

Carmen Covito

Tales from the Web

translated by Ercole Guidi



Author's Edition

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But Who's Landed on the Moon?

I'm peeping through a hole in the hedge. Not easy, with these twigs that tend to snap out barbed-wire-like, aiming at your eyes. Poor pruning. The biggest problem, the knees, however, has resolved itself: I've had no perception of them for a half-hour now. Good. The insensitivity helps me focus on the house. Little villa, I should say. It is precisely that type of residential crap which developers call «villetta»: two levels above ground plus in-ground garage with adjoining family room. Birch trees at the outside.

Yet Lisa is not to blame. She's not responsible for the spotlights on the lawn and the satellite antenna dished out over the roof as... Finally! Here she comes. The strong-door has opened and she is there, here, three meters between us and I'm giving in to emotion and losing my balance and thorning my face and... Close call. Creaking of rotula like a gunshot in the stillness.

But she hasn't noticed. It's the Moon she is staring at. Come, gorgeous, a little closer, bow that sweet little head of yours, yes, this way, come, two more steps, but come on, now! How can you not notice anything? Right over there, between Doc and Bashful, where Sleepy's supposed to be, don't you see the soil has been freshly turned, all black? She has. She has picked up the flier already. She's orienting it toward the beam of a spotlight.

"Garden Gnomes Liberation Front" reads the large print; hence I should see a sudden reaction, unless this girl has come up so badly that... She's laughing! Thank God, she's laughing. I'm relieved. The lump of apprehension that had begun pumping a nagging acid reflux up my throat has now loosened: peppers with cumin. With a corner of my mind I repeat to myself I should put an end to certain heavy experimentations: what business do I have with learning new summer Thai recipes at my age, and for supper!

They were good, though. And I really did enjoy creeping under the gap in the hedge, before, with my little camping hoe recovered from the tool shed of my youth memories... "Come, papa, come on out, I know you're here somewhere."

Out I come. That is, I'm slowly beginning to straighten myself holding on to the plaster dwarf which I adroitly delivered from the lawn of my former wife's new husband, a Northern League boor full of pay-two-get-three pretensions, and loaded, it seems, the Celt little industrialist, that if I had his kind of money I'd know how to use it in style, all of it, but I realize this could never come about, for on my Junior High professor salary I do not evade taxes, not I... God, my back! Up, with caution, plenty of caution...

I suppose Lisa, too, could be defined a youth memory. Or almost: when I gave in to the idea of generating her I was pushing thirty... All right, thirty-five. She is sixteen, now. And that wretch of her mother says if she let me see more of her, I'd end up corrupting her.

Me! I've lost a whole afternoon over that stupid educational flier which my *bambina* is now waving in my face, whispering, "Papa, you're a complete moron. What If somebody else had stepped out in my place? And what does this mean, here, 'We of the small people are struggling for an aesthetic ecology', uh?"

"It was 'struggling'; that's a mistype," I whisper to her in reply, "And anyway at this hour in the garden there's always only you."

"Spying, are we now? Always, when?"

"It's been three days," I confess, placing the little dwarf back in its place. "And I'm not spying on you, it's only that the other day I happened to be in the neighborhood and, well, you had such a little face... melancholically romantic, those are the words."

"Something wrong with your date? Why don't you ever mind your own case?" says my daughter, and she seems almost truly upset, but then, given that arguing in a low voice is practically impossible and if we don't keep our voices down those over there in the house will hear us, we end up sitting next to each other on the damp grass.

Idyllic picture of father and daughter in harmony on an English-Lombard little lawn. Perfectly still. On the other hand, if Lisa told me, hypothetically, that her date was a HIV positive junkie with two heads and no degree, I could only smile and try to convince her that, perhaps, that wouldn't be the most sensible choice. Thank God she's all home and school instead (Technical College for Business Administration, what can you do!), and she is diligent, obedient, respectful of rules and...

Distraught by the thought that I was about to add "banal", I raise my head, I behold the large chunk of moon hanging above us and I start jabbering away.

"I was there, you know? July 20, 1969. The Apollo 11. When Buzz Aldrin was there in the Eagle landing module and commander Armstrong took his stroll on the Moon, with that fine rhetorical phrase, 'that's one small step for a man, a giant leap for mankind'; you should have seen what times those were, even with us in the country, in that sickening provincial inertia, that a couple of years later I came up North to teach; it really felt as if we'd be able to change everything, absolutely everything, and, you know, even that first step outside our old world was, well, in its own way, a revolution.

That's why we were moved by the sight of a man, all alone, clumsy, sealed in his million-dollar protective suit as in a wandering knight's armor, hopping up there... What am I saying? Lisa, there were two of them: for after Neil Armstrong, Buzz too went down, and even if the pictures don't show the faces because the helmets reflect the light, that close to the American flag driven into the Moon is really him, and, remember that human footprint impressed into the lunar dust? I prefer the picture of Armstrong on the ladder, it's more documental, but the footprint has become the strongest image, more symbolic, because it doesn't matter whether it belongs to the first or to the second... No one ever recalls that on the Apollo 11 there was a third man, but I do.

His name was Michael Collins, he was the pilot of the mother ship Columbia, and he orbited the whole time: the Moon, he could only circle about, as I circled about life... But this to Lisa I cannot say."

"Fantastic, that endless night in front of the TV awaiting the connection with Houston" I tell her instead, "that Ruggero Orlando, and that other character, what was he called, Tito Stagno! From the Rome studio, just couldn't agree, "We have a touch down", "We don't have a touch down", "We have a touch down, I'm telling you!" and well, it's been important for the history of our century: we weren't able to put fantasy in power, but we did manage to put a couple of Americans on the Moon..."

"But if that was all a giant hoax!" says Lisa."

"What?"

"It was all an act, was it not?" Just like Auschwitz. There's nothing true. They've done the same with that alleged descent on the Moon. You and those other boneheads in front of a TV screen! They've done you in all right, astronauts and all; and all the time they were in a TV studio somewhere in America. That's what mama's husband says; he knows, he's found a video at the newsstand that explains the whole thing." I must have remained agape too long, for now Lisa looks concerned and then she whispers to me gently, "Tomorrow I'll snatch it from him and lend it to ya, all right?"

I could not not do it. Exerting an extreme violence onto myself, clashing with all my profoundest convictions, with the death in my heart and the roar of rocket engines in my brain, I gave her a slap. And I started bellowing at the top of my lungs, "We'll see! I'm seeing my attorney tomorrow! I'll file a appeal with the Juvenile Court! All needs doing all over again! Criminals! Nazis! My daughter's education lies with me!

No, not this time; I won't let go this time. *No pasarán*. I caved in on everything, always more, down the years I renounced as if it were nothing my political role as a male, my social role as a junior high progressive teacher, my old hopes, dignity.

But now, as the villa of the tax evader is suddenly bursting with lights turning into the space-ship of Independence Day, I cry out my "enough" and I do stand my ground: I'm not going to hand over the Moon to those over there. Another holocaust, no.

Bi-Sex Plus One

Come with me. I'm every woman's Dream Man and I'm yours, your Principe Azzurro **(1)** for your moments of leisure. Yes, you can call me Azzurro, it has a more casual ring to it and goes swell with the color of my eyes; you know, that blue so particular which my tanned skin makes paler, unleashing fascinating glacial transparencies from it.

But I'll never be cold with you. The only shivers you'll ever feel with me will be glittering inside of you from the casual contact - so masterly so - of my fingers perhaps distracted, or perhaps not, upon an innocent part of your body, a shoulder, the ear, the nape, the root of your naked back or, indifferently, the back of your hand. This, the first time.

Then, when I'll have taken off my shades to kiss you... Oh yes, I'm a little short-sighted, just that tiny bit that's enough to give myself a scholarly air and to convince you, from your very first gaze, that this bronze statue of glistening muscles is no empty shell. I know that a woman, nowadays, won't stop at the skin. And I'll be as bold as to let you into the depths of my thoughts; for you I'll lay bare my soul, or my guts, if you prefer a more realistic me.

I'll be sentimental and endearing. But if need be you'll find a pair of wide shoulders on which to lean; as firm a character as my superb biceps. I'm 6 foot, I do sports and I hardly bring it up. My belly is flat, my buttocks firm: the curve of my back shall be your docile saddle if you wish to undress me and ride.

