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CLAUDIA

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It was there, in Volterra, that I found them: the fantastically named Sigismondo Malatesta and his companion of a thousand devious allures, who called herself Isotta degli Atti. It was in Volterra—Tuscany’s most forbidding walled city of stone—at an obscure festival—the only kind that invites me now. In that harsh place, where I won no prize for continuing achievement in video, or any other prize, at the villa of an aging Italian film star (female, divorced, rich, beautiful still, and available) who said, it was Claudia, actually Claudia, and she said—violent thunder and lightning breaking over the mountains, driving the guests from her garden and leaving the two of us standing alone and too close in sudden dark, awaiting rain—and Claudia at that moment said in her fatal, raucous voice, “Jack, you cannot win a prize because you are in your own self the prize. Am I old enough to be your mother? *Si, certo!* Do we care? Are you afraid? Speak to me. Why don’t you speak?” I laughed in a certain way, because I could not speak. I finally summoned words. I said, stupidly, “Thank you, Claudia,” and she replied, “Is that what you want to do, Jack? To thank me? What have I given?”

In her vicinity, I tended to shortness of breath. I thought of this woman as I thought of the work I hadn't been doing for so long and the work I wanted yet to do: it's not going to happen, because passion is a word in a language I had long since ceased to understand, if ever I did. (Do I care that she is old enough to be my mother? I have yet to decide.)

My name is Jack Del Piero, former avant-garde videographer, long detached—without regret—from my Italian-American origins. If you wish, you may gloss “former avant-garde” as “last week's wilted salad,” or—should you be of brutal disposition—call me “garbage,” on the menu still and a favorite with those of nostalgic appetite. I'm also a periodic stutterer who would sing with all the notes connected, as in a single breath, but fluency is a river I'll not swim in: better to write than to talk.

Twenty years ago, my silent videos won special prizes at Taormina and Venice for their “radical experiments in pornography and the beauty of their images.” *Osservatore Romano* pronounced my soul an abomination. “His actors,” wrote the reviewer for *Le Monde*, “are at all times fully clothed. Never do they touch, one another, or themselves, but the erotic charge is unbearable. What exactly is *done* in Mr. Del Piero's disturbing art is unspeakable in public print, even in Paris.”

In the mirror of my videos I banish disaster; I banish myself. There, and nowhere else, I find myself a figure of surpassing grace and savage wit, handsome even; my father's son at last. But at the time I met her—Claudia—I hadn't made a video in twenty years; I'd reverted to being inescapable Jack Del Piero.

They invited me to Volterra (at Claudia's urging, she revealed much later) for the same reason I was invited to all the marginal festivals: as an ironic example for the idealistic young—I mean the attractive, the fresh-faced, the energetic, the goddamn young—a

blasted figure of purity and poverty I am, out of the past, salt-and-pepper hair to the shoulders, lean and hard at 48 (I grow old), and apparently not unappealing, if I can trust Claudia. I suppose I mean, see myself through her eyes, which I cannot.

In Volterra, I served as bitter inspiration for the up-and-comers who'd one day receive, perhaps they'd receive, once or twice, no more than that, glancing—barely glancing—notice at festivals more questionable even than the one at Volterra and who would attempt to assuage themselves to the grave with my memory, thinking of themselves, absurdly, as artistic kin, as having once made it to my level before disappearing, like me, into romantic obscurity—not able ever to think of themselves truthfully (an infinitely excusable fault) as among the legion of artists who were, from the beginning, forever down, and out of sight, and never romantic.

Meeting me, Malatesta said that night at Claudia's, was like meeting the immensely gifted fifth bassoonist of the London Philharmonic, third cousin of John Lennon, whose name (the fifth bassoonist's) would remain forever on the tip of the tongue, never to be recalled, never to be spoken. "Until now," he said: "and here you are, Jack, face to face in Volterra and they are eager to talk with someone else. They are so embarrassed for you and for themselves, especially for themselves, because they do not wish to be near you, they have no interest, they cannot withstand your putrefying presence and who can blame them? (Though Isotta and I are drawn to it: your putrefaction.) You are the mirror of their future. You are invited here to teach them who they are. *Caro mio*, I must tell you that Isotta and I have a plan. Without you, we cannot tell our story; the plot fails." Isotta added, "In Rimini, you work as you like, or waste time as you like." Sometime later, I asked Malatesta how many bassoonists were seated in the London Philharmonic. He replied, "Four."



