

FAGIOLI

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RITA KLAIBER DID not belong in Rome on her birthday, but there she was, grateful to Theresa and Fabio for their apartment, eager for their VCR to rewind one of her American gifts, curious as to what she was about to see.

The tape contained, to the best of her understanding, a decidedly novel act somewhere within the joyful entirety of the first annual "Hollywood's Finest Fourth of July Parade." The unlikely performance she awaited was a Melba Moore salute to Marlo Thomas. Sipping a tall *te freddo*, Rita considered the improbable series of phone calls that might have led to such a tribute. She wondered what Phil Donahue thought of it all.

It was eight weeks since Rita had had occasion to see Phil Donahue, Marlo Thomas, Melba Moore, or anyone else of their stellar ilk. Nine days had passed since she'd spoken to Eliot Bentley. Eliot, her former boyfriend, had taped the parade the very week she'd entrusted him with her own VCR and her apartment in Manhattan. This was shortly before Eliot unwittingly set fire to that apartment and everything in it, everything except this tape, which had inexplicably been spared. Advised by her co-op board not to return to the rubble, ever, Rita was on the lam in Rome, salvaging a remnant of her former life, and looking for love. Given the odds of finding it, she was making commendable progress.

She first spotted Jay Boyle in the Sistine Chapel. He was conducting a tour of Japanese Americans, describing the restoration of the ceiling in a tone of hushed reverence.

He said, "Infrared spectrometry."

She heard, "Bicarbonates of sodium and ammonia," "distilled ionized water," and "carefully, with a sponge." It seemed to her a highly technical insight, and she tagged along with the group to learn more.

She was told that Michelangelo began the job in 1508 under duress,

that he did not recline while painting, that animal glue varnishes had been used to brighten his work, and that lunch would be taken in a pizzeria on Via Crescenzio. She'd heard all this before, all but the lunch revelation, that is, and she took that disclosure to heart, making her way to the given address moments before the group arrived *en masse*.

He sat facing her, some distance away, but, absorbed as he was in the business of being a good group leader, he barely looked beyond his charges. The one time he did was when he was rising to leave. At that moment their eyes met and lingered. Then he offered a small, surprised smile, and went, regrettably, out the door.

Rita walked home. She practiced her Italian by reading signs. She read *Libri Usati*, *Diverto di Fermata*, The Bee Gees in Concert. She thought about the Bee Gees. Hadn't they retired? She passed a *Tabacchi*, the *Banco di Roma*, an *Autoscuola*, a sign for Esso Gas. She thought Esso Gas had retired, too, but no. Esso, like the Bee Gees, was making a comeback. Or maybe it was more like the Grateful Dead and the Rolling Stones: it had never quit. It was still going strong. Perhaps this news was good. Maybe it meant that she, too, would be forever young. Forever on the road, anyway. Or was it bad news? Proof that she was criminally out of touch with American popular culture. She had turned away from those groups. Their longevity baffled her. She'd thrown them over for singers with no last names: Sade, Basia, Enya. Likewise, she'd forsaken Esso: she owned no car, bought no gas. She was a refugee.

Her raft that week was a noisy place called *Pensione Suisse*. She was waiting for Italian friends to return from Turkey, where they were on holiday. They would be back soon, visit with her, settle her into their apartment, and depart on business. Rita was killing time. The *Suisse* was like the youth hostels of past visits: lumpy twin beds, an echoing din from the hallway, the murmur of voices in adjacent rooms, a phone in a booth. The sitting room was grand, however. With the huge windows swung open, and in the right chair, placed just so, she could feel in charge of a world, her vast holdings aged and shingled. She took tea in this room, watched her neighbors, wrote postcards. A cat named *Baci* lived at the *Suisse*, a calico who had taken a liking to Rita's lap. Those days there were few things so certain as *Baci's* favor and the sanctuary of her private bath.

