

Change at Empoli · *Laura Kalpakian*

I

You have no passion, only lust. No spirit, only appetite. Why have you come to Italy as students of art? You do not give a damn for art. Or, perhaps I should point to what one of you has so generously deposited on the hall floor of these offices, point to that and say: That is what you give for art, for Italy, for love, for life. That. You are welcome to that. But I am leaving.

Oh yes, that's what she should have said. Dignified, but its underlying tone unmistakable. She pulled her hat down a bit tighter and pressed her coat against her throat with a kind of dramatic savor, as though these words had actually traversed her lips in front of their intended audience. She was a woman best described as handsome, a face dominated by a firm jaw and wide green eyes, pale skin and dark hair. She checked her own wristwatch against that of the man across from her. He was deeply ensconced behind a newspaper, but his watch testified silently with hers, 9:34. The 9:20 should have left fourteen minutes ago. She pushed the train window down and scanned the platform, fearfully scouting for Giorgio. Perhaps Giorgio had called and told them to hold the 9:20 till he could get there. Silly. People like Giorgio could not command trains. Giorgio could not command his own cat, unless he could flatter and court and smarm. That's the way Giorgio dealt with everyone, except his wife, whom he bullied. Disgusting. Nonetheless, Corinne chided herself for having phoned him from the station. She should have waited, called from Empoli.

She would not feel safe until the train pulled out and she kept a careful watch on the platform, prepared to vanish into the women's toilet if she saw Giorgio Carruthers running towards the 9:20, coat flying, terrified at the thought that he was about to cease being her assistant and now would become Director of the university's Institute for Italian Art. Giorgio would be sweating like a pig, implore her, beg her not to leave the Institute and the filthy students. He would say they were young and thought it a mere harmless prank. Corinne would fix her green-eyed gaze on him, curl her lip in utter contempt and ask: They are adults are they not? Adult American students in a university program, guests in a foreign country? Giorgio would sputter here and she would continue mercilessly: I am—I

was—Director, administrator of an Institute for Italian Art, not the crossing guard at an elementary school, to shepherd, protect and hold innocent hands. These students are drunken, disrespectful, irresponsible oafs. When I was their age, Giorgio, I had an infant daughter and a husband and I was in graduate school, *if you get my drift, Giorgio*.

And, realizing he could not cajole her, Giorgio would next threaten: The university will sack you on sight. Your reputation as an administrator will be smashed. A woman as old as you will not be able to find another job.

Giorgio, you are young enough to be my son, though I thank God many times over, I am not your mother. Nevertheless, I am going to offer you this bit of wisdom. It is not my own. I got it from Max who is very wise indeed in these matters. You would do well to heed Max, Giorgio, though I know you haven't enough inner dignity to understand. *There are moments in life when all that is left to you is gesture*. You perform that gesture because without it, you are merely stranded and pathetic. The gesture is all that stands between you and pathos. Do you understand? Of course not. Ah well, *your* response to the students' thoughtful offering is your own affair. I know why you and the other two instructors suck up (no other phrase is possible, Giorgio) to the students. Their presence here allows you to live in this beautiful, medieval Tuscan town. It is, as they say, a very good gig. So if you wish to chuckle and excuse this calculated heap of dung on the floor as a youthful, harmless prank, Giorgio, do so. But I shall not. I shall never. Never.

Her speech had gathered conviction and velocity as the train gathered conviction and velocity and by 10:05, it had rounded a curve that left the city itself behind. But at the time, the moment—yesterday morning—when this speech was best delivered, Corinne had been without words. Words—English or Italian—failed her altogether as she sat in her office (door closed against the offending substance in front of it) and listened to Giorgio and the other two instructors in a classroom down the hall splutter and demand of the students: *Who did this?* Listened to the students giggle and rustle in response. Corinne knew who did it, knew with a kind of absolute imaginative certainty that Adam Black, vulgar, shiftless, shallow Adam Black, had squatted there, defecated, while the rest of them, say a dozen or so of the twenty students, watched, laughed. The picture, unthinkable as it was, did not defy the imagination. That's what was really appalling.

From her office she heard Giorgio's fruitless and finally ridiculous harangue, heard him dismiss the students for the rest of the day with vague (and as they well knew) empty threats. She kept her eyes on the voluptuous Annunciation angel painted by a less-than-masterful 17th-century hand in the arch of her ceiling and heard the students' footsteps, their giggling, casual obscenities, their overt contempt. *The old witch*. They did not even do her the honor of *bitch*, which at least implies malice aforethought. Witch. Hag. Sexless crone. *Strega Nona* in Italian, but they did not have enough Italian to know this. Their American voices echoed down the thick corridors of the building, the broad stairwell that led to medieval streets. She brought her eyes from the ceiling and rested them on the shelves where her personal collection of slides, Renaissance and medieval art, were neatly catalogued and housed. Shelf after shelf. The students' loutish guffaws melded into the noises and cries from the street below. Corinne rose, picked up the nameplate from her desk: *Corinne Mackenzie, Director* and dropped it fastidiously in the trash. That, by way of notice.

She had never taken off her coat or gloves and in leaving the office (as she had in entering) she walked over, around, beyond the excremental token at her door, moving on conspiratorial tiptoe, quickly, down the broad staircase. At the huge heavy door, she let her breath escape, then opened the brass bolt, stepped, swept into the currents of the narrow medieval street, thick with shadow at its base, alight with autumnal sunshine at the housetops.

Despite the mid-morning cold, people stood about smoking, talking, gesticulating broadly. Old men engaged in heated political quarrels, while women chatted on their way to market. Messengers on motorscooters plied the streets like small noisy skiffs, cutting through a sea of people, mothers pulling hapless children in their wake and workmen brushing masonry dust from their shoulders as they all moved about in the shadow of the Italian national bird: the restoration crane. Overhead clothesline pulleys squealed and ancient shutters creaked open in the morning air. Cathedral bells tolled, making their august presence felt in the very stones as Corinne hurried to the sunny square. The chestnut vendor there who knew her for a good customer was surprised, even offended when she pushed right by, running for the Number 10 bus chugging at the stop.

It was market day and well-dressed women laden with parcels, flowers and gossip pushed and shoved to get on the bus. In front of Corinne an

aged woman, stooped into a human crescent, hoisted herself slowly up the steps. A young man rose to give her a seat near the door. He pushed toward the back with Corinne right behind him. In the lilt and legato, the staccato of Italian all around her, she feared she yet heard the students, their flat American voices, their coarse contempt, their menacing laughter. She clung to the pole and rocked with the bus, closed her eyes tight and, like a quilt for comfort, a fable to hide under, she told herself over and over Max's story of his family's forced flight from Germany in the Thirties.

Not surprisingly, Max came from a mixed marriage, his mother, a Christian, a painter and a cellist; his father a noted historian axed from the university because he was a Jew. They became prisoners in their own country and so, when Max was six, elected instead to become refugees. They bundled up and fled one night in a carefully planned exodus, first to England for fourteen months and then to America. Little Max had clutched an armful of toys to take with him, but his father took them away. Little Max cried and his father stroked his cheek and said sadly, *This, your skin, your flesh—this is what you get to take with you. It is all you get to take. Do not cry. You are lucky to escape with your skin.* Nonetheless, in a gesture of covert rebellion (entirely consistent with Max's adult character), he managed to secrete a single toy beneath his many jackets and when his father found out, he was angry. Max's family's flight, now more than fifty years ago, somehow put her own in comforting historical perspective. Corinne too was a sort of refugee, fleeing obscenity, vulgarity, stupidity and undeserved contempt. She had built this program, worked day after day, contributed. The same could not be said of the students. And now, they forced her to this cutthroat gesture. But it was all that was left. The gesture stood between her and pathos and she would carry it off. Like Max would have. Fitting, that Max should somehow aid her when he was not here to help.