I take late coffee and oranges and too many *cornetti* (marmalade-infused) on her wind-swept veranda, with a view to the walled and towered city, her olive orchard spilling below me silver and green down the hill into the deep-clefted and awful gorge that separates villa and Volterra—a mile across as the crow flies—the city high on its imperious throne of rock. Volterra is medieval old, cold and grim—a uniform world of gray stone—no trees, no flowers, no shrubs, no grass—a paradise of the inorganic, of death—and deeply, deeply comforting to contemplate, the object of this would-be ascetic's desire. In opposition—these were my every morning's choices—there she is, before me in the heated pool, calling out as I meditate on my fiftieth birthday, as I grow fat about the middle in my second year with her, my second year of pregnancy (I am big with Claudia). She, the subversion of my tranquility—my icy dream of Volterra—she, that sumptuous and supple body, brown and naked, afloat in liquid turquoise. “Jack,” she says, she laughs, “I like you with your new belly. Tonight I make the ponytail. Now you must for me jump in and join my pleasure. Quick, *caro*, take off your clothes.” The raucous voice says “pleasure,” but promises delights not exclusively, or even predominantly, erotic.

She says that she is the solution. She says that we are the story. She says that so-called Sigismondo and Isotta (those appalling mountebanks) are not the story. I tell her that I disagree. I tell her so often, and she replies just as often, and always the same, that it is preferable to choose simplicity: “my bed,” she says, “and wild boar steak, the tomatoes heavy from the vine and the basil and the figs, the figs big like pears, I pick them for you, they are warm still, like me, from the sun, and warm more from the hands that pick them. Touch my hand, Jack, before it is too late. Your hands are cold. Jump in and lose your brains.”

I did not jump in; I'm not one to jump in. I talked. Even now, with some understanding of who the man is who writes this, as he remembers, I wouldn't change the words that I'd say to her—if I could say them to her now, as I said them then. Words hidden in me, day and night: When I saw you first in "8½," Claudia, in white, the day itself a bowl of white, you came gliding over the grass—do you remember?—your smile sailed me in a surround of white sky and I couldn't tell you from the radiance, you were the embodied radiance as you came to Marcello in his fantasy—I was there, I was the unseen fantasist as you descended to minister to the faulty instincts of our manhood. Did the jaded crew prick up its ears and stare?

Later, in that scene in the hotel room, where our desire summoned you in chiaroscuro, you and I and Marcello in salacious complicity to betray the Angel of Mercy, you smoothed the bedsheets, terrifying us in your slip, then turned, lubricious, to the camera's gaze (I was the camera) radiant still but darkly so in the blood light of eros. You came as someone else—who are you really, Claudia?—you came to minister to the needy again, but for a different kind of need. Do you remember?

This is how she responded to my moon-struck rhapsody: First with a kind laugh. Then this: "It is only the light design; it is only the cinematografia; it is only the acting, though it does not please me to call it acting. Because I am in Fellini only a volume of space, like a tree, or chair, but more flexible. Are you hearing me? The films are false. You have the chance to destroy the lies of my mystery. But you make more mystery. In the scenes you talk about I do not speak; I am only a body. But I speak. Who am I really? Before I go to bed or to make love I go to the toilet. Are you understanding me? I am here. Are you here? Come, jump in and I will make you real." I don't tell her that, unlike you, Claudia, Volterra is hard, Volterra repels—and that's why I'm drawn to it.

I sat on her veranda in all kinds of weather because I believed that the sick improve (I do not say get well) in the open air. I contracted my ills when I left Claudia—not reluctantly—for an extended period, to work in Rimini and to play a considerable role in the plot of Sigismondo and Isotta. The point of Rimini was work: I was working again, I was going to look in the mirror of my new video and pronounce myself the man I wanted to be. These ills of mine, I admit, are in part mental, or—as my father was fond of saying to me in my teen years—“only mental.” My father found himself—on occasion—mildly funny, and so did I.