Then, playing frisky, I'll topple you as you laugh and scream in feigned horror and push away with both hands my forehead, which is now taking position onto the soft pillow of your pubis, and all the while you hold me back entwining your fingers into my hair, driving me. I'll be dexterous. I'll go wild for a long time. Do we have a deal?

Second level: for Him

Hi! My name is Donna **(2)**, I'm the doll of your dreams. Some tits I've got here, haven't I! Hot stuff, my little kitty; real stuff, no silicon, and this size five is all for you, for Miss Superpussy's favorite stallion; come, come try me out now, I'm here waiting for you... Oh no, please, don't do that, I'm only a little girl, I've never done it with anyone before, and even if you are so determined and attractive; no, no, I couldn't, not this way, not here... The lingerie I fancy is rustling and expensive; I go crazy for laces and little strings and the silk slipping over my hot skin... I'm a math teacher; all I'm wearing is a drop of fragrance and stiletto heels, big bad chum, have you learned the lesson?

Nonsense, oh, what a bunch of crap! I'm your aunty, now I'm gonna put you to bed, and, as I start taking off my pants, I'll tell you the fable of Cappuccetto Azzurro **(3)** ... Azzurro, my love, help! Where are you? Come and fetch me away! I'm a very efficient secretary, I'm a slut, I'm a lady, I'm your tart, I'm a nun; enough, what is it that you all want with me? I cannot take it anymore; I *am* I and I want Azzurro, I want Azzurro, I want Azzurro...

Universal Games, internal message: from Roberto Piras to Magda Colombo.

You ugly moron, see what you've done to me? Up until five minutes ago Donna worked well, and now she's going ape, she's talking nonsense, she's even asking the help of your blasted Principe Azzurro... Correction: I'm the idiot, who let an incompetent programmer stick her nose into MY part of the project. Come over immediately, and, whatever you put into my computer, get rid of it.

Robbie The Sardman

Universal Games, internal message: from Magda Colombo to Roberto Piras.

Are you out of your mind? I put nothing into your computer. If my Azzurro works and your Donna doesn't, then it's you who are the incompetent programmer. And unfair, too. The simple fact that we had dinner together a couple of times doesn't entitle you to insult a colleague of the same level.

Maga Magdò

Universal Games, internal message: from Roberto Piras to Magda Colombo.

All right, all right, I'll take back the "ugly moron." You're gorgeous. But please, Magda, if this goddamned "Bi-Sex" is not ready for the meeting after tomorrow, they'll fire us both, so, what do you say you come to my office and have a look at it? Donna's really messed up, and, ok, perhaps you'll be able to figure out what I did wrong.

Robbie The Sardman

P.S. - And you call what happened the other night a "date"?

Universal Games, internal message: from Magda Colombo to Roberto Piras.

What do you know! I had no idea you were world champion of pants-dropping. Rather, I should have surmised it from the speed with which you pulled down your pants the other night. Apologies accepted: you're right, instead of arguing via internal email we'd better fix the work ASAP. I'll be over as soon as I'm through here.

Maga Magdò

P.S. You're also right about our 'dinner' the other night. I think the technical term is 'heavy stroking'.

P.S. Hey! I have a half-idea what the glitch with Donna might be. You must have given her too many parameters. Typical with you guys: you don't know what you want, and we poor girls have to put on a number of feminine models for you to choose from. No wonder that, after, one goes bananas and clings to the first reasonable and civilized man one can lay her hands on. I'll be right over.

Strictly reserved to the management of Universal Games Ltd. Subject: Psycho-relational analysis on the compatibility of male and female programmers in the construction of a video game for adult couples.

Yesterday, Tuesday, May 25, 1999, I happily concluded my observations on the two subjects involved in the 'Bi-Sex' experiment. I respectfully point out that I should be granted a bonus as these observations were protracted well past office hours.

As an inspector on the verge of retirement, I also feel the obligation to reiterate that the idea of having two good programmers work on a bogus project with the sole intent of verifying their productivity is particularly foolish; I hear that colleague Gerace, originator of this incredible waste, believes he can offset the losses by actually putting the 'Bi-Sex' videogame into production; a prospect I strongly oppose: the latest market researches show in fact that no average couple would ever buy a videogame in which he or she could interact with, respectively, the ideal woman and man.

Both, the real man and woman, I mean, would feel jealous and humiliated, a condition which my humble person has had the manner of exploring, alas, in long past experiences with certain somewhat exuberant ladies: it isn't arousing in the least. Unless our respectable company should choose to be dragged into the sado-maso segment of the market by the stupidity of young Gerace; an hypothesis I refuse to consider: it is scarcely profitable. However, the two subjects, Piras and Colombo, met at 15:00 hrs at Piras' office and got on like a house on fire in perfecting the feminine part of that useless videogame.

From what I could gather, the so called "Donna" had contracted a virus which Colombo denominated 'self-consciousness'; a virus which, to quote Piras, 'had made her fall in love like a fool with', I apologize, 'that asshole Azzurro.' The issue was resolved in roughly forty-five minutes. Then the two programmers, who as always were unaware they were under constant watch, went on to celebrate in a lively and, I dare say, emotional manner until 10 minutes before midnight, at which point they fell asleep exhausted on the floor, and so did I in the observation cubicle.

When I awoke I swiftly cleansed the cubicle of the inevitable organic fluids which the observation had forced me to spread about, but I could do nothing for the trousers of my quasi new gray suit, for which I'm wondering whether I'd be entitled to a refund for the laundry bill.

For the present I'm enclosing the video and audio recordings, from which it can be gathered that sexual relations between programmers do not compromise the efficiency of their work but only, if at all, the physical endurance of senior inspectors. In order to dispel any doubts and urged

solely by my total dedication to the company's interests, I make myself promptly available to replicate the experiment with a second couple of programmers (if possible, I'd like her blonde)

Gian Antonio Manin

Production Supervisor

- (1) **Principe Azzurro:** Prince Charming. The Italian expression - which literally translates into Blue (Azzurro) Prince (Principe) - has been retained as the author plays with the word Azzurro in relation to the Dream Man's name and the color of his eyes
- (2) **Donna:** Italian for Woman.
- (3) **Cappuccetto Azzurro:** Literally, Blue Riding Hood, that is, a color variant of the famed Red Riding Hood.

The Cambise's Elixir

To the eyes of her neighbors, the standard day of Camilla Cambise is roughly as follows: at five past nine the power blinds of her little apartment, third floor, go up one after the other (there are two in all: bedroom and living room's, as the little bathroom and kitchenette's small windows open onto an inner shaft, invisible), and for a half-hour a little flow of rock music streams down into the courtyard (Eurasia Hard-Rock Radio; would you believe the old hag? Her musical preferences are at odds with her age, but one must concede the volume is fairly low).

Around nine thirty, nine forty, rain or shine, Mrs. Cambise pops out the door of Unit B, crosses the courtyard and goes, humbly yet impeccably dressed in flowered dresses or in an austere black greatcoat, depending on the season, to buy the newspapers and to read them at the bar (Bar Ciro, usually; but on Tuesday, which is Ciro's day off, she goes to the Gran Caffè Roxane, a little dearer).

Before she retired, Mrs. Cambise must have been a teacher, or perhaps she worked in a bank, who knows, but she definitely must have been a white collar, or she wouldn't be wasting all that money on newspapers, would she?, and she wouldn't be divorced, or a widow, or a spinster, or however so completely forlorn as to be able to spend entire mornings always and exclusively at the bar, where she sips her one coffee and a large glass of natural water.

From time to time she pushes her reading glasses up onto her hair (gray and poorly trimmed) to throw a glance about and address a wave of acknowledgment to the familiar local faces, but no one ever disturbs her. At ten past twelve, minute more or minute less, when the waitresses prepare for the hot sandwiches of the clerks on lunch break, Mrs. Cambise considerably vacates the table; then she is seen briefly at the Esselunga or at the Chinese take-away or, more frequently, at the «Golden Chicken» delicatessen and grill-room, which does home delivery upon request.

Then she heads for home, carrying her little shopping bags, and, unless she took the 5 pm streetcar that runs into town (is she going to the movies? to a play? to some lecture? The fact is, she goes out twice a week at most), she is no longer to be seen crossing the courtyard again or looking out of the window or re-emerging in any way from her two room apartment until five past nine the next day; the only signs of her existence in the afternoon being occasional music attacks, promptly reduced to a lower volume, a lamp burning at dusk; and then, as the evening slips into the night and a dull quiet sets in over the courtyard, from the accurately pulled curtains of her lounge might crackle out the oddity of a chortle or two. What'd she be laughing about, that one, all alone?