Ordinarily Corinne Mackenzie was not a woman who did things in haste. She preferred always the slow and voluptuous enjoyment of endeavor. She cared nothing for efficiency, and yet, when she got off the bus, she raced to the sunny, spacious flat she'd lived in for two years; she tore off her coat and gloves and with frantic, unseemly haste, flew, pulling clothes from the closets, cosmetics from the bathroom shelves. She moved swiftly through the flat, bedroom, bathroom, study, sitting room with its

balcony where potted flowers were already crunchy from the autumn frosts. She flung things into two open-mawed suitcases and when they would not zip shut, she flung things out. She took the phone off the hook and refused to answer the bell when it rang from the street. Giorgio. Of course. That afternoon (before she took sleeping pills at five) she had successfully ransacked her own flat, at the last jamming her books into shopping bags and hauling them downstairs to the greengrocer's, the every-obliging, aging, courtly Signor Vitti. She gave him (to his open-mouthed amazement) 150,000 lire and asked him to surface freight the books and keep the change.

The following morning she phoned Giorgio from the station where she awaited the 9:20 to Empoli. She told him she was about to board, to change at Empoli and go to the Pisa airport. He said she was making a mistake, a silly gesture. It was only a harmless student prank, he said. All in the past. He begged her to reconsider. He said it had been cleaned up.

To be capable of gesture is to be assured that one's imagination is alive and well. For a woman of Corinne's age, it testified as well to vitality of the spirit. Of course she did not look her age. Good health, good habits, good genes and discreet applications of the dye bottle worked in unison to create the artistic impression of a woman on the sunny side of fifty. She felt no compunction about the dye bottle. By profession, temperament and training, Corinne Mackenzie was dedicated to art and so, naturally, though she was an American, she was more at home in Italy than anywhere in the world. Italy shared her values: honor artifice—presentation is everything. Honoring artifice, Corinne's personal presentation was such that you would never have believed her to be the mother of a woman as old as Allegra. Indeed, mother and daughter might have been transposed in the sense that women Corinne's age were supposed to be shrewd, practical, cautionary unto calculating, and utterly without imagination. Such a description better suited Allegra who, despite all Corinne's efforts (beginning with the flamboyant name, ballet lessons, piano lessons and travel in Italy before she reached pubescence), had grown up to be a tremendous disappointment: married, middle-class, matronly. Mention art to Allegra and she thinks it's a new caddy at the country club. Disgusting. Allegra, her hideous husband and her ineffectual father always playing revolting bridge. Always looking for a fourth. Well, wait till the boy grew up. The

boy was the image of his insurance-mongering father. No doubt he'd play bridge with them. Rubbers.

“Mi scusi, Signora, ma non parlo Inglese.”

The man across from her emerged from behind his newspaper and she realized she'd actually been talking aloud. To him. She laughed. *Non importante*, she said, *niente*.

He was well-dressed, well-fed and exuded a sturdy sort of well-being, so attractive in a man. His hair was dark, heavily salted with gray and she reckoned him to be on the sunny side of fifty. No matter that he did not speak English, Corinne spoke beautiful Italian and of course he said so. People always said so. From Poggibonsi on, Corinne and her fellow passenger enjoyed a languorous conversation, sitting in the shuttering squares of thin sunlight as the train plunged into the countryside where rags of November tattered the trees. On the hillsides the leafless vineyards lined up, row after row of them, their skinny arms twisted round wire and one another, synchronized as anorexic chorus girls. Corinne and the man leaned forward with intensity and relaxed against their seats, speaking as though they had time and time and time in front of them, none of it bounded by the railway's timetable. She found herself forgetting all about Allegra and Giorgio and the filthy students and basking in this man's attentions. There are some things only a man can do for you.

He was an engineer, returning home after business in Roma. He gave her his card: *Dottore Ing. Paolo Branchi*. Naturally she was impressed. She would have given him her card, but she was no longer Director of the Institute for Italian Art. She could not say that she was leaving because of a pile of student dung, so she said simply she was an artist, a student, a devotee of Renaissance angels and after two years in Italy, on her way to the Pisa airport to return to America.

Paolo leaned forward. He was clean-shaven except for a manicured goatee framing his voluptuous lips. He smelled of something discreet, yet tangy. His eyes were rich with experience and he had the air of a man who rose from contented beds. He wore a wedding ring. He said, as an artist, Corinne should never leave Italy. As a woman, he added, she should never leave Tuscany. His voice was low, ripe with respect and innuendo, as though he, Paolo, recognized that Corinne and Italy deserved, were worthy of one another. Then he said he must get off here. The very next stop. The one before Empoli.

He alighted from the carriage, carrying his briefcase and an overnight bag. She watched from the window as the November wind snatched at his coat. Pausing at the station door, he turned and waved and for a single moment—until the train pulled sluggishly forward—she thought he might just

Sad. He might have been an amusing companion, someone to have a coffee with at the bar of the Empoli station while she waited to change trains. She might have had more than a coffee with him. After all, she had no plans. No tickets as yet. No one waiting for her at some foreordained destination. She might have had many things with him. Her sorrow at leaving him deepened into a sorrow at losing him, more intense than if he had been her lover. As lovers they would have had a past to cherish mutually, something like the toy Max secreted under his many coats, to hold that past against all future change and incident. But as it was, they exchanged a wave and bid goodbye to one another, to all the artful might-have-beens, to possibility spun of tissue so fine, so fragile she could almost hear it shred and tear, catch on the metacarpal branches as the train hurtled over the autumnal landscape. Earth and sky neutralized each other, as though hammered out by some ancient, expert hand into that singular color you could only think of as Tuscan blonde, the very gold of those fat, pale persimmons still clinging to the blue-black trees.

Corinne Mackenzie made it a point of honor never to complain about the trains running late. To do so would have displayed a foreigner's too-tidy sense of values and played (historically speaking) into Mussolini's arms. Of course, it was no accident that the great Italian railway stations had all been built in the fascist era and why—given that era's values—they all had the ring, the flavor of vast movie stages, sets decorated in the manner of the Kordas, where anything from battles to bedrooms might have been successfully choreographed, as long as they were false, immense and costly.

The rail station at Empoli, on the other hand, had been entirely overlooked. It still retained its sleepy, intimate, well-tended air. The date on the ornate iron grillwork was 1890. The platforms were flagstone rather than concrete. Under rounded, eye-pleasing arches of peach-colored stucco, planters full of geraniums pinched in the November cold. Doors leading to the bar, porter's offices and the station itself were neat panes of glass framed in green paint. Corinne pushed the station door open and

once inside her heels tapped on a floor of polished marble, an odd, velvety maroon color. So well maintained was the Empoli station, you might have thought it a myth—and given that it pre-dated Mussolini, perhaps it was.

Yes, the man at the ticket window said, because her train had been late into Empoli, there would be a lengthy wait for the train to Pisa. Two hours. At least.

Corinne bought her ticket, gave her two bags to a tiny muscle-bound porter (with a tip; she knew what language was really spoken here) and said she would collect them in time for the Pisa train. The prospect of the wait was not so bad. She had no plans. No plane ticket as yet. No destination firmly in mind and no one waiting there. She might get to the Pisa airport and say simply, give me a ticket on the first plane to Paris. To London. To Milano. Hang the expense. Isn't that what credit cards are for?

"Signora?" The station *capo* addressed her as though she had been speaking to him. Perhaps she had. He was a burly man of forty or so with that Italian air of lewd gallantry. Italian men left you no choice: if you responded to the gallantry, you automatically responded to the lewdness as well. With characteristic panache, Corinne informed him it was *non importante* absolutely *niente* and left him nurturing an air of bewilderment unbecoming on a man.

Suddenly famished, she went into the station bar where she ordered a *pannino* and a *dolce*. Make that two. Of each. *Caffe latte*. In the warm, bright bar she loosened her scarf and coat and bolted her coffee in the Italian fashion. Ordered another. She noticed for the first time the bar had two sets of doors. One led to the platform. One led to the street, the town of Empoli. In all the many times she had changed trains at this station, in the twenty-five years she had been coming to Italy, Corinne had never stepped outside those other doors. She wondered fleetingly what the town of Empoli was like. She moved to the doors, peering through the green framed panes of glass. She did not open them, knowing somehow, that would have been an irrevocable step.