Claudia says it's easier to choose life and that only the mad overcome the difficulty of the choice for death. I am not mad, she assures me. She says I am sad (no rhyme in Italian) and must embrace the sadness *con tutta la tua forza*, with all your power. If I do that, then I shall embrace her for our good remaining days on this terrible earth. “You desire to embrace me, Jack, though you do not.” She insists it's best to choose the easy course because the end will be hard enough and reassures me (reassurance being her most reiterated speech act) that I am safe now. “In my house,” Claudia says, “we are not actors; it is not permitted.”

I believed it possible that I'd recover; believed this especially when she took me riding in her vintage '65 Mustang, meticulously restored, on narrow roads, top down over hills blanketed with vineyards and a countryside dominated by islands of noble cypresses and the occasional ochre-colored villa. We avoid the obvious: Siena and Florence. We work, but fail to skirt the difficulty between us as we take the narrowest of side roads, lanes really—the vegetation and overhanging trees virtually closing off the passage in places, brushing the sides of the car—where we are at last free of careening

Italian motorcyclists. We stop here and there awhile in forgotten villages—no tourists, no art treasure—villages of a single café on a desolate little piazza where we take a macchiato and sweet around eleven and, at four, a small sandwich of salami and provolone, with Campari on the rocks, at a table on the piazza, under a canopy, during sudden showers interrupted by sudden shafts of sun, the light brilliant on the ruined façade across the way. We take our pleasure in the food and drink and each other: in this latter, she vocally, me in silence.

I tell her she is the sudden shaft of sunlight, I the more than intermittent shower, the too often all-day downpour, and she replies, “Yes, we go together like prosciutto and cold melon.” Then one time I blurt it out, I say, “Let’s tell the truth, Claudia, I’ve been living with you for two years, more or less, and we have yet to make love. I point to the ruined façade and say, I am that ruined façade.” She says, “Not in my house, this ruined façade; you make too much drama.” She says, “Anticipation is good.” (Sigismondo’s favorite line.)

Apropos of nothing, I tell her that my parents cared dearly for me, my childhood was not tragic, but they cared for one another even more, perhaps too much more and for this sin of passion they carried guilt for me and self-loathing, they carried these things like old broken-down pack horses dying of thirst in the desert and needing the mercy of a sudden bullet in the brain. She says, “Today you talk pretty again like the writers I do not read.” I tell her that my mother got what she needed: a massive coronary, out of the blue—she who had no family history of such problems hit the floor like a ton of bricks. My father also got what he wanted: the flair of a theatrical big finish—Wagnerian *Liebestod*. Claudia says we will not endure such problems, because she is too old to give birth “and if you wait much longer to make love to me, I will be under the earth. No children, no guilt, no loathing of ourselves,

but the sadness, of course. It is possible a big heart attack. Why not? But Wagner? No Wagner in my house and the only Verdi we are permitting is *Falstaff*. Because it is better to be *buffoni*, the two of us, but especially you, Signor Melodrama. And the Beatles, *si*: I love you yeah yeah yeah." (I fail to withhold a grin.)

I say, "I'm going to do it, I'm going to edit the Rimini video." She says, "In my house?" "I'll go public with this horror," I say, "I'm coming back strong at Taormina, I'll take it all the way to Cannes." She says, "If you wish; I do not wish. Do you wish, Jack, in your secret heart?" I say, "I don't know. Only The Shadow knows." "In my house," she laughs, she says, "shadows are not permitted."

So it goes: touring the Tuscan hills, chatting in lonely cafés. Or much reading (me) and much gardening (she). Claudia reads little. She keeps house, not because she doesn't want to spend for help but because she likes it. Soccer is an addiction: she is an Italian. She says that when Roberto Baggio missed the penalty kick in overtime at the World Cup she became "scarred for life." She watches the soccer channels in the afternoon and is teaching me to understand this beautiful game, beautiful (like Claudia) even when I do not understand. These are our days. Our nights: We cook together. She's good, but soon, she says, I'll be better. And it's probably true. I have the touch, but not the experience. Or the will. We go to bed in separate rooms, without submerged rancor. There is no rancor.