True, from her window, until when, round three am, the annoying rustling of the electric motor signals the closing of the blinds, one can see the blueness of a video filter through; but, for 6 months now, or perhaps seven, no one has heard any audio of movies or TV programs issuing from that apartment anymore, not even at lowest volume. Is Camilla Cambise playing perfect tenant and passing her evenings with stereo earphones on her head?

That's it. Or close enough. For six months Camilla has been playing a videogame, and she does it with the earphones on her head, because at first she was a little ashamed.

All those wee synthesized sounds, the twittering, the shrieking, and most of all the thunders! They still cause her to start, for they always come suddenly; and Camilla laughs and pulls the earphones a millimeter from her ears, shaking slightly her head.

She had began, on doctor's advise, with a shoot-all for play station. It seemed in fact that those swift movements of fingers and wrist on the joystick would be a panacea to retrain her reflexes and hold off sclerosis; but she had felt uneasy as she stood there shooting at any minimal hop on the screen. Once the mechanism had been grasped, there was no game. And besides, in forty years of honorable service with the Special Anti-Rabies Fusiliers and despite her three gold medals at the Inter-force Tournament for Sharp Shooters, Camilla has never found in killing any fun.

All those poor foxes, all those dogs with the foamy jaws and the dispirited eyes; and, at the time of the Great Epidemics, all those kids and the screaming girls...

After the first two cases of rabid students, Camilla had asked herself why on earth her Command wouldn't replace the regular bullets with something less lethal, and at the third she had gone as far as formally file a motion for restoring the sleeping injections that had previously been provided for the case of a prized elephant of the zoo; but through the line of command the order had come down to her to quit beating about the bush and it had been explained to her, off the record, that any showing of sensitivity, if humanly comprehensible, would have been calamitous: what they were dealing with, was a stock of Political Rabies which was terribly contagious, helplessly virulent, untreatable.

To destroy each and every infected head was a despicable necessity, directed to safeguarding the healthy part of the Country. It was therefore with a well placed sense of duty that Camilla had participated in that campaign, too, but in the years that followed, as she got closer to retirement age, some traces of doubt began to creep up afresh, and, if it actually never did get to the point of making her finger shake on the trigger, it occasionally came to affect the accuracy of her shot to the extent of letting one or two foxes escape with just a wrinkle on their coat. And that is why Camilla cannot enjoy taking out aliens and monsters in droves: it's all too easy for her and, unfortunately, it makes her feel younger again.

At the store where she returned in the hope of exchanging the game with another, a polite salesman informed her that, having bought it, she had to live with it: but why not consider a small supplemental investment and move on to the wider choice of games for PCs? With a good machine, her grandson would have learned things other than games.

Camilla, as her own acting niece, laughed but caved in. And she has never regretted it: the computer installed, a few demos glanced at, she had soon come across this simulation game which, for six months, has been keeping her pleasurably engaged. It is titled "If I Were God" and it consists in the creation of a whole world. Not too large, really: the planet numbers only a couple of continents somewhat far off in the Total Ocean, scarcely larger than a mid-sized island.

But they are enough to her. There is so much to be done! At first, enchanted by the beauty of the naked landscapes, Camilla proceeded slowly: very high cloudless skies were taking on the red and yellow reflections projected from desert lands, reflected the very deep blue of lifeless waters. She observed, admiring the ability of graphic designers and taking possession: she loved that world of polygons which, combined into fine textures, gave birth to crystalline and three-dimensional shapes. And it did not upset her that the only sounds were a soft whistle of the wind and the cyclical breathing of the tides.

It was almost unwillingly that she began gathering some macromolecules, but then, you know how it is, you get carried away and from proteins you're on to protozoan before you know.

Without even realizing it, she had found herself swarmed with dinosaurs, and some mammals were already wandering about hiding in the bushes. Time to straighten things up and start playing for real "If I Were God," which in its most popular versions can be found as "Populous" or also "Civilization," and which substantially is not different a game from the widely known "Sim City;" it has the simple objective of creating from scratch a simulation of improved humanity: balanced, stable, harmonious, possibly just.

In six months Camilla has already come to some interesting results on her main continent, which on account of a certain penchant for self-flagellation she named Volpizia: human beings here have passed quickly beyond the phase of tribal warfare and are developing a good tendency to cooperation. They have municipal federation, schools, theaters, efficient hospitals, and beautiful public parks peopled with delightful red and silver foxes.

From time to time some of the citizens still die of rabies, but only for reasons which Camilla finds graciously childish: one person, for example, has died because others wouldn't let him embellish the Communal Cafeteria with the spray-poem that he had composed (and which indeed wasn't bad at all).

Instead at Distopia, the small continent where Camilla has her most audacious experiments going, the two adjoining but strictly separated populations of the Hermaphrodites and of the Amazons go along so well that they have invented, on their own, the Distopic Sexual Olympics, a fanciful sports ritual which provides for the periodical and peaceful encounter of all adult individuals, and makes Camilla laugh in earnest.

In the matter of sex she hasn't much experience: being a she-Sharp-Shooter weighs heavily on personal relations, for men have either vanished already or they are certainly aiming at something else, and she in fact as an old woman, from no to no, had found herself alone, wise and bitter, that is in the truly ideal conditions to play God. Volpizia and Distopia are her daily retribution, her driving curiosity, her elixir of full life.

All the more so that, twice a week, Camilla has begun to attend the meetings of a group of enthusiasts whom, with their diaries of creation under their arm, congregate at the Pox Social Center to compare their respective worlds. Each, like her, painstakingly studies every morning the economic and political news in order to draw from them some general principles and apply the opposite to his peoples.

Like her, each knows that the simulation is but an idle game, and yet they get hot about it, argue, display the symptoms of a Political Rabies attenuated and confused but not dead. Camilla is very happy for discovering "If I Were God" in time.

In absence of this powerful antidote, characters such as *signor* Esposito, unemployed engineer, or forty-three-year-old drop out student Emilio Zork, or such as, well, practically all of her friends from the small group, would already have appeared one day at a window and start shooting into the midst of their neighbors out of the blue. And none would have put in a shot. But she.

Today, Love

Today, Wednesday, around three pm, I realized that I was attempting to talk to myself. Oh yes: cellphone in my left hand, desk phone receiver in the right, I had indeed said, "hallo?" and I had stood there, between the two microphones, a formal smile painted on my face. You couldn't hear a thing. I thought, "What do you know, I'm not home..." and while I was thinking it, I suddenly realized the absurdity of it. And I became alarmed. I let the cellphone drop on the desk; then, drawing back and keeping my eyes on it, I stretched out two fingers and turned it off.

Dial Werner's number on the desk phone, right now. Even if he is no longer my shrink because he converted to transcendental meditation and quit the profession, three months ago, I didn't know who else to turn to with this thing. But the number was busy. So I sent him an urgent e-mail: "I'm going crazy, help." That, he would surely get. And in fact, less than ten minutes later, he returned my call.

"Giulia, dear, you ought to fall in love," said he at point blank; "it's the best cure."

Okay, I thought, the guy doesn't want to waste his time on me, okay. Nonetheless, even if he is no longer my shrink, I'm still the one who is keeping his books, for free, and I'm the smartest and most expensive online chartered accountant in the area, and so he couldn't get rid of me that easy.

"But please, Werner! Whom do you want me to..."

"You're right" goes he, a little too hastily "So, my advice is that you keep a diaria **(1)**, it's the second best cure."

"A *diaria*?" I say foolishly. "But... One gets a *diaria* when one goes on a business trip, and I'm not going anywhere..."

"A *diaria*, precious; a diary in the feminine gender. Got it? Get yourself a notepad and write down everything. It works miracles."

"Write? By hand? But..."

"By pen. Get yourself a pen (2), too. Or pull one from yourself; it'll be faster."