Corinne returned to her coffee and watched the reflections of four other people in the mirror behind the bar. The mirror gleamed with colorful bottles of every stripe and hue set on high shelves of thick greenish glass. The young bartender, ruddy, expressive, convivial, washed glassware and carried on a spirited conversation with a woman and an older man. They all seemed to know one another. Under discussion was the woman's

worthless son who was breaking his mother's heart. Talk about broken hearts! What about your own daughter? Your only child who spurns all art, all understanding, emotion and possibility and marries a man who plays bridge and sells life insurance. What could be worse? Grubbing money off people's fears. A vile, low profession, insurance—of course, everyone has to have insurance. I have it through the university, or at least I do for the moment. Did. But can you imagine living, *sleeping* with a man who gets people to spend money not on what they can taste or hold or relish or remember, but against the possibility, the *certainty* of death? Death insurance. To barter in *morte*, yes? He's no better than Allegra deserves, really. Not a single ambition, that girl, not beyond tennis and shopping and golf and that insufferable bridge. Just like her father.

Allegra's father had no other name. That was all he was, Allegra's father. In some ways, all he had ever been. How could Corinne have married such a man? Trying to explain was like confessing to a youthful, inexplicable passion for rutabagas. He best resembled a rutabaga. In retrospect anyway. At the time she could only ascribe the marriage to a blinding assault of hormones. She recognized the fatal mistake quickly, but there was, equally quickly, Allegra and no way out. Instead Corinne poured her considerable energies into graduate school, fell in love (though not into bed) with Max. Allegra's father knew this, but the marriage still endured, a puddle of marital inertia. Max, of course, gave her the ticket out of the puddle and the marriage when he got her the museum job. Allegra's father did not want to move to the city. But even with the job and the divorce she could not get rid of the man. He pined mercilessly for Allegra. Called her all the time, finally moved to the city to be near his daughter. Visitation every other weekend. And then, *Would you mind, Corinne?* Every weekend. *No, of course not. If that's what Allegra wants.* Corinne was free on the weekends, free to be Max's accomplice, free to exult in emotionally extravagant love affairs. Exulting and then—just as surely—despairing. (But you could do that in those days, you see. People did. Fell in and out of love and bed. It was only a question of stamina and imagination then. Not having to ask grim questions or take blood tests. The very term *safe sex* would have sounded ludicrous. Ludicrous, I tell you! Like something missionaries would do once a month whether they needed it or not. A woman would no more think of carrying a condom in her purse than a man would carry a tampon in his pocket!)

Still, every Sunday evening there would be a bitter metallic taste in Corinne's throat when Allegra returned holding her father's hand. Corinne envied their love, then—more poignantly—resented their camaraderie as Allegra became a young woman: the female version of her father. As though, together, father and daughter had played a trick on Corinne, used her body to incubate and, that done, dispensed with her, regarded her thereafter with perpetually innocent perplexity. They seemed to watch Corinne from a great distance, neutrally, expressing neither admiration nor condemnation for her passion, her courage, her imagination. (And Max believed you must have all three, or none at all.) Allegra and her father preferred the neat foursquare confines of the tennis court and the bridge table. Later, after Allegra married, her husband joined them. And no doubt, so would Allegra's son. They tolerated Corinne on family occasions. And, since that's all it was, toleration, they scarcely noticed one Thanksgiving when she (purposely) had too much to drink and said, loudly and for the benefit of the other guests (all card players, naturally), how much she despised bridge, hated it, announced that the shuffle of the cards reminded her always of flatulence. They went right on shuffling shuffling shuffling

“Signora? Signora, Allegra?”

She explained to the bartender that Allegra was her daughter and she was about to turn to the woman whose son had broken her heart, but the woman was gone.

A man came in. A working man, judging from his cap and paint-flecked clothes. He ordered a drink and from one of the high shelves lining the mirror, the bartender took down a bottle of thick metallic-looking liquor, maroon as the marble floor. The man took the drink down in one gulp. Winced, hard. Shivered. Tipped his cap. Smiled and left.

It was not a drink Corinne knew. She had seen the label of course. One does not come to Italy time and time again over the years and well, of course she'd seen the label. Her eyes swept over the bottles sparkling invitationally in the warm light and the high mirror. Fifty or sixty of them. Maybe more. She could remember having tasted maybe a dozen. Maybe two. The other thirty-odd she had never tasted and there wasn't time now. Not before the train came. There might never be time. The gleaming Unknown inside the bottles seemed to wink and tease her in the light, glisten with the same imputation of lost possibility, like Paolo's sad wave.

The young bartender put a glass of mineral water in front of her while he made exaggerated drinking motions. He picked up a paper napkin and thrust it at her. He wiped his own eyes with it in broad gestures and then handed her a clean one. He put it in her hand. She watched him—as though at a great distance—pinking with exertion and the steam from the dishwasher and his arms up high indicating *drink drink* and she felt suddenly flushed and weakened, terrified at what she'd done. At what she'd done and left undone. The flat unlocked. The hot water heater still on. Forgotten something essential like the laundry still flapping on the balcony lines. Forgotten something urgent and important that she was powerless to change or effect. She patted her face with the paper napkin and drank the water, thanked the bartender, but declined his insistent motions that she should sit. She would feel better outside.

Once on the platform she buttoned up her coat and paced in long, quick strides, unsuccessfully willing away thoughts of the unlocked flat and laundry on the balcony line. Unthinkable that Giorgio Carruthers should find her stockings and slippers and panties flapping on the balcony in a sort of brazen, come-hither way. But she certainly couldn't return and collect them, go back to turn off the hot water heater. She'd left that on too. Too? Was there something else? The wind rattled and shook her, like an angry parent to get her to confess, like Max's father had shaken him when he found out Max hid the toy in spite of his father's warnings that he was lucky to have escaped with his skin.

Shivering, Corinne pulled leather gloves from her pocket and put them on her fine, long fingers. Artist's fingers. That's what Max always said. He would turn her hand over in his and say she had artist's fingers and hands. An artist's mind and eye and imagination. And then he would laugh in that peculiar, jagged way and add that for all that, she had a model's body. She rather took offense at this. If he had slept with her, she could have absorbed it as a compliment, but since he never had, the observation smacked of the clinical and faintly obscene. Though you couldn't really take offense. Not with Max. So funny and urbane. The most civilized man in America. Difficult. Of course. But civilized. And like any civilized person, very few things were good enough for Max. Over the years even this paltry number had dwindled until talking with Max was like clinging to a slippery rock in a sea of mediocrity, holding on so that one should not be swept into that vast ocean of what was tacky and vulgar

and beneath contempt, as though these things were constantly nibbling at your ankles and if you once slipped or lost your vigilance, they could suck you in. You could drown in a sea of mediocrity. Max could wear you out.

She had met him in graduate school. She was still married to Allegra's father, but the real love of her life she had just discovered: Renaissance angels, so muscular, handsome and ineffably gentle. How then to account for her falling in love with Max, who was such an insufferable snob, even then, but so powerful a personality, so blond and beautiful and fastidious and funny and arch? Such a delight. He was two years her senior and after he graduated, the months passed in a gray Max-less fog, framed in the faces of the Renaissance angels and punctuated by his frothy acerbic letters and long distance telephone calls. So consummate were Max's political skills—even then—that when she graduated, he ushered her right into the enviable position in the European Art Department of the prestigious museum where he worked. She left her husband. Fine. Grand. Wonderful. Corinne was convinced that once relieved of her ineffectual husband, Max would surely

But he didn't. True, he squired her about everywhere and on the arm of the most civilized man in America, Corinne found herself dining in celebrated company: artists, musicians, scholars, curators, actors, authors. She became, in effect, Max's accomplice and went everywhere with him. She remained his accomplice while she fell in love with other men who, one by one, dropped from her life with great crashes, like shingles falling from a steep roof. She remained Max's accomplice even when she fell in love with Dennis, besotted by Dennis, about to die of cirrhosis of the heart for Dennis. And even when she married Dennis (probably the happiest day of her entire life) she could not quite vow off Max. She tried. He always wooed her back. Flattery. The flattery of a snob is irresistible. He said (and it was true) Corinne was the only person in the world not frightened of him. Offended, yes. (Wasn't everyone?) But always ready with the quick retort and never frightened. Corinne instinctively knew how to fence, (verbally) thrust and parry, kick and duck. She got occasionally hurt, but never really wounded. Not until that night. That night Max seemed to slip, to lose his balance, to tumble, snatch and claw at everything and everyone in his path. Even Corinne. Especially Corinne.