Their second meeting was even more fortuitous than their first. This occurred one week later when they were high above the Spanish Steps on a stairway landing in the Hassler, under a painting called "*Il Lago De Navona*." She was going up as he was coming down. When

they reached the landing in sync and found themselves poring over each other yet again, the moment had all the feel of the preordained.

"You," she actually whispered, astounded.

She went on staring, missing the sepia scene over his shoulder. She never saw the horse-drawn carriages rolling through the flooded piazza, a frolicking populace, the public commotion. Rita was engulfed in a private commotion of her own: kismet.

Their unspoken common denominator that evening was the hotel's rooftop restaurant, where Jay had dined as a guest of his group, and where Rita, though she could not have anticipated such an affront, would have been refused entry. The sumptuous room, with its wine and panorama, came only with dinner, an extravagance she was not prepared to support. Neither was he, but, being a gracious recipient, he doted on his *finnocchio al pismanio* (relishing the fennel, laced with olive oil, lightly salted and peppered), the *bucatini all'amatriciana*, an *abacchio al forno*, and finally, *gelato*. As the *grappa* arrived, Jay excused himself, and, after saying his good-nights, found himself taking the stairs, a sense of congenial plentitude within. He saved Rita from being refused this, herself, when he said, simply, "I'm an American, too. Can I interest you in a stroll?" Then, cocking his arm, he escorted her back down the stairs, through the lobby, and out into the late summer night.

After that, they made frequent trips between their respective rooms. His, on the courtyard of the Hotel Dinesen, was an easy, though initially uphill walk from her friends' flat on Via Gregoriana. She merely retraced her steps to the Hassler, cherishing its imposing splendor each time, and proceeded up Via Sistina, making a left on Franco Crispi and following this along the edge of the Borghese Gardens until Crispi became Porta Pinciana, and at number eighteen, on the corner of Aurora, she entered the slightly faded, though welcoming lobby of the small hotel.

He had stayed there before. He knew Rome well. He told her the story of a hailstorm in April on Via Tritone, waiting in sodden misery with a dental group for a bus to St. Peter's.

"Number sixty-two," he recalled with modest authority.

He had friends in Rome, and favorite places. On Thursdays he frequented *Caffe Antica Della Pace* in Corsia Agonale. He liked his Sambuca over ice, and received it that way without asking. He knew the caretaker in Keats's house on Piazza di Spagna, and sent American toys to the man's children on Christmas. His *tintoria* was local and familiar, too, tucked behind *Piccolo Mondo*, invisible to the uninitiated. Once they had eaten *antipasti* while two women, who were fond of

him, Rita thought, pressed his tie and jacket in the tiny room past the kitchen. It was past closing time. They refused his tip. They were clearly delighted.

He bought bread and cheeses, chocolate and blood oranges on Via Lombardia while she ogled shoes in the window of *Mishelle* and in the gaudier shops along Via Veneto. On the first cool Saturday, they felt like a touch of Paris, and indulged in *cappuccini* and iced cakes at a sidewalk table on the boulevard, then strolled arm-in-arm past the Excelsior and their embassy to gawk and giggle at the bones of the Capuchin monks. Later, they shared a long nap, waking when the wind came up, then made their way to an aerie in Campo dei Fiori for sunset and dinner.

The rooftop apartment was spectacular. It was, Rita realized, her first penthouse. The huge room with its lavish appointments had the rarified air of gentility amidst squalor, though her notion of the neighborhood being squalid was relative, and, in all fairness, only occurred to her once she stepped through the door and into the domain of Gwynneth and Geoffrey Steyn.

The Steyns were bean farmers. They sounded Dutch. While Gwynneth showed Jay her latest *ex-votos*, Rita talked beans with Geoff.

"*Ceci, borlotti, cannellini,*" he told her, and poured two glasses of *Vecchio Semperi*, a Sicilian aperitif, he explained. His hands were smooth, manicured. They were not the hands of any farmer she'd ever seen. Then again, this was not your typical farm house.

She toasted to *fagioli*. She asked for their English names.

He translated. "Chickpeas, speckled red, small white. Sorry," he added. "Habit of business."