And now excuse me, my gorgeous big silly goose, but I'm here with a young disciple whom is impatient to commence our transcendental sitting of me..." "...ditation" I completed automatically; but perhaps the suspension points weren't there, and Werner had indeed meant "a sitting of me": just before the line had dropped, or he had hang up, there had been like a little laugh followed by a muffled scream. A young follower who cannot suffer tickling, possibly. But Werner's transcendences did not concern me. I switched on the answering machine, fax and voice mail, I fondled my faithful, snoring computer good bye, I put on my anti-smog mask and my large protective shades and I dashed off to the hypermarket on the corner.

One should always run when crossing the road. It's safer. At least, that's what government guidelines recommend for the outdoors; I, thanks to my work, which can be entirely done from home, haven't got many contacts with the environment. I understand, to be sure, that with a lifestyle such as mine one runs the risk of being somewhat cut off... But on this Werner is wrong; I, as to love stories, have had plenty of them with my former husband already: in addition to mine with him, there were all his affaires. I never did get where and how he would see all those other women.

After the separation, I've tried to get to know somebody myself, via the Internet, and a couple of times I thought I perceived a little shiver, but then invariably the story would run aground over the difficulty of setting up a meeting that would not be only virtual, for as far as I'm concerned I would even be ready to go all the way, but it seemed to me fair that the current suitor ought to take his chances first: in the end, why in the world should it have been I to take the first step in order to meet one who won't dream of getting on his ass to meet me? Today, however, there was only one dead body in the street, not even that fresh, and no sharp shooter was firing from the roofs, neither on the way out, nor on the way back. Weird. The police must have suddenly become more effective, or perhaps the terrorists have gone on strike. It would be about time: TV newscasts

say that people are sick and tired of getting killed even on days when air-quality isn't that poor. In fact, it was quite pleasant outside today: soft beams of light pierced the fog graciously.

I reached the hypermarket's check out counter without being robbed or assaulted. And I have even found the pad and the pen.

Thursday. A call! It was only the daughter of my next door neighbor, yet to receive somebody is nonetheless such an emotion that when Samarcanda - the poor kid's name is Samarcanda, perhaps that is why she has such a sad little face, as if crushed under a wealth of golden curls: in fact then she asked me whether couldn't I please call her just Sam? - when Sam then had walked in, something foolish escaped my lips: "Do I look neat?". Of a little girl, how about that! And then I had just changed for my candle-light dinner by myself.

But when I saw her I recalled that Irene, Samarcanda's mother, is a fashion designer: I wouldn't want to make a bad impression.

"You're so cool: that fringed skirt becomes you so; the holes fit perfectly, I swear." She must have wanted to be kind; she was wearing a neo-nostalgic trendy little outfit, in an exquisite jute-canvas with appliqués of synthetic potatoes. Yet she sounded sincere. Touched, rather: her lips were strangely trembling.

"Will you lend me a half-hour of net-time?" she asked pleadingly, "because I must do my homework and I can't, because my electronic teacher is not responding, because mama must have forgotten to pay for the subscription, because mama is..." And at that point the gentle, well bred Sam turned into a sobbing octopus.

She rolled herself over the floor stretching out arms and legs everywhere. She kicked. I had my doing in trying to immobilize her and figure out what her yelling was about, to begin with. As it turns out, Irene has been gone a week and hasn't shown up since. That explains all that quiet. The walls here are so thin that, usually, I can set my watch on Irene and Sam's arguments: it is sufficient that they raise their voice a notch (and average of seven times a day) and I hear

everything as if they had been standing next to me. Up until tonight the child had not been concerned because Irene, before leaving, had left her well supplied and had even warned her to be a good girl, not to open to anyone and, when she returned, she would be getting a nice surprise.

I'm afraid the surprise, instead, will be a really ugly one. Although I had seldom seen Irene, her voice kept me company. I'll miss her. And sure, her daughter will miss her more than anyone else. After she calmed down, we did her homework together. Not so reassuring: it was about a research on the women in non-industrialized nations, and what wouldn't come out of databases! Misery, diseases, natural disasters, men acting as owners forcing women to be amongst women, deprived of a hint of social life, and with all those children starved to death... How more fortunate we are! To invite Sam for supper, I had only to double the dosage on my Perfect Chef's display.

During and after the meal, the child hasn't quit talking for a moment; she had gained confidence, so much so that she had even started nosing about my apartment in a rather indiscreet manner. When she saw this notepad on my desk, she cried, "But you've got the Fata Rifatta?" (3)

"The what?" She was referring to the picture on the cover; a sort of young top-model with enormous, perplexed eyes, the waist of a wasp, the wings of a midge, the legs long from here to there and in place of her tits two cones of an embarrassing volume: the whole against a backdrop of candish colored sky. It must be some famous cartoon heroin, since my little guest looked amazed, shocked, rather, that I could ignore who she was.

I disappointed her. Especially when, as I attempted to regain positions, I ventured that this Fata Rifata, why, sure, she was pretty.

"It's not Rifata! It's with two tees!" Sam corrected me harshly. "Rifatta! It's a Fata Rifatta don't you see? Are you dumb?" and, deciding that evidently I was stupid but recoverable, she set out to recount to me the entire cartoon, from when the fairy still had short legs and small eyes, and on with a magic after another, that is with a plastic surgery after another, that, I say, what kind of a magic is that? But as it turns out this fairy here brings about instantaneous operations, with a stroke of little magic wand, upon herself and upon the other characters.

Not the doll, said Sam; the doll of the Fata Rifatta, the most sought after by today's little girls, flying off the shelves, is not capable of transforming anything; she has one and she knows it, and yet she likes her so because it has a micro-recorder inside with various tapes of conversation and one can talk to it, and yada yada yada... When Sam finally left, I had to swallow two pills for the headache.

Friday. Worked all day. Helped out Sam again with her homework. This time however I didn't ask her for supper. Decided to myself that, if her mother didn't show up by Monday, I'd be footing her subscription to the electronic teacher: all time saved for myself.

Saturday. I think that for Irene there are no hopes anymore. Today I often caught myself pricking up my ear toward the wall that separates my apartments from that of my she-neighbors, and, at a certain point, worried about the stillness, I even stepped out on the little balcony (the two apartments open onto the same little balcony, which should be used to hang out the washing, but obviously no one ever uses it), I leaped over the low divider that cuts it into half and I peeped through the glass of their door-window. Perhaps I felt some sense of guilt for not having let poor Sam talk and vent it all out... There she was, nice and quiet, playing with her doll.

In the afternoon, I heard her call her mama at the top of her voice, but no one answered her. I know how one feels when someone one loves leaves... If this *diaria* has any use, well, then I have to note it down: I've never forgiven my ex husband for faxing me his decision to leave me. He ought at least to have the guts to tell it to me over the phone. Not even that, instead: a three-line message to tell me that some movers would be passing by to collect his stuff and that was that, follows letter from the lawyer, the recreant... But what am I whining about? Whining it's no use. There are no fairies in this world who can listen to you and rush by to fix your existence. If Sam's mother has indeed been killed, as I believe, who's going to take care of her little girl? I don't recall seeing or hearing any father, about.

Perhaps she was conceived in a test tube. Why, well done, Irene. She wanted a daughter and she built one for herself, without the nuisance of irresponsible males who wear you out with

their betrayals and then go and seek excitement in adventure elsewhere. I'm almost certain that my ex has gone in one of those undeveloped countries "where the land is still the land, the sea is still the sea and men are still men" as the tourist ad goes: and where women are still witless, say I. But you can't bring someone into the world and then get killed as if it were nothing. No way. I've made up my mind. I'll take care of the little girl. And so much for the headache.

Sunday morning. I've had it with this purposeless diary. I have nothing to write. Nothing to experience.

Sunday night. But I do, instead! Damn, damn, damn! Easy, now. Let's start from the beginning. While I was watching the popular TV game show "Choose your Victim!", in the apartment next door broke out a hell of a din. Sam was shouting, "Go away!" and "I don't believe it!" and again "Go away!", and there were noises of things being smashed to pieces, like glassware or dishes or ornaments tossed against the walls, perhaps at someone. I thought I heard, in fact, a second voice. Irene must be back, I thought.

All I did, therefore, is raise the volume of my TV a little. A normal argument between mother and daughter. Then, however, I could hear the door-window being slammed, and that was already not so normal. Then... behind the glass, on the little balcony, prying inside through my door-window, a man! I sprang on my feet, extremely alarmed. The fellow was lifting his fists to smash... nay, to knock on my window. He seemed unarmed. He was gasping. He also said distinctly, "Giulia, I beg of you, let me in." How would he know my name, and what was doing out there, on the balcony, with no respirator and no mask, that handsome and delicate fair young man? A little too delicate: he was already turning purple, he was suffocating, his big green eyes, or blue, were watering. In a surge of compassion and without considering the possible consequences, I opened the door-window and let him inside.