It was the usual gathering of educated, civilized people who of course agreed with Max that America was a grubby place where nothing worked,

a place at once commercial, shallow and vulgar. England—England was even worse. Max confessed to having lived in England and to being an Anglophile. (And their hostess, the wife of a well-known artist, said she was too. Always had been an Anglophile because England was so) Not anymore, Max went on. He vowed he would never go back to England. The strikes. The breakdowns. The general despair of society and had you ever seen anything more jingoistic and preposterous than that Falklands (so-called) War? What a lot of posturing! Nothing worked in England, the place had gone to pot and now the English were stuck with their narrow, tawdry little country where nothing worked and everything was inefficient. Europeans in general, but the English in particular were living off their past—Max continued, having got up a great sail of hyperbole and inefficient. Europeans in general, but the English in particular, were living wit—Europeans served up their past like a huge dead bird without having taken the trouble to fully pluck or bleed it, or cook it either for that matter, just putting it, neck wrung, dead eyes staring, on a silver platter, the pale, feathered carcass still sort of oozing

This vivid unfortunate metaphor over dinner made everyone blanch. Dennis looked positively ill. The mouth of their hostess twitched as she tried to daunt the conversation over to gardens or something, but it was no good (Corinne could have told them this, all of them) trying to stop Max once he'd got going, not when he was so funny, even if he was angry, even brutal, that little golden gleam of malice twinkling on the rice paper of Max's brittle wit. Oh, maybe he sometimes went too far. That night, of course, he did and Corinne, vaguely desperate, exerted herself on behalf of the others, interrupted (she was the only one who could) his soliloquy on the great dead, feathered bird of the past and said—*Ah yes, well, with all this decay everywhere else, at least we have Italy, yes? Tuscany. At least we have that.* Closing her eyes and under the spell of the wine and the candlelight she willed herself away from the dreary yet-another-dinner-party to the golden poplars, dusky cypresses, the yellow light of the Arno.

Max's jagged laughter sliced, ripped right up the middle of that illusion and that's what he said it was: a stupid illusion because you had only to go to Italy nowadays to know the Italians did not deserve their beautiful country, which was going to hell anyway. The Italians did not offer up their past. No. They sold it! They would sell the Sistine Chapel if the price were right. Slavering after tourist dollars, the Italians all posed and sim-

pered and all that nasty greed made it plain that from the Medici, Michaelangelo and Leonardo right on down, they were all either peasants or pick-pockets. They would kneel at the feet of the Virgin while they picked your pocket in the church.

Corinne's face stung. As though Max had slapped her cheek. Hard.

My roses have the blight this year, their hostess said. At our home in the country, the roses have withered before

Corinne rubbed her cheek, feeling for welts. As Max must have; because she knew, swiftly, absolutely and correctly that Max had lied about his father. His father had not stroked his cheek. His father had slapped him, hard across the face, sent him spinning. His father had flung down the toys, smashed them: *You can take nothing with you. You are lucky to escape with your skin.*

None of them escaped. They're very old rose bushes and I'd hoped it was just the

Corinne peered across the candlelight. Amazing. Max had grown old. You could see it in his still-handsome face. Some crucial change. Max had rounded a curve in time, after which the world lost savor. Beyond that pivotal moment, all change was—and henceforth ever would be—for the worse. Nothing would be the same or as good as it once was. Not men or women or food or sex or wine or music, not books or movies or countries. Nothing. Max had been somehow shipwrecked in the present: sputtering, angry (look at him), beached with his civilized wit while the future sailed off without him and the past vanished golden in the haze. *Max is going to die.*

She and Dennis left almost immediately. Once home, Corinne went into the bathroom, turned on the harsh light and regarded herself in the mirror. Had she too grown old without knowing it? In spite of good sense, good health, good habits and the dye bottle? Had she too

Corinne made love with Dennis that night: rich, slow, voluptuous love, the way Corinne liked to make love, like whales make love, she always thought, like whales' warm-blooded bodies heat up the ocean around them, like whales savor the succulent present.

And then everything happened so fast. After that night, within, say, six weeks, Dennis had left her. Gone before she could utter a wordless *what?* Out of her life after a brief chat in the kitchen (*what? what?*), followed by the click of the closing door. Dennis's key on the kitchen table and a letter from his lawyer. Odd clunky Latinate phrases which, when you finally

translated them emotionally, meant that Dennis had got rid of the old wife so as to marry a new one.

And where was Max when she needed him? When she needed his cutting ability to say nasty things about Dennis and how Dennis had never deserved her in the first place? Oh, Max had quit. Within a month or so of that night, Max had quit, without even so much as a nod of farewell. Quit. Not simply the museum, but the country! Gone to Europe for an indeterminate ever. Switzerland or Sweden or Scandinavia. Some cold place. *Why* couldn't she remember where Max had gone? Impossible! Anyway, she had it in her address book. If she'd brought it. Maybe she had left it in the center desk drawer in the flat. Even so, she should have it engraved on her heart and mind where Max went. He had been her friend for twenty-five years. More. (But let us gently round it off there.) Friends, colleagues, accomplices, though never — no they had never

Anyway, she'd long since quit lusting after Max. A little abashed however to say how long she had lusted, hungered for him without ever guessing, well guessing, maybe. Yes, guessing. But not *knowing*. And not wanting to know. And anyway, in those days, things were different. You couldn't pop into court, sue someone because you'd lost your job, haul them up and say you'd been discriminated against (whimper, sniff) because of who you went to bed with. In those days it was different. Well, some things were different. Some things stayed the same, like the way Max could persistently fire your imagination. The sly smile. The half-hooded eyes. The air of intimacy Max spun, as though he pulled thread from his body, like a spider, bound her imagination somehow with that silken, gorgeous cord. *Oh Max, Max*. He drove all night to be at her dissertation defense. *Renaissance Angels*. And though the huge room was filled with friends and students and colleagues (to say nothing of Allegra's father and the hulking, heavily judgmental faculty) once Max was in the audience, Corinne was speaking to and for and with Max alone. As though they were in bed together and she wanted his approval. And she got it. There are some things only a man can do for you.

He got her the job, didn't he? Those early months at the museum were filled with richness, luster, wonder. Oh, there was the job itself, the city, its pace and excitement, and of course the pride in going about with Max, in being Max's accomplice. Then too, she'd got rid of Allegra's father and fallen in love with Barry, wonderful, slow, voluptuous love with Barry.

Of course it didn't last. The shingles all fell, crashed down from the roof and she was crazy with grief because there are some things only a man can do for you. To you.

Never mind, said Max. Barry never deserved you anyway. Come to Sunday brunch, Corinne.

That Sunday brunch with the snow flurrying thickly at the white window, where all this emerged, for sure, knowing and never again simply guessing, even if you did not want to know (oh remember in those days if you were found out, you could be ruined, it was the kind of thing people tolerated only if they did not know and only guessed) how, if it emerged at all, it should be like some tropical flower: antherium. Like an antherium, she thought. Not at the time. At the time she had no such poetic thought, but later she thought of it—snow and all—like an emerging antherium, with its hard little yellow tongue wagging out *I fooled you I fooled you I fooled you* (not that it made a damn bit of difference, so passionate and powerful was her attachment to him, was his personality that not one damn bit of difference did it make) that snowy Sunday when she had not brought antheriums. Hothouse freesias. Common freesias. Yellow.

And rather confused, she stupidly offered them to Max's friend—oh bloody say it, his lover. She held out her hand with the yellow freesias to Max's having just-risen—like slow, warm-blooded, just-risen whales—lover not beautiful though, young, but already balding with a pronounced overbite and a mole on his head that his receding hair uncovered. He had answered the door.