After two years I'm making some progress: I'm almost used to looking at her; I share a villa with one of the world's most stunning women and I'm possibly on the blessed road to ordinariness. Getting over her looks is not really the problem. (Well, somewhat of a problem.) It's getting over the way she takes me in; the obvious (even to me) pleasure she takes in my company (even my long silences). From the beginning she's behaved as if we've known each other forever, and it's no act: "Not in *casa mia*, although you,

Jack, sometimes make operas out of yourself." It's the quality of her attention and it's difficult, maybe impossible, for me to accept that I could be the object of that gaze, that she is not suffering from some temporary hallucination which, once it passes—you complete the thought. When I sense that my capitulation is near, I tell her that I am my father's son. This is my final line of defense. I remind her of how he went out, that passion is the royal road to self-destruction. She only says, "What was your father's name? It was Frank, yes? Is your name Frank? Are you changing your name to Frank? No? Why not? I am closing the case. *Basta, Jack.*" (A week ago, I held her hand.)



Claudia is candid, improbably unaware of her charm, but not unaware—how could she be?—of her beauty: "I am beautiful, they say, but what can it matter when we eat breakfast together with bad breath after 2,000 days?" Only the truly unaffected can smile as she does. Above all, she is unpredictably exciting. On that first night in Volterra she brushed aside my comments about her films, took my hand and led me to the vast garage to show me an ancient Mercedes engine, laid out in what seemed to me, but not to her, a chaos of pieces, small and large, on a grease-stained floor. With the enthusiasm of a teenage boy, she was learning automechanics from a forbidding technical manual, also grease-stained: the kind of book, she said, that she enjoyed. The following morning—that is, the morning after the first of many chaste nights at the villa—she took me to an outdoor market and pointed out that all the customers were women because women must do these things, but she, who has many euros to hire servants, goes to market twice a week because the sight of fresh produce and the odor of fresh bread lifts the fallen flesh—this said with a frank glance downward to her

wondrous chest. It pleases her to tell me at the fish market that her brother, professor of cinema in Palermo, upon hearing of her interest many years ago in my infamous videos, had summarized for her the ideas of a still landmark study of my importance to the field, the international bestseller *The Pornographics of Everyday Life: Notes on the Structure of Postmodern Beauty*. It was fortunate that Renato had explained this difficult thinking (which drew her closer to the idea of me before we met—closer, she said, than even these excellent stinks of fish) because she herself was not capable of reading such a book. She said that many “bombs of sex” from the movies, “like poor Marilyn,” wish to be valued for their minds, that she had been one of those big bombs, she too had a mind, but it was not a mind in the sense that Renato and the other bombs meant this word of the intellectual class. She said that if we should value each other, it would be for everything we absorbed from “the eyes, the ears, the hands and the mouth, especially the tongue, because this is how healthy people find the spirit and the mind, there is no other way, *caro mio*, I do not want to be loved for my so-called mind alone.”

When Claudia speaks, I am almost composed. (Yesterday, I touched her shoulder.)



I treat her to my reflections on minor Italian cities. I say, “Maybe I’ll do a career change and become a travel writer.”

She replies, “Can you do this and not leave Volterra again?”

I tell her that tourists demand Florence, Siena, and the territory between—“the Chianti region, where hills and cozy valleys are fluently intertwined—like fortunate lovers,” I say, tactlessly; “where you become the measure of an intimate world, the vital center of space and time. Where you feel safe.”

"Can you touch me now? In my vital center? I want to feel safe."

"In Volterra, the land falls disastrously away, undermined by obscure forces that create a desolate terrain of cliffs. On the long approach to the city, as you traverse the way to the top, all is steeply eroded: in spring not a wild flower blooms."

"This is not true," Claudia says. "I have seen two wild flowers."

"The view from outside Volterra's walls is of five disturbing valleys, without end. Mist blurs the outlines of all objects—form deteriorates into formlessness, the insecure. You are not the center; there is no center; you feel an encroaching terror."