Rita did not generally equate Holland with bean production. She thought of tulips and glistening windows. Canals. Ice skates. She'd once known a boy in Haarlemliede, the son of a candy maker. They'd missed curfew at her hostel. The back of the candy factory was damp at dawn. She'd almost cancelled her flight. For some reason she thought the Italians bought their beans from Mexico or Central America. She couldn't recall where she'd picked up that useful tidbit, but it came to her as she and Geoff Steyn stepped onto a veranda lush with bougainvillea and potted fig trees, rosy in the glow of the dipping sun. They settled into furniture draped with softly muted fabrics. His was a love seat, hers a glider.

"You raise your beans in . . . I'm sorry. Where did you say?"

"Lindley," he smiled.

She thought of Hans Brinker, Amsterdam, drugs, whores, and bicycles. "And you export to Italy. So you and your wife must spend

a good deal of time here in Rome." She glanced around the ample veranda. The elegance was weathered. The plants were not new; one fig pot was cracked where a root protruded. "Obviously," she added, grinning foolishly.

"Twelve years on and off." He exhaled proprietarily.

Rita wondered if children were part of the equation. She had heard no small voices, seen no toys. She thought it odd that the two couples had paired off like this. What more could she ask about bean farming?

Her host had no visible problem with protracted silence. He sat there, happily staring into the western sky. She looked eastward, enjoying, despite the slight anxiety she feared could become palpable, the last of the sun on this quarter of Rome. She stole a glance at Geoff Steyn. He was in his early forties, Rita guessed. Ten, maybe twelve years older than she would soon be. Rita had never spent her birthday in a foreign country. This year she would. She thought of her brother in Maine, her parents in Boston. Someone would expect her home soon. And then what? Maybe she could live in the family house on the Vineyard. She missed that house, its widow's walk, their final days each September, the lighthouse up the beach.

"I suppose you eat a lot of beans," she offered desperately.

"Never," he assured her.

"That was my next guess."

Where was Jay? Come to think of it, *who* was Jay? She reminded herself that she had started over. The change was not planned, she'd had no time to prepare. She had lost everything in New York, an idiot lover and all her treasures. Now she was depending on the kindness of strangers, as the old line went, and, relative to this Dutch mute, her tour guide from the Sistine Chapel was a cherished old friend. An urge to flee came over her. Before she could weigh its insanity, Gwynneth Steyn emerged with a platter of steaming mussels.

"Jay tells me you're a potter," Gwynneth began.

The light was changing. A lamp came on inside. Garlic wafted on the air as Geoff rose and turned to his wife, then Jay appeared with the wine bottle and hot bread.

Gwynneth arranged the food and table linens while her husband got more glasses. She lighted candles with a sure hand. "You must know Deruta, then," she said.

"Not well," Rita told her. "Only *Grazia*."

"The best of the lot," Gwynneth noted approvingly.

Deruta. A ceramics town between Todi and Perugia, it was wall-to-wall pottery shops, and *Grazia*, with its dank back rooms for wandering, managed to feel like an oasis.

"Rita designs porcelain like you've never seen," Jay announced.

"Like you've never seen, either," she laughed. In fact he had only seen slides.

He nodded to his friends. "I've seen her portfolio," he told them. He worked the buttery *cozze* from their shells and smiled at Rita over a candle flame.

"I'd love to see your work," Gwynneth gushed. "We have a dear friend." She turned to Geoff. "She must meet Rindi." She turned back to Rita. "He has a shop."

"We'll call," Geoff said.

She was grateful for the compliment, the interest, their generosity. She forgave the initial strangeness and conducted herself as one does among friends.

"He never eats beans," she called to Jay from her bath the next morning.

"Of course not. He's fed up to here with beans. He's the largest exporter in his region. I forget the numbers. One year he was paid to burn a surplus. He employs hundreds." They would go to the market on della Croce for figs and late peaches, then comb the art fair on Margutta. Jay wanted stationery at *Vertecchi*. On this he was willing to splurge. And on her.