As the stranger was recovering from the early symptoms of intoxication, I studied him closely. A little older than I'd have thought at first. On his mid-thirties, I'd say. Slender, and elegant. Not bad for a thief or a vulgar clumsy mugger. And what was really peculiar was that I thought... no, not really that I knew him, but that I had known him forever. And that's why I wasn't

all that surprised when, after recovering his breath and having done with a brief hysterical cry, he told me that, despite the appearances, he was my female neighbor, Irene, turned into... What did I think of "Ireneo"? A nice name for a male, uncommon: it means "man of peace".

But Samarcanda had been utterly frightened, she wouldn't accept or believe that she, rather than "he", that he had done it for his daughter, for her, only for her. Because, explained Ireneo, the most modern pedagogical theories condemn the exclusive relationship between a mother and a daughter: so long as she is a child, yes, that's fine, motherly tenderness and love and all, but not afterwards, afterwards one needs a father. And in our times, with the difficulties in finding available fatherly figures as opposed to the easiness of changing appearance and sex... The idea had dawned on her, she confessed, while watching that series of cartoons that Sam likes so much. She thought she was doing the right thing, and now instead... "Giulia, I was completely wrong." "I don't know," I said, staring absentmindedly at the hand with which Irene - Ireneo! - was tormenting a gleaming lock of her very short hair.

A square hand, strong, solid.

"Excuse me, but you... I mean, with this change of sex ... have you gone... I mean have you really gone all the way?" He sprang on his feet, paced back and forth about the living room with his hands in the pockets of his pants, as if engrossed, or embarrassed. Then he stopped and smiled at me: "Of course I have. Never liked things left half-done."

"Then there won't be any problems... I mean... Sam'll come around, you'll see. She'll understand how lucky she is, to have for a mother... I mean, for a father, so... brave and sensitive a person."

"Do you think so?" said he, touched.

"Oh, yes," I replied, and as I looked at him straight in the eyes - blue, they are blue and deep and more trustworthy than a mountain lake of olden times - I felt in my chest a pounding of frantic throbs, sweet and hard as a machine-gun-spray of sugared almonds.

- (1) **Diaria:** Italian for Travel Allowance, as the lady-narrator (correctly) objects to the shrink. Playing with the word, the author makes the shrink use it (incorrectly) as feminine gender of the word **Diario**, Diary.
- (2) **Penna:** Italian for **Pen**, but also for **Feather**. The shrink plays with the word suggesting (offensively) that she pull a feather from herself with which to write.
- (3) **Fata Rifatta:** literally: Fairy Redone. The Italian expression has been retained as the author plays with the words when the little girl corrects the spelling of her host (...it's two Tees...)

Stand By Me

I had already put on my white sweater and I was waiting on the terrace, in the dark, shivering in the ocean wind. That night the ocean was really spectacular: foaming with long, raging swells, hurling itself against the shore as if willing to devour it and then devour me. There was even a tongue, no, like a blade of moonlight which, filtering through a heap of black thick clouds, cut the agitated surface exactly down the middle. A backdrop suitable for a thriller, and I felt in fact very uneasy, and yet happy. How quaint.

I felt a tickling up my legs, as if many little creatures were climbing on me in a line... Out of the clouds darted a lightening, then a thunder deafened me; I felt my hair crackle and stand on end on my nape; but sure, that's what it must have been: a summer thunderstorm approaching. I wrung myself in my sweater and I grew sad. How funny I must have looked, so forlorn and dismayed before the ocean, with my fan-like hair like a golden halo and the goose bumps over a mile of bare legs... For, naturally, I wore nothing under the sweater. Jack loved my penchant of doing away with lingerie! Although that was in fact what had caused the misunderstanding of May 19, which had kept us apart for six weeks.

Poor Jack, I had embarrassed him on the day of his birthday, but I thought I was doing the right thing, I thought that to him it would have been a little extra present to see me there in that squeezed-flesh-colored outfit that glittered with six-thousand Strass and seemed to cry out, "tear me, tear me"... I know, I had done the wrong thing, it had been foolish of me to undress myself in such a way on his official celebration, with hundreds of wild cameramen and his wife whom had carefully steered clear of me as I sang "Happy Birthday Mr. President" with my little enamored voice. The witch must have given him a piece of her mind, afterwards. And in fact from that day Jack had not called me anymore, and when I did call him, he would not take the call: "The President's in a meeting with secret service, the President's in a meeting with missiles experts;"

why, they were running out of excuses in order to keep me from him; the last time they went as far as tell me, "The President cannot be disturbed; he's deciding whether or not to blow up the world."

I was on the brink of despair; I must have really been out of myself when I answered to tell the President that either he came to the phone or I was going to blow *him* up. In fact I had no intention of sending my private diary to the newspapers, but that's how we all were in the early Sixties; we were convinced that atomic bombs are a great way to win a war even without using them, so long as you have them. And in fact Jack came to the phone at once, he apologized, he explained to me his problems with his wife who obsessed him, with the Cubans who robbed him of his sleep, with the Russians who were driving him crazy; all in all, he was extremely sweet.

I forgave him right there and then. I agreed to wait until he'd find the moment to squeeze me in in his agenda. Same place, our romantic ocean retreat borrowed from the usual discreet friend. As to the when, he couldn't be more specific than a "very soon, dear." Therefore, in my natural and a bit rough on the more delicate skin, wool sweater, on that late summer night I was all aquiver: I had been waiting for him for so long! And with the lightening and thunders of the impending storm, I also feared for him. But then I heard the unmistakable noise of the chopper and I heaved a good sigh of relief: Jack was safe and sound; he was landing on the portion of beach shielded by the trees behind the villa, just like other times.

I saw the detail of marines in camouflage jump down and dash off in the darkness; good boys, always so discreet, having them around made me feel secure, too. Panting with happiness, I ran inside. With my feet flying over the carpet, barely touching it, I dashed across the living room toward the door that was being opened; here he is!, at last!, my big handsome protective President with the Hollywood smile, the very wide shoulders... He seemed shorter, leaner, not so imposing, a little... younger? Curse my awful myopia: I had to be practically into his arms before I realized that that wasn't Jack.

It was Bob, his brother.

"But what are you doing here?" I asked him later, after I managed to take his balled-up necktie off my mouth, which besides was chocking me for it wasn't pure silk but rayon, as was the fashion then, and I for synthetic fibers have always had an allergy much ahead on my times; "And Jack? Where is he? When he finds out that you..."

"Relax, sweetie, Jack's not going to be mad" says to me all cheerful that fiend, giving me his best impish smile from above (to me it seemed rather the sneer of a shark, but when you see things upside down you can never gamble on their significance, and I was still laying down on the carpet while Bob had turned round and was retreating on all fours over me looking for God knows what, perhaps his briefs; and therefore the smile was immediately replaced by a nice pair of blue eyes and then by his thick lock of hair, so I had no way of pursuing the thing).

"What do you mean, he's not going to be mad?!" I jumped, "You... you... you come here and steal your brother his lover and... mmmh" I managed to say, before Bob found what he was searching and shoved it in my mouth in place of the necktie (it wasn't his briefs, it was his undershirt, luckily, one hundred percent cotton). He turned round again, sat on my stomach and stared me in the eyes with those big innocent-kid-like eyes of his.

"Jack knows. Stop! No use flinging yourself about, when women move and talk they make me nervous; I can explain it all. He couldn't make it, there was a last minute impediment, the United Nations, Vietnam, I'm not sure, something like that, and so he called me and said, 'Bobby, after all this time that she has spent waiting for me it would be cruel to leave her alone in that empty cottage; I couldn't do that, she is the most beautiful woman in the world but she is also the most vulnerable woman in the world; I don't want to hurt her, I want her to know that I care for her; therefore here is your chance, Bobby.

"Do you think I don't know that you too have a crush on her? Then you go tonight, go over and represent me;' that's what Jack said to me, and I asked whether for 'representing him' he intended 'represent him in full,' and he said that would be entirely up to you."