"But what do you truly fear? I do not believe that it can be Volterra. *Tesoro*, I, also, have fear, but not of Volterra."

"With the exception of one building, Rimini is of no interest. For the thousands who in summer invade from Germany and the Scandinavian countries, touring and gazing is never the object. They don't come because they recall Rimini as the city of Fellini's birth and the subject of two of his films. They have heard the name Fellini, but have not seen the films. Many, in fact, are no doubt of the assured opinion that Fellini is a variety of pasta, short and wide."

"When you have truly recovered from your illness, you will be kinder and not make such cruel jokes. You will not fear to be kind."

"Nor do those northern invaders, dear Claudia, come in the hot months because they remember and are drawn by the singular name of Rimini's legendary and lethal ruling family—Malatesta, the name that conjured fear and hatred in the thirteenth, the fourteenth, the fifteenth centuries. They have no need, as I did, to stalk narrow, cobbled streets, seeking contact where once he, Sigismondo, strolled in outrageous arrogance—he, the most shocking

of Malatesta scions, the original Sigismondo, Renaissance soldier of fortune, and bloody visionary who caused the Tempio Malatestiano to be erected as a monument to himself and his passion for Isotta degli Atti, the third wife. He loved her to distraction."

"Maybe it made him happy to be distracted."

"He invited Piero della Francesca to Rimini to live and paint in his castle and diddle his servants of both sexes, if he so wished. I was seeking contact with this Sigismondo, said to have murdered his first two wives in order to clear the path for Isotta, to whom he'd lost himself. Sometimes, he'd written to her, a few weeks before his death, with these Popes and Cardinals it is required that with my knife I go in."

"I think you care for this dead man. Are you in love?"

"They come to Rimini for the sun, the beaches of white sand, the warm and murky Adriatic."

"Are you in love?"

"They come in hopes of an unforgettable encounter with an astonishing (if unemployed) Italian, and they are not denied."

"I am an unemployed Italian—formerly astonishing."

"In winter, Rimini is a ghost town—battered by gale-force winds off the sea, fog-enshrouded, cold and damp. Especially in winter, I found Rimini irresistible."

After I've finished treating her to my dyspeptic ruminations, Claudia responds, fiercely, "Is it possible that you are writing a travel book for malcontents? Why do you make these comparisons? Why is it necessary to make comparisons of these places, if you are truly content to be living where you are, with me, in Volterra, which you say that you prefer? If you so much prefer it to be here, near my body—this is my body, Jack—why must you say it so much that it is better for you to be here, with me? Your color is not so good."

Those two in Rimini called regularly after I met them in Volterra—I refused their invitation many times, but finally, after three months with Claudia, in early December, I accepted “to make,” as they put it, “something very rare.” When I informed her that I’d be leaving for Rimini, for how long I didn’t know, just as I didn’t know if I’d ever be back, she said, “Do you know who these people are?” “Yes, I think they’re frauds.” “No, Jack, they are only actors.” I said, “I’m going anyway.” For reply, she made a large gesture—comic, very Italian, and untranslatable. Had she repeated it, I might never have left.



I know what my father would have said. Because hadn’t he—chaired professor of Extreme Aesthetics at Princeton—already said it, memorably, many years before, in a scholarly journal? “We cannot physically desire a woman whom we perceive and contemplate as beautiful. If we attempt to make love to her, we fail, even if she comes eagerly to us in her naked glory. The idea of erotic love with a woman of beauty presents itself as an absurdity, as if we had been asked to pole vault over Mount Everest. I submit that the beautiful woman, *qua* beautiful woman, has never been made love to, not once, because, truly perceived and contemplated, beauty kills desire: it paralyzes the will and awakens us to the thought of soothing death.”