"Have you been to Holland?" she called. She heard him come to stand in the hallway. The door between them remained closed.

"No. Have you been to Finland?" he replied.

"What?" she asked.

He was laughing in the hall. "What about Spain?"

"Wait," she said. The water was draining. She stood as he said something else. She couldn't hear him. Wrapping herself in a towel, her toes curled on the marble floor. She was dressing when he came into the bedroom.

"I think it's chilly again," he said. "Dress for Finland." He took her in his arms. "Or Holland, if you prefer." He kissed her neck. "But not for Spain."

Jay would leave Rome soon to conduct a tour in the lake district. Rita knew a painter at Bellagio. She, herself, had not been accepted yet, and didn't have the heart to visit. Besides, her money was running out. She thought of Rindi, the man with the shop. What if she were to work here? Where would she find the clay?

"Where is this Rindi's shop?" she asked Jay.

Rita saw them approaching in the throng on Via del Corso. Gwynneth wore a wonderful hat. Geoff carried two bags from

Laurent. It was still morning. They greeted each other like four old friends, then headed for a place the Steyns insisted she'd love, a place called *Isolo del Sole*. It was magnificent, a converted houseboat on the river. Their treat.

Rindi was in Crete, they'd already discovered. He had invited the Steyns to join him.

"You, too," Geoff added, amazingly.

Gwynneth detested Iraklion, however. "A mini Athens," she complained. She regretted that Rindi's good taste in African art did not carry over to his choice of vacation spots. She and Geoff preferred Sifnos. They knew of a villa in Apollonia.

"African art?" Rita asked.

"Not solely," Gwynneth assured her. "All kinds. Lately he's been buying Australian aboriginal. But Rindi is always mining new talent." She turned to Jay. "You look pale," she joked. "You need a dose of Greek sun. And so does Rita, don't you Rita?"

"Lake Como," Jay reminded them. "I've got a tour. Some Berkeley alumni."

"Too bad," Gwynneth said.

Geoff shook his head. "You work too hard." The day felt like autumn. Conversation was easy. Rita talked about Ireland, where she'd studied her junior year. Jay had gone once, too, to see family there. The two of them compared their kindergarten Gaelic, then recited a nursery rhyme. The Steyns loved it. Gwynneth was drawn to guttural languages, she said.

"Gwynn speaks fluent German," Geoff boasted.

"I enjoyed hearing you speak Dutch last night," Rita told them. "In your kitchen."

The Steyns looked at Jay.

It was during their first course that Jay called attention to a group of Japanese men who were on their way out. After they left, Jay sang them high praise.

"If it weren't for Nippon TV, we'd still be craning our necks to see salt deposits, dust, glues, gums, and smoke damage on the Sistine ceiling," he said. "Those guys are the cameramen making the documentary."

"What documentary is that?" Geoff wondered.

"The restoration of the Sistine Chapel," Jay reminded him. "Nippon TV is funding it."

"Leave it to the Japanese," Geoff said.

Jay went on to talk about the future. The intention was to control the microclimate in the chapel with, among other things, light sources

that do not create heat. "And carpet designed to trap dirt." He looked at Geoff. "You know that new carpet on the stairways just before you go into the chapel?"

Geoff smiled. "Can't say I do."

"Good. You walked right over it and didn't notice."

"Hardly," Gwynneth snorted.

"I remember," Rita volunteered. Geoff regarded Jay. "I'm a businessman, my friend. Now, when do you suppose I have time to go sightseeing?"

Jay glanced at Gwynneth, then at Rita.

"Don't look at me like that," Gwynneth laughed. "I go."

"Wait a minute," Jay said to Geoff. "Are you telling me that you've never been to the Sistine Chapel?" His disbelief was emphatic.

Geoff shrugged. "All in good time," he said.

Jay howled. "I get it," he needled. "You're waiting for the Last Judgment."

"Ah, so in your lofty eyes I'll rot in Hell for this." Geoff removed a packet of cigarettes from his jacket pocket.