"Mmmh" protested I, and Bob started laughing and opened his hands, with the consequence that my throat became like aswarm with little worms, for the abrupt resumption of blood circulation.

"I know, I know and I do apologize," said Bob, "Actually, I'm afraid I was a little hasty, but you must understand that it's been a long time that I've been dreaming of... I lost my head the moment I saw you. What can I do to make you forgive me?" I tried to fire myself as much as

possible and he finally got it; he said "Why, how reckless of me! Sorry, it's an old habit of mine with Ethel!", and not only did he take his undershirt off my mouth but he also moved a bit from my diaphragm, so I was able to speak.

"Did he really say he didn't want to hurt me?"

"I swear" said Bob raising two fingers in the sign of the boy scouts. I smiled at him cautiously, and to bide my time I coughed for a good while. I couldn't believe him. But he seemed indeed sincere.

"And...?" "And? Speak up, sugar, your voice is so hoarse, so exciting!" "And... Jack didn't just say that, when he said that you too... Well, you know, that thing of the crash..." "That I'm in love with you? But, Marilyn!, how can you doubt it?! I'm madly in love with you! I love you so much that, look, I could kill you."

The gentleman I'm with now says it was all a bunch of lies. He says those two have taken advantage of my want of human warmth, and that they have done me up like salami. He says that Jack gave me to his brother because I could hurt his career and become a national security risk. He says that, to look at this thing also from the other point of view, one must not forget that Bob was an excellent lawyer; it wasn't certainly hard for him to convince his older brother to pass the toy on to him instead of discarding it directly, since there was also that little issue of the diary that had yet to be found.

"So then at least Bob did love me; he wanted me", I rejoin, and the gentleman I'm with now smiles at me with tenderness and says with infinite affection, "Dear child, and who wouldn't want you? You were Marilyn Monroe, not a rag for the floor; will you ever get that into your head? Everybody loves you now, and even in life you've been much loved. But not by those two, definitely not by those two."

"May be," mutter I, frowning.

"But on Jack and Bob you went down too hard, if you asked me; both of them killed... I may be too good, as you say, but You've been a little too vindictive." And at this point He starts chortling and I have to put up for the millionth time with His favorite citation from all the lines in my movies, always the same, there He goes, I know, now He goes: "Nobody's perfect."

Unreal (and Fine)

In 1907 the "two legged thing called guidogozzano" was a frail, fair-haired twenty-four-year-old with his ears sticking out a bit and drooping shoulders. Everything had happened to him, that year: the release of his first poem collection, the first exchanges of love letters with colleague Amalia Guglielminetti, his first serious attack of tuberculosis.

The discovery that he had the ailment of the past century came to threaten his sense of humor: but how, he himself, the anti-romantic par excellence, he who sang the first true rhythm of the crisis of the Nineteen-hundred, was to die of a Nineteenth-century ailment? For the shock his rhymes became sharper. He cut down on adjectives. He was now almost ready to write a beautiful poem. All he needed was a slight push, so slight as to lead him to take one further step forward into desire and one quick backward step into reality. He wanted a life-model to envy. And here is where I come in.

"Felicita, why are you hiding the magazines?" my father asked me, apparently intent to exploring the bowl of his pipe. Dear papa. I could have re-decorated the whole living room under his nose and he wouldn't even blink; yet a rustle of paper would make his ear prick up.

"Did you forget we are expecting a call?"

"Why, yes; your friend from the city, the young promise of literature..."

"The counselor, father. Remember to address him as 'counselor', and if you asked him some legal advise on the estate, so much the better."

"Better, is it? I don't know. Counselor or poet, it still is an indiscretion to pester a guest with stories of... But what did you turn yourself into!"

He had raised his eyes wide open in so aggressive an amazement that I suddenly felt very insecure: "We were agreed..." I mumbled. "Have you forgotten? We are humble people in this

house, that's right, well off but humble. And I've dressed consequently... Don't you like my hairdo?"

"Ludicrous," he grumbled, and started pacing back and forth between the Corinthian sofa and the looking glass. "This whole affaire is preposterous. Damn you and your girl friends from Turin and damn me that I can never say no to you. Not that I give a damn about passing for an ignorant, thanks to you; but having to suffer the sight of my only daughter dressed like a servant and all proud of those moronic pigtails... copied hair for hair from a Vermeer's interior, besides... But have you looked at yourself? You're almost ugly, you have no appeal."

"I'm making a note of this," said I, frowning in contempt. Good; father was becoming more and more pedantic and reckless with age, but he hadn't lost his memory. And in any case it would have been too late to step back now: they were ringing at the door; Maddalena was already on her way to see who it was; Guido Gozzano was here.

I straightened my borrowed skirts and went to meet him, yet a little uneasy. In fact, I had nothing to worry about. The scene was perfect. It was perfect for the whole month. The first day we gave him a tour of the salons (Odor of shade! Odor of past/Odor of desolate abandonment ...) and whilst he observed our door-top panels decorated with mythological themes we cried that definitely we would have liked to get rid of old junk, refresh the house, but with the cost of renovation these days... And speaking of fresh, wouldn't the Counselor fancy taking a stroll in the lawn, that is, in the vegetable garden?

My father was impeccable in playing boor and didn't spare him his fretting about the slothful factor and his praise of lettuce heads; yet he surpassed even me when he went on to tell him a complete popular serial on the how and why the aristocratic mansion would have come into the hands of our bourgeois family: that the last marchioness had fled, that the scandal, and that the fruit of the sin, and the rash expenses, and the mortgages, and the great confusion of title registrations in that far 1810... He bored him so thoroughly that when I opened the door of the smoking room and I appeared before him with the tray and the lace doily and the un-matching coffee cups I certainly appeared as something to love; rather, I was. I was a magnificent blunder in the dark. (And I see again the vermilion of your mouth/ So wide whilst laughing and drinking/ And

the square face, without eyebrows,/ All speckled with light freckles/ And the firm eyes, the sincere iris/ Blue of a china blue...) I loved him; that's true. In a Gozzanian way.

For him I stood silent entire afternoons, I smiled, and I listened. Mostly he spoke to me of butterflies. And the Parnassius Apollo, and the Pieris Brassicae, and the Ornithoptera Pronomus... "See, in the chrysalis are distinguished two opposite sides: back and belly. On the belly are seen raised layers made and disposed as the bandages one finds on mummies' heads; the back is dentate and crusty...", and I following, darning linen sheets, perfectly content, reassuring, inane. When, however, I heard him praise with melancholy tones the dorsal hairs of the Acherontia Atropos, a large butterfly commonly called «Dead's Head», I decided that dusk was falling fast. I got on my feet, artlessly proposed to him to take cover and, from staircase to staircase, I drew my prey into the attic.

The sensitive Guido was struck by the portrait of the ancient Marchioness. Indeed a valuable work, whether or not, as I believe, an Appiani's; it had been difficult to carry it into the attic; my father strongly opposed it; yet that sumptuous neo-classic whiteness against the gloomy backdrop of discarded furniture was to me a special effect one couldn't do without. I used it to whisper with a very credible naïveté some broken phrase about childish frights; covering my mouth I whispered that the Marchioness sometimes came out of her picture and walked through the corridors, and Guido smiled at me with reaffirmed superiority and turned his attention elsewhere. I had been right: without make up, my likeness with her, with my great-great-great grandmother, wouldn't attract any attention.

Yet the sense of triumph for that little deception framed in the large deception, led me to an excess. With the print depicting laurel-wreathed Torquato Tasso I exaggerated: no country young lady would have asked how it was that that gentleman had a cherry bough on his head. Was I really a fool? How could it have not occurred to me that those there know all too well what laurel is? I had given myself out! I should have done, rather, a good comment on the spices that go with the roast. But Guido didn't notice the mistake (and in fact he then cited my phrase in his poem without realizing that it clashed with it). He was moved, lost in a dream, meditation, or fantasy of his. I had him.

We again admired together "The autumn plain/ From the Six-hundred attic, oval,/ Of thick little frames, where the plot/ Of the glass deformed the view/ Like an ancient unnatural enamel./ Unreal (and fine)..." And at that point we obviously talked of marriage, then they called us for supper; then, as always, came the Doctor and the Notary to play cards. There were many of us, in my little scheme. Besides my father, practically I had to persuade all the prominent people in the village not to say a word on my degree, and it had been hard, for in those days we educated women were very rare beasts and thus a quite prized subject of conversation. I had had the good venture of finding a worthy ally in our pharmacist, whom, since he also wrote a few verses from time to time, was more willing to get in the shoes of an artist, but I do think that not even him could grasp the scope or at least the sense of my cultural operation.