Had my father’s argument ended there, it wouldn’t have stirred offended commentary. The “argument *qua* argument,” as one of his condescending fellow philosophers put it, “amounts to a mildly provocative extension of Immanuel Kant and other ascetics of beauty.” But in violation of academic protocols, my father insisted on inserting—in the words of one of his detractors—“the slovenly

empirical, the shamelessly personal”: a revelation that stunned the entire discipline. “My ceaseless desire for my wife,” he wrote, “was ignited only after a lengthy spell of chastity, in the early years of our marriage—when the repetitious realities of domestic life had thoroughly worked their disenchanting and banalizing effects on her numinous beauty. Our first sexual contact—how good it was!—followed close upon her first thunderous seizure by flatulence. It was then that I embraced not only my wife but also her wisdom. She’d said, during the long dry spell, ‘If beauty lies in the eye of the beholder, then I hope to fill your senses, periodically, with my various corruptions. Darling, you simply cannot fuck an angel, *qua* angel.’”

Jack, he’d have said, forget the films and photos and attend to Claudia on her sick bed, crawl right in there with her; kiss her before she’s brushed her teeth in the morning; request, and pray to be granted, permission to accompany her to the toilet. Then be prepared, if you dare to do these things, for the onset of fierce desire. Have the courage to be human and you’ll find her entirely desirable, if you love.

It was, of course, my father who introduced me to Claudia’s great early films, screening them for me many times in my teen years, in order to guide me—deviously, according to his ironic method—but always, I must believe, with my best interests at heart—onto the hard path of my humanization, the path which in his case led to suicide. I was enthralled. I bought the tapes, then the DVDs; when broke, in my early twenties, and working at a video rental store, I skimmed the till for my needs: I bought a sixteen millimeter copy of “8½”; I bought the two books of photos, long out of print, published only in Italy, for steep prices; I instructed a rare book dealer to locate and purchase, no matter the price, a pristine copy—I insisted on pristine, only a pristine copy would satisfy me—of the May 1961 issue of *Esquire* magazine—I was five at the time of its

publication—the issue that contained her most ravishing photo, though I, as Daddy would have predicted, was neither ravished nor wished to ravish. Instead, I hid her away in the museum—the mausoleum (that’s better) of my mind, where I viewed and viewed again, times without number, her lonely image in melancholy space. I was with her there—in melancholy space—released, like her, from this world’s contingencies and desires, living inside Claudia’s secreted images, where we felt ourselves trying to elude the grip of nature’s vicious plot.

Quickly it became vocation and avocation to nourish and indulge my intimate friend—melancholy—a gift (from whom?) that baptized me for art and formed the secret ground beneath my prize-winning videos. Claudia’s films and photos belonged to a world I could not have experienced, but nevertheless had invented as memory. As if I had once, with her, been there, had always been there with her. As if it had all, inevitably and deliciously, slipped away from us, except for the retained images—traces of a bygone world, which I cherished more than present life itself.

My appearances at Italian film festivals were occasions to bring her image closer, endow it with local time and habitation. I thought of her as late afternoon light in certain Italian cities (so many) bleeding color; as changing tones of color in changing light (so many tones); as my lonesome impressions, gathered from deserted Italian streets, in autumn and winter, when the tourists have departed, and their loitering consorts, also departed, and gusts of rain swept the streets clean for me, the lone wanderer walking to no end. Most of all, she was the elongated beauty—have you seen Claudia’s elegant neck?—of a piazza in Ortigia, at dusk, when the lights of ancient buildings come on to bury the dying light of day and a young girl plays alone a fantasy game of soccer—the booted white ball catching soft light while she sings out *Calcio! Mamma! Calcio!* In those Italian moments, in those Italian places,

I made memories of the present. In Volterra, to shield myself from the presence and present time of Claudia was my exacting vocation. To convert desire to memory was my master strategy, when desire was not, itself, already memory.

I know now why the original Sigismondo, whose streets in Rimini I walked, whose air I believed I'd breathed, whose death room in the Castle—so he named it, *camera della morta*, while he and Isotta lived there in the flush of hot youth—I envisioned myself asleep in that death room, deeply, restfully, where she and he had died—I understood why this intrepid man of action, in his sonnets for the living Isotta, needed to imagine her—make her an image, an untouchable work of art. The image is cold. He imagined her stone cold dead. Presented her the poems as his passion's best gift. I didn't know the body of the beloved—Claudia's body—but I knew intimately what Sigismondo knew, knew it well on the day I came back to her from Rimini, a year after the day we met.