From the kitchen Max called out gaily and asked if she would like a hit of brandy in her coffee. Against the cold. Of course she would like it. Against the cold. Sugar? called Max.

Yes. Sugar—she said to Woody—did you say your name was Woody?

Yes, Woody. I take my coffee black, said Woody who could not have looked less Woody-like if he had been a woodpecker. So to speak.

A thing like that—Corinne went on stupidly—sugar in your coffee, does not change overnight.

After this initial blundering, bovine beginning, however, she carried it off. With panache, actually. (Panache and daring were Max's two favorite words. Anything without panache and daring could only be dismal.) Actually, she was relieved. Even rather buoyed. Because it meant that Max had not spurned her, Corinne Mackenzie, in particular. But women

in general. She could not take offense or have her feelings hurt at that. It was not personal. Quite the contrary. Her friendship with Max testified to . . . to . . . to whatever it was friendship testified to when you did not go to bed together. Women were not Max's cup of tea. It made sense that he had dated as long as it was politically incumbent on him to do so, but he had not bedded these women because they were not his cup of tea. He might even have phrased it exactly thus. Did. His wrist flicked and the starched cuff peeked out and the cufflink gleamed. He was, even then, the most civilized man in America.

But Max didn't live in America any longer because it was crass and commercial and shallow and nothing worked and England was impossible because nothing worked there either and they picked your pocket in Italy. All Europe was living on its glorious past, nothing else. Europe laid out its past like a giant, still-feathered carcass for the Americans (and now, of course, the Japanese) to prey on, peck its dead unseeing eyes and

She sat down on one of the wooden platform benches, breathless, after her incessant pacing and looked up the empty tracks and wires leading away from Empoli toward Pisa. And the airport. Escape. She rubbed her throbbing temples, took off her hat and shook her dark hair, undid the top button on her coat. There. That was better. The easier to breathe. Inhale. Exhale. Inhale. Yes. And of course it was silly to—Exhale—get worked up about it because she would simply look Max up in the address book. She would not have left something that important behind in the center desk drawer. She would call Max before she flew out of Pisa because he was someplace in Europe. Some cold place. He had moved someplace where things presumably did work. Switzerland or Scandinavia. Or some cold place that had an air of efficiency. Rather like a hospital.

II

As in a slow and noisy, random dance, passengers for the train to Firenze gathered on the platform, their advent and recession predictable as the tide, as easily known by the timetable posted low, eye level on the wall outside. And another timetable inside, high above the ticket booth. High and low. Ebb and flow. The Firenze train blasted in and passengers got swept on and dusted off (because the Empoli station was nothing if not well maintained). These passengers ebbed from the platform after the train

left, into the station, the bar, or simply, like the porters, leaning against the peach-colored arches, smoking, waiting, like actors whose cues are a long way off.

She was chilled clear through and realized she must have been outside for a very long time. The thought of a coffee appealed to her, but not the cozy crowded bar where bottles were filled with experience she would never taste and doors led to the town of Empoli. She stood and walked to the waiting room. It had only one door. To and from the platform.

The waiting room was broad, high and drafty, lined on three sides with polished benches and a single inadequate heater. The marble floor was so clean you could see your reflection and though the walls were bare, they were not painted institutional green, but a sort of pale vanilla color with fluted plaster piping at the ceiling. Whimsical. A single slab of sunlight cut into panes fell from the door and Corinne unbuttoned her coat and sat within its picketed confines, amongst, oh, possibly a dozen other people scattered along the walls. No good looking men though. With or without newspapers.

A cleaning woman hunkered in a corner with her broom and barrel, daring anyone (with her eyes) to dirty her floor. One young man (a German judging from the stickers on his backpack) did, tossed a used ticket down. She swooped on him, crying out for all the world to hear that this young man had come from a family of pigs. Look at him! No respect! Young people today were thoughtless and thankless. The cleaning woman turned to three old huddled grandmas, two with the single-seam mouth of the toothless. They solemnly corroborated her assessment of young people in general, this German in particular. He stalked out of the waiting room. Amongst themselves the three old dragons and the cleaning lady agreed it was good riddance to bad rubbish. They exchanged heated views on the general uselessness of the young, how in their day

Oh yes. Corinne could have told them a thing or two. How truly vile young people can be. All they want is sex and money, but no responsibilities. And thankless? Thankless! Here we are, offering them a program that allows them to study art in Italy. A sacred opportunity! Truly! What do they do? They defecate on it. No, it's true. I swear. One of them actually crouched, squatted in the hall, oozed *merda*. And his peers — no better. The girls laughed. Crass. In my day, things were different. I do not say we were angels, but we revered art and life and love. These kids — but it is a

mistake to call them kids. They are not cute and little. They are adults. They are a menace. Listen, in America you get three of them on the bus and people get off. It's true. On the subway, you clutch your bag and keep your eyes on the ads. You step aside at this offensive arrogance. They thought it was funny, that — that pile, the *merda*. Could I continue to deal with such dogs? Dogs might defecate on the floor, yes, but they would not laugh. And now, I shall return and the university will fire me and it will be very hard to get another job at my age — I left the museum to take this one and they won't hire me back because they'll know I broke my contract, just walked out on my responsibilities. Well, that is not one of my responsibilities. I'll point to the contract and ask: where does it say a thing about *merda*? Where?

The center desk drawer. Giorgio Carruthers will paw through that too. (Giorgio is as American as they come, even if his mother couldn't speak a word of English. Giorgio is insufferable.) But he will paw through the desk and my underwear. I can't do anything about it now. I took what I could. I was lucky to escape with my skin.

She rubbed her cheek thoughtfully. Sadly. As Max had said his father touched his. And after more than fifty years, what could it possibly matter if Max lied, if his father had slapped him? After half a century, *aqua passata, non macina piu, si?* She smiled at the three old, black-clad women staring at her with piercing eyes, the absolutely unabashed gaze of dragons. No one to fear. No one to answer to. These women reigned supreme over as much of the world as they cared about. Corinne bit her lip. "I've been thinking aloud, I guess. Well, you can imagine the shock of it. To come in and find — terrible. Terrible what these young people will do."

The cleaning woman returned to her barrel and the old dragons hunkered down amongst themselves and words blew up from their enclave like smoke: three crones huddled, hunched over a boiling pasta pot. *Strega Nona*. Grandma Witch. The three fell, as witches will, to fearlessly muttering of death, husbands, children, weddings, errant girls and wayward boys, difficult births and swift, fatal illnesses. Corinne understood. All. She wondered if she put on a black dress and thirty pounds, took five inches off her height, added a few years, abjured the dye bottle, might she too qualify as an old dragon? Like them she had had husbands and weddings and difficult births — well, one, a daughter, that wayward girl, Allegra. She had known men, lain down with them at night, risen with them

in the morning, lied to them, lied for them, cried for them, bent double and beat her head on the floor for them. Oh, not for her first dim and ineffectual husband, Allegra's father, but the others, the cherished, vanished lovers; she had lied and cried and wept for them and for the other husband: Dennis.

For Dennis (and at an age when passion is utterly unbecoming on a woman, which is to say in these last few years when a woman was supposed, expected—the hell you say, *required*—to exude grandmotherly serenity unto senility) Corinne Mackenzie had bent double, beat her head on the floor, gasped, hurt, took so many sleeping pills she saw double when she got up in the morning. She got stoned, not on the pills, but stoned, beaten, hit—face, back, belly, groin—with chunky Latinate phrases from Dennis's lawyer, stoned like the woman taken in adultery would have been if Jesus himself had not intervened. Though it was the man, Dennis, taken in adultery. Taken. Smitten. Succumbed to adultery and moved right in with her, married her as soon as the divorce was final from Corinne who tried everything she could think of to hang onto him. Money. Moral obligation. The grandeur, sweep, passion and longevity of her love. Every lofty principle and every low trick in the Book of Love (and no need to wonder Who Wrote the Book of Love. Not anymore. Lawyers. They wrote it, relished it: the swine). Corinne lay stoned and bleeding, making long, expensive transatlantic calls to Max on those crackling phone lines that always make you feel like you have to shout: I'M DYING, MAX.