I thus let everybody presume that they were obliging a whim of mine that was just a bit more elaborated than usual. After a month of all that one-man-audience play, to be sure, someone was becoming uneasy: the Mayor decided to anticipate his annual trip and, claiming he had to check out nearby fields and bushes, he left for London with his trunks of un-ironed shirts (three-hundred-sixty-five of them, plus one for leap years: he claimed British laundries were the best). But by now the most was done. Phase two of my intervention on Guido involved only a few finishing touches.

I showed a few symptoms of romanticism, I was tedious and downright too mawkish in exhibiting the standard modesty of marriageable girls; then we gave him a masterly touch of vulgarity through the chatter of the kind pharmacist, who told him of my meager dowry and of the buzz in the village... When Guido Gozzano left, we were all happy and content. He, because he now had his most beautiful «un-plucked rose» to regret, we, because we couldn't put up with all that healthy life any longer. While I put on again my Poiret's little outfits and, as a possessed, began looking for the Turkish cigarettes, which I had hidden too well, my father went back to filling in the index cards to be sent to Vienna... For few are aware of it, but it was my papa who supplied Sigmund Freud the raw material for his clinical cases: that year he had been working on a relationship between creative writing and daydreaming, I believe.

But that is a different story. When I traced my cigarettes, all I had to do was wait for the postcards from Mrs. Guglielminetti. Amalia kept me posted as to Guido's progresses better than a literary gazette, and in fact she sent me almost immediately a first version of my poem of Gozzano, which was titled *The Hypothesis*, and didn't meet with our appreciation. We both knew the boy could do more, even though I must say that poor Amalia, with all her para-Dannunzian bursts and her liberty-seductress-like large hats, did not make it any easier for him. Perhaps it should have been my duty to take care of her instead of him.

But even a Muse has some limits: how can you inspire your best girl friend, one whom you've met at the nuns' boarding school, and whom was already on your nerves then? I was careful not to reveal to anyone that my interpretation of Miss Felicita had actually been modeled upon Amalia, naturally in a completely reversed perspective.

Sophisticated, she? Humble, I; supercity-girl, she? And I country girl. With hindsight, I can affirm it was the right choice to helping Guido, and it was also not too bad a vendetta on that pretentious Guglielminetti. She now in literary history is a second-class figure, a minor author and somewhat fading at that, whereas I stand tall with the immortality of the famed. But this, I know now.

In 1909, when Miss Felicita was finally ready and printed, I wasn't giving it much thought anymore. I had other things to do. I was in Paris with my friend Valentine de Saint-Point, I had trimmed my hair very short and I had completely lost my head after a very modern character, very original, whom with my assistance had published a manifest full of energy... Dear, my Marinetti! A little exalted, but so good with public relations and onomatopoeias! "We will glorify war... Beautiful ideas worth dying for and scorn for woman," said the Manifest of Futurism, and Valentine was convinced that she was the woman. Poor deluded. Even though that ungrateful Filippo Tommaso has always refused to give names, it was definitely I who inspired him "The feverish insomnia, the racing pace, the deadly jump, and the slap and the punch."

The Unmatched

Watching herself in the mirror for the Impeccability Check, Jo'Hanna discovered a little mark, which, the day before, she was certain, had not been there. A hideous sign. If the skin begins to defy the central laws, producing unauthorized decorations on its own, where will we ever end up? Fortunately the mark had appeared only on the left hand face, the one reserved from time immemorial to the emotional creations of teenage girls; the colleagues at the office would have thought that good old Jo'Hanna-34 was having problems accepting the Passage to the Rational Age Group, and that would have been the end of it.

It would have been far worse had the mark compromised her right hand face, or, good Klarity! the middle one. Career advancements would have been invalidated, rightly pushing her back to novice Level, for who could ever trust an Official of Klarity that fell prey to irregular skin manifestations? The exterior is the precise reflection of the interior; even Neutral kids know that, and that's to say it all, thought Jo'Hanna scanning the surface of all of her faces in concern; but nay, there was only that one mark, there, right on the nose of the left hand face... Queer shape: it seemed a black line followed by a sort of wee curl, like a barely hinted question mark...

Lost in thought, Jo'Hanna raised her fourth pair of arms to tidy up her complex pigtail architecture, already perfectly in order, which binds the three heads of every genuine Lady restraining their natural propensity to wandering about on the long blue necks, and in the meantime with the lower arms she peeled off the last remnants of nocturnal skins, indifferent to the fact that, like every morning, together with the remnants of the skins her Night Sexual Symbiont orderly would also fall to the ground. Like every morning, the Symbiont, feeling himself removed from his warm and feathered nice orifice, burst into tears with desperate moans.

"Cut it out, Elliot," said Jo'Hanna irritated, "It'll only be for fourteen hours. And beware that last night I noticed a halo of impurity on the floor of the lounge-module; instead of wasting time cyber-chattering with your little friends, try and pay more attention to cleaning, All right?"

"But I love you," chirped the diminutive Symbiont; but he was already commencing, obedient, to eat the skins scattered over the floor. Jo'Hanna squeezed her multi-shoulders and, perfectly unclad, she walked out and headed for her office on the nineteenth floor of the spaceship. There was the usual hysterical atmosphere of the pre-invasion work days, with a quantity of Neutrals darting between the posts of the She-Officials on the embedded roller-skates. Jo'Hanna started cautiously toward her processing trestle.

"By Klarity!" Greeted her T'Nina, turning ceremoniously one head.

"Likewise," said Jo'Hanna, hesitant.

Why on earth did her colleague greet her on her right? Was the mark then so visible, so serious? Jo'Hanna brought instinctively a pair of hands over her left hand face in order to hide it. T'Nina took a better look at her and jumped down her trestle in a vortex of stretched out hands: "You too? You too? clucked she, possessed by an incomprehensible commotion. Faces to faces with her, at length Jo'Hanna realized: the stain on the left hand nose, T'Nina had one identical. That's why she had greeted her with her Logarithmic head! To hide the Emotional one! They clucked together for a while, exchanging the necessary expressions of sympathy, but, as they were still clucking, there arrived a Neutral Express with the summons for an extraordinary Great Assembly of the Management Group.

Jo'Hanna-34 and N'Tina-106 promptly joined the line of She-Officials headed for the meeting module, and it was then that they discovered that they were no exception. They all had the queer line and question-mark-shaped stain on their left hand face, each and every one of them. Very far from the Ladies of Klarity's space-ship, some five-hundred meters beneath the Frejus Tunnel, in the Planetary Situation Unit ran in laborious collaboration by the United Nations and by the Free Earthly Trading Territories, a Chinese engineer consulted his watch and raised his thumb in an ancient conventional sign, giving Generala **(1)** Elizabeth Arpist the occasion to utter for the first time in her life, "Ok, boys, here we are! Fetch the prisoner," just as in Twentieth Century war movies.

A bunch of north-and-south Irish engineers pushed an armored cage to the center of the salon. The Generala got on her feet, straightened her skirt, reached the heavy hatch and in she went, without neglecting first to ask in a soft voice, "May I come in?" "Do come in," grumbled the extra-terrestrial prisoner, crouched down as usual at the bottom of the cage. The Generala approached to within half-meter of him, bowed and cordially said, "Cigarette?" The Symbiont of Klarity shook his head in so depressed a refusal that the Generala caught herself into thinking again that, why, that doubtless alien being, even though remarkably cute, was in all identical to a human male... that is, not exactly in all: given his obstinate inclination to tearing to pieces and devouring all kinds of clothing whenever one tried to cover him somehow, the Symbiont appeared equipped with very ordinary genital implements as to shape yet as to size... off scale? Unheard of? Well, quite exaggerated to say the least.

A young Senegalese marine from the Pan-African command who had recovered him alive from the spacecraft which had crashed into the Futa Gialon Range, had killed himself two hours later, officially as a consequence of the trauma of having had to untangle him by axe from the immense corpse of a three headed, eight-armed blue she-giant; but Generala Arpist, knowing her men, suspected that the poor boy had killed himself out of sheer humiliation.