"I meant the cleaning," Jay explained quietly. "The Last Judgment is next." He looked down at his hands, embarrassed.

Geoff sat back, tapping a cigarette against a lighter. "I must confess," he said lightly, "I've been waiting for an invitation"

Jay was grinning when he looked up. Leaning over, he slapped the other man on the back. "You've got it," he told him, relieved. He darted his gaze to Rita, and reached for her hand. His grip was moist.

"Well," Rita said, "I have something to confess, too"

The other three looked at her in surprise.

"Since we're on the subject of personal confessions," she lumbered on, hopefully. "When I was in Holland, I left Amsterdam only briefly, and I cannot, for the life of me, remember the name of a single town I saw. Well, maybe one"

"Amsterdam," Gwynneth pondered.

"Holland?" Geoff asked.

Jay shifted in his chair.

"So, you see," Rita continued, "I don't have a clue where, exactly, your farm is"

Geoff Steyn lit his cigarette.

Gwynneth raised her chin. "Our farm, Rita, is outside of a lovely little town called Lindley"

Rita brushed a hair out of her eye. "Is that anywhere near Haarlemerleide?" she asked.

"In South Africa"

Now Rita looked at Jay. She caught herself quickly, though. She

smiled at one Steyn and then the other, and said, "Oh."

The dishes were cleared to make room for the next course.

"It does sound like Dutch," Geoff Steyn conceded.

A plane passed overhead.

"We go back many generations," Gwynneth Steyn asserted. "I could have sworn I mentioned that," Jay said.

"You could have said something before" They'd arrived at *Vertecchi* in sullen silence. At the door, she'd begun. Now they had to step out of someone's way and argue in the gutter. The day felt utterly vulgar.

"They're friends of mine, okay?"

"You accept what they support?"

"I didn't say that."

"Your friends are part of the problem."

"Who are you?" he challenged.

"The feeling is mutual," she replied.

He turned away from her.

"Burning surplus beans? What does he call surplus in South Africa?"

"I can't answer for him."

"Jesus. I mean, the guy lives in Rome for twelve years and has never even seen the art. Maybe he's never seen mention of Ethiopia or the Sudan. Mozambique? I guess he's waiting for an invitation to join the human race, too."

He was without defense. They had bailed him out of a jam after he'd gone for weeks without work. They made some introductions, he got the work visa. What did it matter? Everything was ruined. Fouled.

"To think I drank his wine," she said.

"I suppose you're making a difference," he said. "A potter."

The Steyns said hello to her on their card from Sifnos. Rita received this news on the telephone, offering no enthusiasm. She had booked her return trip.

"What about your birthday?" Jay wondered.

"What about it?" She regretted the sing-song.

"I'm sorry I don't know any perfect people. Present company excepted." He was not making things better. He had been back from Lake Como for two days. She was leaving for Boston in three.

"Let's have dinner on your birthday. We can meet at the Hassler again. This time we'll take the stairs up."

He waited.

"Listen," he said, "that crack about being a potter . . ."

She had no answers. She had simply lost heart. He wanted to arrange things. He would call on her birthday, he said.

"I'm sorry you ever met them," he told her. "Everything was so perfect before."

She wasn't angry anymore, only drained.

"Just promise me one thing," he asked.

She would live on the Vineyard. She would set up her wheel in the garage and throw pots. At Thanksgiving she'd ferry to Woods Hole, meet her mother, and drive with her to Boston. Rita would carry a porcelain tea set, a gift to her family. Her grandmother would live to see this.

"Just do me the courtesy of answering the phone."

She would give money to the needy, write to friends long abandoned.

"Rita."

"Yes. All right, Jay."

It was a sentimental day. Rita woke up feeling tragic. She made the walk to the Dinesen, but did not go inside. Time was warped by the gesture, by her sense of reliving a past made significant by some great distance. In truth? There was only as much distance as there had been a past. About two weeks for each.