No, you're not. You've known he was cheating on you for years.

NO! I NEVER KNEW.

You never wanted to know. There's a difference. Everyone thought you were so brave, tolerating his infidelities.

I NEVER TOLERATED THEM!

You deluded yourself then. And it's all the same thing, Corinne.

WHAT IS?

The truth of it is, Corinne, that what people call strength is only an endless capacity for self-delusion, for imagining things otherwise.

I'M NOT DELUDED! I'M TIRED OF BEING STRONG.

All you need is a new man. Someone new to occupy your imagination. Someone other than Dennis. That's the trouble.

THAT'S NOT THE TROUBLE! I'M TOO OLD FOR A NEW MAN.

Bullshit, my dear.

I'M DYING OF THE PAIN! I MAY ALREADY BE DEAD.

Corinne only knew for certain she was not dead when there came to her office at the museum a wholly unexpected phone call from the university and a man asked her to have coffee with him that afternoon at a downtown restaurant to discuss the Institute for Italian Art they were founding in Tuscany. They needed a Director.

You come highly recommended as a Renaissance authority and an administrator said the wispy, bald man before her. He had an overbite and a mole at what was once his hairline. He passed the sugar. You take sugar, I believe.

Woody?

Max says you are the perfect Director for our program. He says you have a first-rate mind, that you are fearless, imaginative, able and speak fluent Italian. Woody sipped his black coffee. He says you have panache.

He is fond of that word.

But sparing in his praise. I thought it best to approach you informally in case you did not wish to leave the museum, after all these years, for what would be a brand new undertaking in every sense of the word.

I would welcome the new undertaking. I do welcome. I

Do, she said to Italy, the land of Honor Artifice and Presentation Being Everything. The perfect place for Corinne. The perfect job. Perfect. Except for the students. Unused to dealing with students, Corinne did not know (as Giorgio did) that students want—need, demand, insist—to be courted up and coddled. Corinne did not see them as winsome youngsters, but as adults. Corinne refused to indulge them or pat their little hands or bottoms, was appalled at their bad manners as guests in a foreign country. It seemed clear to her that you had good manners in someone else's country as you would in someone else's house. They had no manners at all. Giorgio made excuses for them, but Corinne thought him a great toady to offer himself as chum, troubleshooter and all-around Good Guy. She thought Giorgio downright spread-eagled himself to the students. And of course that's why the turds were not at his door. The pile of indignity and obscenity was at her door. Oh, was there ever

“Lady? Hey, Lady—are you all right? Can I get you something, Lady? Can I help you put your coat back on?”

He was a young man, a student, clearly. You could tell. He was the age of Adam Black and for a moment she feared it was Adam Black and he was about to squat and

“Lady, can I bring you something from the bar? A glass of water, maybe?” He reached out and brought Corinne’s coat up over her shoulders. “You’re shaking all over, Lady, and I could hear your teeth chattering all the way down there.” He nodded down the bench where his girlfriend who had stringy hair and wide frightened eyes, watched. He patted Corinne’s shoulder. “I knew you were an American.”

“Of course I’m an American,” Corinne snapped. “I’m more American than you are! I have had to define myself every day for two years as an American. For two years, every day, someone says how well I speak the language and I must be an American and I have to say: Yes. YES! I am an American!” She glanced from the young man to the three Italian crones, looked from one to the other as though she’d been asked to choose with whom she best belonged. Define. Defend. She was suddenly very tired.

She patted the boy’s hand and smiled. “Thank you. It’s nothing. It’s been cleaned up. Thank you,” very much, gentlemen, but I shall not leave this post under an undeserved cloud. My reputation, my whole professional life is at stake. You believe that since the *merda* has been cleaned up, I should have stayed. How very American of you. How very American to think that the past, once addressed, however shallowly, in whatever sort of namby-pamby manner you care to call good faith, that in and of themselves such paltry efforts will vanquish the past. You believe that in tidying and dusting the past, you can defeat it. How American. To say *It’s all in the past* is exactly the same as if you’d said, *It never existed at all*. This is as American as the Pledge of Allegiance. It might as well BE the Pledge of Allegiance, *It’s all in the past dear and so it cannot matter and will not touch us, or change, or contaminate us if we clean it up, turn our backs and march forward ever forward because the present creates itself afresh each day, springs forth on the half shell. The pristine present*. I stand before you gentlemen, to testify to the contrary. Giorgio may have hired someone to clean up the *merda* — oh, let us say it! Let us say it was shit, *shit* gentlemen, there before my office door. Giorgio may have cleaned it with his own fair hands. But the shit existed and we must deal here, gentlemen, not simply with the shit itself, but with the *notion* of the shit. We must address it. Because the past can contaminate the present. The future. The past often does and only Americans

believe to the contrary. It is not enough to clean the shit up, gentlemen, you have to wrestle with the notion of it. To vanquish shit, the past, you must do more than hire it cleaned. You must do what Max did: you must twist and writhe it, clip and force and make the past fit the present you envision. It is not a matter of cleaning it up, but a matter of imaginative conviction.

I do not wholly indict you, gentlemen. I am an American too. I am more American than you could ever dream of being, there in your safe little university berths. I have been defining and defending myself and my country—daily for two years to people like those three dragons over there. Look at them, gentlemen. In Italy, *Strega Nona* is a powerful person. In Italy, these old women (on the sunless side of fifty) are fearless. Ride any bus and see what I mean. The young people snap to around these old women. Respect them. But for me, Adam Black leaves his shit at my door and his peers concur in this action, even if they did not themselves squat. They watch, they laugh to see him shit at my door. Adam Black will go unpunished. But I shall be punished because he shat in front of my door. I did not imagine this, gentlemen, I heard them: laughing and chatting, their endless coarse and boring babble all the way down the corridor and into the street, riding the bus and even at home as I so hurriedly packed, because nothing could make their voices hush, cease except the pills I knew would drop me down down down into that sweet and dreamless well of forgetting the center desk drawer and the laundry on the balcony and the hot water heater. Because *to clean it up*—and I do not mean to mock poor Giorgio's voice unduly—but to clean up the shit is *not to say it never existed*.

They announced the train to Pisa would be delayed. Several travelers in the waiting room jumped up (as travelers will) as though their jumping up and making a great fuss will somehow hasten or make some other damned bit of difference. The American boy who had been so kind looked patiently at his girlfriend. The girlfriend took the maternal line (wouldn't you know it? The little twit) and patted his hand. The three old women went on obliviously with their smoky babble. Dragon talk. Either they were not going to Pisa. Or, they knew the train would get here when it got here and there was not a damned thing they could do about it. It simply didn't matter.

It certainly didn't matter to Corinne Mackenzie. No plane ticket as

yet. No plans. No foreordained destination with someone waiting. Only one thing matters to the refugee: escape. Escape from the students and the center desk drawer and Giorgio. The dreaded thought occurred that having missed her originally, Giorgio had phoned ahead to have them hold the Pisa train while he jumped in his car and drove like a wild man to Empoli. Knowing she would change at Empoli. Everyone changed at Empoli. She could see him now, parked illegally before the station, flying in with his coat like wings, appealing before her on bended knee (like some skinny, unlovely Annunciation angel) to return so he could keep his comfy berth as toady and assistant and not have to be the responsible Director.

Nothing can induce me (oh, that was grand, fine, simple, distinguished) Nothing can induce me to return, Giorgio, even if you tell me you will find my underwear waving bye bye on the balcony, even if you go through my flat as though I had died, moving towards the center desk drawer where there, right there amongst the paper clips and pens I put it yesterday (it could not have been yesterday could it? Could it?) I put it there: that last anguished letter from Max who guessed, who knew from the night of the dead bird dinner party (knew, not guessing. Knew.) and even if you find the hot water heater on and the flat unlocked, Giorgio. I have escaped. I have fled. Giorgio. I have given a hundred and fifty thousand lire to the greengrocer across the street who will never in a million years mail my books, but keep the money, knowing he will never see me again, never mind that he has always been courteous, friendly, gentle and forthcoming for two full years. Never mind. That's how those Italians are, Giorgio. Pickpockets! Peasants! They kneel at the feet of the Virgin while they rob you in the church.

