For the first time in the whole evening she uttered one single word.

"Grazie!"

Benedetto, held Anna's hand and smiling responded,

"My pleasure..., vieni mangiare, we eat, then go to mia casa... in Monteluco,.. beautiful view of Spoleto, ... and domani.. you discover la bellezza da Umbria."

Anna stood up, shaking her head and tenderly caressing his cheek, she responded

"Sorry, I can't, I must go now. Will you meet me at the Hotel for brunch tomorrow?"

Anna offered him a kiss and walked away, turning her head almost sang,

“Shall we say 11?”

Anna asked the taxi driver to rush to Hotel Charleston. Upon her arrival, Charles opened the door, surprised.

She wrapped her arms around his neck without saying a word and started kissing him deeply.

Charles was torn between anger and desire but could not resist her, and allowed her to take the initiative.

He lifted her blouse over her head and an image flashed in his mind of the Italian man caressing her small eager breasts. He was overcome by rage and jealousy, and he took her forcefully, closer to rape than love, breaking the bedside lamp, plunging the room into

darkness, his heavy breathing and Anna's soft sobs filling the room

Afterwards, they smoked in silence. Charles spoke at last

"I guess your Italian boy came short of expectations."

Anna, ignoring the comment, walked away to the bathroom. On her return, as she got in bed, she asked,

"Did you enjoy the opera?"

"No, it was awful, Japanese dodecaphonic music, you would have hated it, I walked out after the first act", he responded.

"Well I'm glad I missed it, by the way I invited Benedetto to join us for breakfast tomorrow."

"You are such a bitch."

"Yes, I know, and you like it, good night love," she responded as she deposited a light kiss on his cheek as she lay her head on his pillow

The next morning Anna, Charles, and Benedetto were sitting having a large American Breakfast. The two men in a wordless macho, subliminal confrontation, made an effort to be civil with each other for Anna's sake, and their ego. Anna ignored them, while she was furiously writing on a paper napkin. The loud barking of two dogs mating jolted the two men out of their confrontation. Simultaneously, Anna held up the napkin with her writing and in a dramatic gesture, declared,

"I want you to listen to my new poem."

Both men looked at her with some suspicion,
as she started to recite in a theatrical manner.

"You silly, silly men
you equate penetration
with possession, and mistake
my moans of pleasure as
an affirmation of your
Masculinity..."

"When a dildo
brings me as much pleasure
if not more
Even your touch,
and words of love
do not smother the fire
in my loins,
nor the loneliness
in my heart"

Anna took a pause looking at them, lowering her voice, she continued

"You silly, silly men
trying to make me come,
when I want an orgasm of the soul."

With that last word, Anna stood up, bowed and as she was walking away, casually stating

"Please leave a generous tip."

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Anna spent the rest of the afternoon exploring Spoleto's narrow streets. She discovered a small boutique selling earrings, tried on a pair of large gypsy styles and bought them, wearing them as she left the store.

She visited the exhibit of a famous contemporary Italian painter in the basement of

an old church. She was amused noticing the contrast of the colorful almost abstract images with the musky medieval surroundings, darkened with centuries old grime.

As she exited the exhibit she was lost for a moment. Meandering for some time, at last she found the shoe store with the red shoes she wanted. She tried them on, and liked her reflection in the mirror. On an impulse she bought them, using a credit card so she would feel less guilty for paying so much for a pair of shoes.

Pleased with herself, she walked to Piazza Duomo. The late afternoon light reflected on the beautiful golden mosaic of the Cathedral as a group of young people played traditional folk music.

She listened to the soulful sound of a bagpipe, played by a bearded young man. As a young woman, with acne, played the flute. The group leader, a skinny guy, played a medieval-like string instrument that sounded like a violin. And the last one was a lovely young man with dark curly hair, looking like a live Roman painting from Pompeii, was marking the beat with a tambourine.

Anna, seated on the steps of the small theater next to the Cathedral, absorbed the whole scene. She felt happy, lighthearted tapping with her feet the rhythm of the music.

People had gravitated toward the musicians.

A group of young girls began dancing traditional folk steps, simple, rhythmic, lovely. A young man joined them; then others followed, holding hands forming a moving circle. Suddenly a woman

started singing, and then other voices joined in an old Umbrian folk song, as the church bell started marking the hour.

It was a perfect combination of time, space, people, light, colors, music, voices and the chime of the bells, coming together to create a magical moment.

Anna, enthralled, was overwhelmed by its beauty. For the first time in many years she shed tears and stood up, raised her arms wanting to embrace the moment, to grasp it, afraid of losing it. At the same time she felt full of grace, and blissfulness. She started laughing, tears rolling down her cheeks, fully experiencing the glory of her liberating exaltation, bathed in pure joy.