She bought navy blue leather gloves for her grandmother, the kind she had worn when Rita was little, a style her mother called "smart." She gave money to beggars and wrote postcards to two old school friends. Rita wracked her brain, but could think of no others. She was being ridiculous, and she knew it. She bought flowers for Theresa and Fabio. She was thirty years old.

The lady at *Pensione Suisse* did not remember her as clearly as Rita had hoped. *Baci* did, though, and settled into her lap in the sitting room one last time. This was where Rita composed her letter, an empty gesture, perhaps. But, still. Rita hoped it would be received in the spirit intended. She meant it to be convincing.

Finding the Steyn's building took longer than she had thought it would, and afterwards she took a cab home. When she entered the vestibule and found the tape, she treated it as the first stage of her American re-entry. Unwrapping it, Rita thought kindly of Eliot. She wished him well.

The first annual "Hollywood's Finest Fourth of July Parade" must have cost a small fortune. Hungry people could have been fed. This was Rita's first response. Her second was one of awe; the parade went on forever. The palm-lined boulevards of Southern California shim-

mered in the summer sun as television and film stars hosted and dazzled.

Eliot had told her about it nine days ago on the phone. The details, overlapping her own livid replies, were made otherworldly by the trans-Atlantic delay. He mentioned several floats and numbers, told her what she must not miss. At the time, it was inconceivable that such an event would be all that was left of her life. Rita had shouted words to this effect.

Eliot reminded her that the fire was an accident, moreover, that he, by the Grace of God, had been spared the flames, too.

He had been out to dinner, for God's sake, she said.

She was being insensitive, Eliot told her.

Rita bit her tongue.

Judgmental, too, he added.

Melba Moore wore black. Her float was intricate and colorful. Well, what float wasn't? There were super heroes at her side as she swung and jumped from one surface to another, dancing, lip-syncing, encountering friend and foe at every turn. One figure looked uncannily like Spiderman. So far, though, no sign of Marlo Thomas.

Rita edged into Theresa and Fabio's kitchen. Something was making her jittery. The caffeine, she thought. Without taking her eyes off the television, Rita poured her iced tea into the sink. From the doorway, she watched Melba Moore and her antics. Melba was getting on in years, Rita thought. This was not reflected in her dancing, however. The lady could certainly kick. Others thought so, too; the people who lined the parade's path were applauding. Returning to the living room, Rita discovered why; the number was ending. The float was moving on. Rita sat in disbelief as a powerful sense of letdown came over her. Eliot had said the tribute was to Marlo Thomas. He had not mentioned Spiderman, she was certain of that. What was the matter with people, anyway? Who, Rita wondered, could she trust?

A celebrity hostess came onto the screen, a smiling young actress Rita recognized from a hit series of recent years. "That was Melba Moore in a salute to Marvel Comics," she said. "How about those gams, Brett?"

A young male star appeared, a man with perfect teeth. He was saying something about fabulous costumes when Rita sank back against the couch and closed her eyes.

Marvel Comics. Rita had heard the woman say Marvel Comics, not Marlo Thomas. Could that have been what Eliot tried to tell her? Had she missed the whole point of his call? For nine days she had wondered what the connection could be between Melba Moore and

Marlo Thomas. She'd come up with only the flimsiest of ties: they both knew Alan Alda; they wore the same perfume—the one that was not tested on rabbits; neither was named for a saint. Now she knew better. There wasn't any connection at all. Rita had been waiting for someone who was not scheduled to appear. The story of her life, she thought.

Rita opened her eyes and sat up. *Marvel Comics*. What else had she missed? She looked at the screen. A marching band was playing a jazzy version of a song she thought she should know, but could not quite place. She had to listen carefully, forget what the song was supposed to sound like, to make out the melody. It was ridiculous, a song so ill-suited to a parade, it was funny.

There was more. An aerial view showed that parade snaking into the distance, an endless pageant of the weird and the unexpected. Rita leaned forward. She turned up the volume. Once she had gotten over missing Marlo, this parade wasn't all bad. She actually thought she liked it. She still felt this way, some time later, when she froze the action and answered the phone.