“Signora, prego!” He took her arm; this man, gently, but firmly, took her arm and led her out.

“I must find the porter. It's time for the Pisa train. I must have my—”

“Signora, guarda—” He pointed to the sign.

Two choices presented themselves to Corinne. She could blush, falter, *die on the spot*—that she had wandered into the men's room while looking for the porter. Or—rather like an old dragon—she could assume she had a perfect right to go wherever she wished. She chose to graciously allow the man (whose hand was light on her arm, a whiff of wine on his breath) to

escort her to a bench outside. As they walked, she chattered with him in her fluent, musical Italian and then he was all deference and understanding. Oh, after that, he was all paste and wax. The wax would give the paste substance. The paste would hold the wax when it wanted to melt. Men were like that. All men.

He asked her to wait on the bench and returned with the tiny muscle-bound porter who explained that it was too early to bring out her bags for the Pisa train. Had she not heard? It had been delayed. Yes, delayed again, if you like, Signora, but delayed. She should go into the warm waiting room until it was announced. She should not sit here on this outside bench where it was so cold and

It wasn't though. The wind had made a noontime truce with the sun. Or perhaps the sun seduced the wind, lulled it into submission. In November it would be a short seduction, but why not? How nice, the prospects of *il pranzo*, that lovely big meal followed by *il riposo*. Soon, one by one the shops would close and everyone would go home for *il pranzo* and a nap, the affirmation of the personal life. Commercial life would not resume until four when the awnings rolled back up. Till then there would be no life on the streets, only noise from the restaurants and cooking smells, perhaps sleepy children's voices, perhaps tender laughter from behind the shutters of second story windows. *Il pranzo* and *il riposo*. Was that why so many of them—like Paolo, the young bartender, like this man, whoever he was, though he had gone now, even like the old dragons, they all had the look of people who had risen from contented beds? Because they rose from those beds twice a day instead of once; they returned to work late in the afternoon and then meandered home at eight?

Hopelessly inefficient. That's what Max said of the Italian way of life. He had come to visit her just a few months ago. August. Late in August and for one afternoon only and would not hear of staying a moment longer. One afternoon before turning around and going right back to wherever it was he had gone to. They had a slow, pleasurable lunch on the shaded balcony, clothesline down altogether, thank you, everything spruced up, looking its best for Max. Presentation Being Everything. The potted geraniums waved languidly, responsive to whatever miscreant breeze might care to come up from the street below. The narrow street was lined with skinny crepe myrtles, their pastel papery blossoms the colors of sashes on young girls' dresses a hundred years ago, said Max. Or maybe a hundred thousand years ago.

On the white tablecloth tiny tears of spilled Chianti stained. They each held an amber glass of vinsanto and the sticky dessert plates lay in a kind of afterglowing afternoon abandon between them. The sun, in its late August arc, peeked and teased through the lattice, lit up Corinne's fuchsia cotton dress, caught and tinted the smoke that rose from Max's cigarette which he held in the European fashion, though she knew very well he affected this. Max was more American than he cared to admit. Though the effort had cost him a good deal of imaginative energy, he had effectively vanquished his refugee past, the life of squalor and necessity, living over a stinking furrier's shop, his father pulling up suspenders, pulling on a moth-bitten sweater and going downstairs to work in the furrier's shop because without the English language, all his German learning was worthless. His father was stubborn and did not wish to learn English, did not learn it at all until after his mother — lacking paint, cello and family — had died. She worked for the furrier too. She kept his books. Max, politic as he was polite, shrewd as he was charming and beautiful, put all of them and all of that behind him. Swiftly and without regret. So tidied, dusted and cleaned up was the refugee past that it might never have existed. The slap transmuted — transmogrified — transubstantiated into a caress, far more fitting for the most civilized man in America. Probably the most civilized man in Italy now. On her balcony. They watched the greengrocer across the street reopen his shop.

Hopelessly inefficient, said Max, as the greengrocer's awnings rolled up in a thunderous rattle. Old Signor Vitti began hauling his boxes of produce out again at four as he had hauled them at seven this morning, stacking them neatly, artfully in front of his shop. *Hopelessly inefficient*. He should stack them all at once in the morning, Max said, put in a few more hours and go home for a nice long uninterrupted evening of it. Not do that twice a day. Max pointed to Signor Vitti who (unaware of their eyes) stood wiping his brow.

That's very American of you, Max. Corinne glanced at him: But in Italy you have to relinquish efficiency and shrug at the future and tolerate, even savor the past and the present. As it were.

Oh, my dear Corinne. Only you, you alone of women could take that ridiculous phrase — as it were — and invest it with such — what? Seductiveness. Truly. You make it sound like an invitation.

Don't flatter yourself, she replied breezily. That was the sort of tone

you took with Max after a quarter of a century, after you guessed but did not know. Did not want to know. Guessed all the things you did not want to know.

Italy suits you, Corinne.

Italy saved my life. You did, actually. After Dennis. Getting me this

Oh, it was nothing. A word to the wise. I was not lying. You are superb. Anyway, you wouldn't have died. You're being dramatic.

It felt like death.

Max smoked thoughtfully: Love is like that. Overrated. Like travel or Godiva chocolates.

They watched as Signor Vitti huffed and puffed in the August heat, heaved his bins of Tuscan tomatoes out to the sidewalk. His son came by with his little daughter. They gave the child a peach and the son told the father to go into the cool of the shop. The son, light, lithe, well proportioned, moved effortlessly, brought out the bins and boxes, muscles straining against his damp shirt.

You should have been a man, Corinne. You have lived the way a man lives. Max spoke without a false note and the ring of utter sincerity sounded foreign in his voice: Men do as they please. They always find a reason, if one is needed, before or after, but they live as they please. Women don't. Women always live the way someone else wants them to. They conduct their lives along a sort of railway timetable. They must do this, or that, or the other, at a certain time and in a certain order. But men say, you can't confine or constrain me by what you think I ought to be. You've lived like that, Corinne.

It has cost me, she said evenly and after a deep breath.

Of course it has! It will cost you more as you get older. That's the inverse rule: things get easier for men as they get older. Things get harder for women. Don't look at me like that, Corinne. I didn't make the rule. I'm only reciting it.

Smoke curled from his nose and a smile curled on his lips. He put his cigarette out. The sun moved through the lattice and struck his cheek.

I knew you should have been a man when I first met you, he continued. Oh, it's not a sexual judgment, for God's sake, it's intellectual. Really.

And how did you know?

Max chuckled: All those Renaissance angels. Most women who go in for art, they flail and coo over the Impressionists, which—he snorted con-

temptuously—What a bunch of sissies. The gorge rises. Only a woman with real balls takes on the Renaissance.

I don't recall having taken it on.

That's why you should have been a man! You were, you always have been unaware of your own courage. You're quite beautiful to watch. Not at all posturing the way women usually do when they undertake something brave. His voice minced high and false: *Oh, look at me! I'm being so brave!* You, Corinne—he put out his cigarette by breaking the ash off. A clean break—You simply did it. You see, when people talk about the Renaissance, they offer up all that textbook tripe and humbug about humanity and the human body and so on. Bullshit. All of it. The Renaissance was not about Man or Mankind. It was by, for and about men. Men's bodies and men's thoughts and men's laws and battles and politics and the religion men fashioned. Men, not mankind. And certainly not women! All those Botticelli beauties aside.

That's quite a large aside.

No. It isn't. You know exactly what I'm talking about. He lit up again: Don't you?

Why didn't we have this conversation in graduate school, Max?

There was no need to then.

She sipped her vinsanto: Do we need to now?

Max fanned the smoke and laughed his jagged laugh: Think of all those Renaissance Annunciations, Corinne. Does the eye rest on the vapid Virgin about to get the news? No. Of course not. It's the angel that draws, keeps, delights the eye. The angels' sinews, those strong-fingered, strong-winged angels with bodies of men, their rippling torsos, their strong, flat plains made in God's image. But still, the unmistakable bodies of men.