She did not have these kind of problems.

"Well then, Bill-Athos dear, how is it up there, uh? How is it going?"

"And how should I know."

"Come, come, and don't play cry-baby now. You want to disappoint your friend Elliot? You want to disappoint us, who are so good to you?"

The prisoner lowered his head and mumbled, "What's the point? My Lady Ka'Rla has died, died..."

The Generala grabbed him by the hair and gave it a good tug: "That is exactly why you must cooperate, dick! You want us to deploy all of our weapons? You want the Ladies of the other Symbionts to die, too? You want our friend Elliot to become like you, an Unmatched?!"

"No, no!" screamed Bill-Athos, horrified; and Generala Arpist afforded herself an inner chortle.

Perfectly manipulable, these male aliens; it was enough to use a grain of psychology and they were taken in whatever rubbish a female told them. Better yet, they were so naive as to be unable to hide anything, neither an emotion nor a scheme for a secret invasion. Dealing with females would have been a completely different story; they were smart, determined, so much so that they had even started to build up an internal consensus: in India, millions of fanatics were already crowding the temples getting ready to receive the New She-Deities which, they believed, were to descent from heaven to benefit them, whereas any other moron would have seen that those there wanted to come and play Ladies also here on Earth, unfortunately completely unarmed after the conversion pf the armies into, mind you, very useful EYAPPOs (Elementary Yoga Apnea Parachutable Protective Organizations).

But the Situation Unit was ready to push back forever into space the monstrous entities, taking advantage of weak spots unveiled by the incautious Bill-Athos and the precious help, if not entirely voluntary, of the Rebellious Symbiont Elliot, head of a conspiracy which was coming in the nick of time.

"Go ahead," repeated the Generala, "You're in telepathic contact with your friend and he's in psycho-hormonal contact with his Lady, and all; so all you've got to do now is tell me how things are going up there, speak up."

"The She-Managers are in a meeting," whispered Bill-Athos, unwillingly. "They have discovered that the mark appeared on their Emotional face is indeed a microscopic inscription..."

"Microscopic to them!" exploded Generala Arpist, who deep down was a hot-tempered character (even though her rigorous training allowed her to disguise it: she had attended the prestigious Non-Peace College of the She-Neo-Jesuits).

"We're doing our best to project the message in large type into the microcephalus mind of that jerk of your friend, and those she-elephants don't even see it!"

"The She-Scientists are enlarging the inscription. They have called in the She-Linguists to interpret it."

The Generala relaxed and tried to smile: "Very well! We can move on to Phase Two. Remember? Phase One: draw their attention in order to urge them to get together. Phase Two: attack and convince them! Print this image well into your mind and transmit it to Elliot."

The alien took the note, gazed at it and frowned in disgust.

"Mmm... Are we certain this stuff will help to convince the Ladies that we Symbionts are entitled to a more loving treatment?"

"You bet!" said the Generala, "You can trust us, I swear it on my mom!" and, in the effort of appearing sincere and convincing, she went as far as kiss him. In the meeting module of the Great Extraordinary Assembly of the Klarity's Management Group, six hundred-ninety heads turned abruptly toward Jo'Hanna-34.

It had never come to pass that an Official would suddenly scream in such an unseemly way, through all her mouths; thus a resentful buzz began to spread insidiously from trestle to trestle, upsetting further Linguist An'Thonia's account and forcing the Weekly-She-Delegate to eight-hands-pound her little hammer on the presidential desk.

"As I was saying," continued An'Thonia throwing one or two nasty looks at the screaming Official whom in the meantime had hushed up and had taken on a not so agreeable bluish color, "The first part of the inscription in standard earthly idiom is quite clear, and readable as 'I'm awfully sick', but the second part remains indecipherable. Literally, it ought to stand for 'Would you have an aspirin?', something, in my opinion, completely senseless... Ah, but what now!"

Another triple cry had pierced the tense air of the meeting module, and a moment later there was another, and yet another, and before a minute had elapsed more than half of the two-

hundred-thirty She-Managers were, in a sequence, screaming in terror, hushing up and turning bluish.

"Silence!" pleaded the Weekly Delegate; then she screamed terrorized, hushed up and turned bluish as well. An horrendous image had presented itself to her Emotional mind, instantly transmitting itself into the Harmonizing and into the Logarithmical mind, which had quickly drawn the distressing deductions. As it turned out, something similar was happening to them all.

The last to go through the scream-silence-bluish-turning sequence was Linguist An'Thonia, and she was also that who took the longest to recover from the shock. The She-Managers close to the scaffold of the She-Speakers heard her mumble to herself, herself and herself, "I'm very sick, wouldn't you have an aspirin? I'm very sick, wouldn't you have three aspirin?". After an animated discussion it was ascertained that all the She-Managers (two hundred-thirty-one including the Weekly Delegate) had received in succession the same mental image, depicting a woman by the evident terrestrial typology with a horribly contorted facial expression, a knife splitting her only head down the middle and, repeated all around not only earthly idiom, but also in pure Klaritese, the caption "Migraine".

According to the ancient custom of having one demonstrate publicly what they all already knew, the She-Manager who had first received the image was entasked with exposing the problem. Jo'Hanna-34, therefore, still a bit bluish especially round her lower orifice (which even with the best Officials is always the last to regain control) but standing with her foreheads raised before the Assembly and with firm voices, said, "We had no idea that such a thing existed. We'll have to investigate about the origin of the image. Now, however, whoever has projected it into our mind, the important is that images never lie. The exterior is the interior.

Consequently, this strange ailment is certainly typical of the planet that we are about to conquer. Will it be contagious? Will it not? In any case, and prudently considering the less favorable assumption, our situation can be easily summarized in symbolic terms."

With a graceful about face she reached the blackboard, grabbed a few chalk sticks and with a pair of hands she drew a head and a knife, while with the other six she drew three heads and three knives. Then she addressed the Assembly again and, using only her central voice, she asked solemnly, "For Klarity, are you prepared to run the risk?"

"No!" replied in chorus two hundred-twenty-nine central voices (Linguist An'Thonia was still babbling in various tones of doubt, "Wouldn't you have an aspirin?" and "wouldn't you have three aspirins?").

It was thus that the Great Assembly of the Ladies of Klarity, sole species in the Galaxy not to have had either three or two or one single headache, gave up the invasion of the Earth and of any other planet likely to host that terrible disease. The weekly tabloid "Above and Under the Universe" reports that two hundred-thirty-one little traitors led by the Symbiont Elliot continued for several light-years to exchange telepathically winks and elbows of congratulation, all happy because, idle and awfully bored, their Ladies spent most of the return journey well wrapped up in their sleeping skins.

On Earth, the shrewd Chief of Staff Generala Elizabeth Arpist became Generalissima and guest-appeared in many TV talk shows where she brilliantly illustrated the theme "Is it true that images never lie? No, not exactly." In well informed circles buzz has it that following one of her recommendations, blown in a moment of weariness into the ear of the EYAPPO Armored Corp's "Gay Power Endurance" Recreation Club director, Bill-Athos the Unmatched, too, was then able to enjoy a popularity as broad and deep, if not more.

(1) **Generala**: made-up feminine gender of **Generale**, that is, General.

Author's Note

All these Short Stories, except "The Unmatched", have been available for some time through the web www.carmencovito.com. Now I thought it would be nice to take advantage of e-book technology and present them as a collection.

Reading remains free although I am withholding the copyrights. I must thus ask my readers to be at least as kind to me as I have been to them: please do not commercialize these stories in any ways and on any existing or future supports.

Bibliography

A writer and a translator, Carmen Covito was born in Castellammare di Stabia, Naples, Italy, in 1948. She lives and works in Milan. She is the author of the novels: "Plain and of a Certain Age" (*La bruttina stagionata*, Bompiani 1992, 1993 Bancarella Award), "Why do Hedgehogs Cross the Road" (*Del perché i porcospini attraversano la strada*, Bompiani 1995), "Welcome to This Environment" (*Benvenuti in questo ambiente*, Bompiani 1997), "The Red and the Dark" (*La rossa e il nero*, Mondadori 2002). Some short stories not included in this collection have been published in the small volume "Skeletons Without a Closet" (*Scheletri senza armadio*, La Tartaruga 1997). The web <http://www.carmencovito.com/>, totally self-managed and produced, has been Online since 1997.

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