Signor Vitti's son finished with the cartons of produce, swung his little daughter (now finished with her peach) up easily on his shoulder and with a cheerful farewell to his father, set off down the street.

Most women haven't the stomach for the Renaissance for that very reason, Corinne. That's how I knew you were remarkable from the beginning. Of course, then, all those years ago, I did not know, I could not guess you would be ongoingly interesting. You have been, you know. I have watched your life with ongoing interest.

You have done more than watch, she said drily, adding, But less than you might have.

The sun, inching forward, fell full on Max's face: bony, the skin thin and fragile, mottled. His hair was entirely gray and not at all blond. Dark splotches dotted his hands which he quickly wrapped in his napkin.

Perhaps we've been fortunate, that you weren't a man, Corinne. Our friendship has been fortunate in that.

Perhaps *you* have been fortunate, she said with more bitterness than she intended.

He seemed not to notice, chose not to. He continued: If familiarity breeds contempt, you can imagine what intimacy breeds. You've had lovers. You've had husbands—He did not take his steadfast blue eyes from her—You've lived the way a man lives and that's why you've suffered so much. That's what your lovers, your husbands could not abide in you. Your courage and imagination, your passion. They could not abide the courage and imagination that goes with it. Must. Of necessity go with it. They hated your courage and imagination and passion. They are the things I most loved and admired in you. They are the reason I have always loved you. But most men can't abide that in women. Anything else they will tolerate. Literally, Corinne, *anything*. But not that. That's why they left you, my dear. From that first, dreary, what was his

Barry.

From him till Dennis. Everyone in between and everyone since.

There hasn't been anyone since.

Pity.

On the street below the other merchants ran their awnings up on ricketty metal runners and in this quickening, noisy afternoon allegro, Corinne said: You never loved me.

Of course I loved you. Always. Didn't you know that?

He looked at his watch. His cufflinks gleamed in the light. Even in the heat of a Tuscan summer, he wore cufflinks.

But I must leave now. I have a train to catch if I'm to get the plane at Pisa.

You're sure you won't—

I'm sure.

She rose. Odd, she should just now notice they were virtually the same

height. He always seemed taller. He'd grown so thin she probably outweighed him. You change at Empoli, she reminded him: That train will take you directly to the Pisa airport.

Comforting.

I didn't know that, Max.

But you just told me—change at Empoli and that train will

I didn't know you loved me.

Of course you did. You've always known it. You just didn't know I'd say it. Ordinarily, I might not have.

Let me come with you.

Absolutely not! I can find the door, Corinne. You stay here so when I get down to the street, I can look up and see you here on the balcony with a glass of vinsanto. Pour another glass of vinsanto. Please. Do as I ask. Let me see you here at the last. Let me take this picture of you with me to the

. . . grave, that is my next, my foreordained destination. But please, do not for one moment mistake this for some sort of tacky, vulgar suicide note written in a drunken stupor. I am as sober as I can be, what with the pain and the pills. That's why I came here in the first place. I heard they had a cure. Perhaps I did not hear quite cure. (Perhaps I only wished I had.) I might have heard treatment, maybe not that even. Maybe I heard drugs they do not allow in America. So I came to this cold, efficient place and I shall do the efficient thing.

Ultimately, one wishes for efficiency. Dying is very difficult, ugly, graceless, ungainly, inefficient. Whereas death—what could be simpler? There are some moments in life when all that is left to you is gesture. Gesture alone stands between you and pathos.

I am about to become, once again, a refugee. This time I will not escape with my skin. I shall take it off—the flesh—like the tattered, dirty, crumbling old shirt that it is.

Do not fear for me, my dear. It will all be swift and easy. Do not cry, my dear, my love.

Love,

Max

*

The three old dragons roused themselves from the clean, warm public splendor of the waiting room and every porter not engaged in the active cadging of tips hopped to, lifted their bags for them as they hobbled to

the platform. Corinne rose from her bench, hoisting her own two suitcases and joined the other passengers as the train to Pisa was announced. People seemed suddenly to emerge from all over the station, clustering forward expectantly, listening for the approach of the train. You could tell, just to look—who was getting off at Pisa Centrale and who was going to the Aeroporto. Look at those people—a family of five surrounded by a perfect forest of baggage. Americans, of course. No European would pack up that many children and think it fun to travel. Europeans would only do that if they had to, if they were refugees, lucky to escape with their skins.

Corinne peered forward, looking for the Pisa train, happy, confident that Giorgio would never catch her now. Perhaps she was wrong and he had not even pursued her to Empoli. Perhaps he was, even now, at her flat, pushing open the unlocked door, walking through deserted rooms, the bedroom, the study, bathroom, sitting room where he had found the laundry flapping on the balcony line, on into the kitchen, turning the hot water heater off. Walking in and through her flat, her life, the things she'd left undone, Giorgio, treating her things—the letter in the center desk drawer—as though she had died. Like Max had died. Already dead by the time the note came. Day before yesterday. Already dead.

“Ah well,” she turned to the old dragon by her side. The woman came up to Corinne's shoulder. Corinne smiled. *Aqua passata, non macina piu, si?*

Strega Nona agreed it was all water under the bridge, though she could not have known it was a very American sentiment and ultimately correct. Literally: in the end, correct. The process of living is that of accumulation: friends, lovers, family, goods, experience, memories. The process of dying is that of letting go. Not in any orderly or efficient fashion, but simple release. The change, from one process to the other, was that of a curve in time; you rounded this curve in time and the one process was behind you; life lost its savor and nothing—not food, not wine, not sex or music or men or women or the pleasures of paint or words—would ever be as good as it once was. You got on this train and you could not get off. You rounded the curve whether you wished to or not. Did people know when they rounded the curve? Did most people know? Such a fundamental moment. You would think so. Although perhaps it came on you slowly and slowly the things you'd accumulated fell from your life and the people you'd accumulated fell from your life, and the experiences you'd accumu-

lated fell from your life, the knowledge, the significance of memory. And then your life fell from your life.

The train for Pisa galloped into Empoli, hurtling, thrashing, a great swirl of noise and smoke, impatient, as though it had no wish to stop. It was already crowded. People were standing in the aisles.

Corinne followed the three old dragons on. As soon as they entered the car, four people stood so that the dragons might have a seat. The dragons accepted this gesture with a nod. Nothing more. Corinne took a place opposite, a single place beside an old man who farted loudly, lifting one buttock for effect. The sound was that of the flaccid snap of a deck of old cards. One of the dragons motioned to Corinne: *Come, join us, there is room here with us.*

The old man looked pleased. He had farted this seat empty all the way from Firenze.

Overhead there was room for only one of Corinne's bags. She smashed the other under foot, folded her hands over her purse and held her breath against the moment of combined, heightened expectation, irrevocability: when the train goes into motion, pulls out of the station and your chance to go backwards is forever lost and now denied you. When time dissolved like a great lozenge in a bath of *what if*.

What if, for instance, Paolo had not waved his sad and simple farewell this morning? What if he had got back on the train? Would Corinne be with him now (his rippling torso, his strong flat plains made in God's image) in an Empoli hotel room? What if she had said to the young bartender, there in the station bar, pointing to each of the thirty or forty liquors she had never tasted: one shot of each. I don't care what it costs and I don't care how long it takes. Now *that* would have been a grand gesture! Immensely satisfying. Worthy. Courageous and not to be mistaken. This—the mere desertion of Giorgio, the Institute, her job and the filthy students—would have paled beside a gesture like that! Line them up, she should have said, All along the bar. One bottle and beside it, one glass. I shall taste them in order, one after the other. I shall savor each. I shall not be rushed, but move slowly as a just-risen, warm-blooded whale through this experience. It is absolutely *non importante* to me how long it takes. *Niente*. I may even fling open the front door and step, irrevocably, into the streets of Empoli because, after all, I have no plans as yet. No ticket. No one waiting for me at some foreordained destination.