

**LUCIJA
STEPANČIČ**
WAKE ME UP,
SOMEONE

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WAKE ME UP, SOMEONE

novel

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love, death, fantasy*

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About the book

Cankar Award shortlist

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After a party in Florence, a young student of art history finds herself in the apartment – and the arms – of a mysterious aristocrat, only to realize that he is several hundred years old. Or, rather, dead. Together, they embark on a fascinating journey through time, visiting dead relatives, doomed artists and witty tricksters. Suddenly, the love story turns into a metaphysical thriller, deconstructing various genres with references from popular culture. Though it can be read as both romance and mystery, this brilliant novel transcends genres and defies simple classifications.

About
the
book

About the author

An art conservator and an awarded literary critic, Lucija Stepančič is an award-winning author of several novels and short story collections, as well as books for children. Stepančič has also co-authored several graphic novels and other hybrid works with Damijan Stepančič combining words and drawings, such as the collection of witty literary columns in comic-strip form.

About the translator

Gregor Timothy Čeh was born and brought up in a bilingual family in Slovenia. After studying at UCL in London he taught English in Greece and then completed a Masters at Kent. He now lives in Cyprus and regularly translates contemporary Slovene literature for publishing houses and authors in Slovenia, with translations published in both the UK and US.

Sample Chapter

“So,” he asked. “How’s death?”
“Hard,” she said. “It just keeps going.”
Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*

you might think you know where you’re coming to
but when alone, I usually disappear. then
unfamiliar suns inhabit the empty sky,
and night and day rush on with such speed
that lights and shadows can barely
keep up with their incandescent dance.
Irena Rozman, *syrinx’s song to pan*

I

Why would anyone in the world, especially the waiter, lie so nastily? That evening he had come for the third or fourth time to tell me that Mr Alessandro (the one over there, in front of the picture of Susanna at her Bath) would like to speak to me. “He’s been looking at you all evening, Miss.” Did he think I was a fool?

Alessandro, if indeed he was Alessandro, casually mingled with guests all along, apparently enjoying himself but in actual fact glancing longingly at the paintings on display, especially

the Baroque bathing Susanna with her magnificent boobs. You could even say that he was the only one at the opening of this exhibition to actually notice the paintings. Though the gallery was packed with all the most aristocratic art lovers, compared to him they all behaved like they were at some fete organised by the local fire brigade. Behind his routine, his professional smile, the waiter cunningly and inappropriately smirked to himself, at least that's what it seemed like to me. What could he possibly gain from making fun of a girl with an eastern accent? In the meanwhile, the passionate Alessandro's gaze created around itself a zone of autonomous climate and every woman in the world would wish to find herself under those skies. The anonymous author really did afford the virtuous Susanna in the painting a truly wonderful pair of breasts but for some reason only Alessandro honoured her with the appropriate admiration. I did too but admittedly mostly because of him.

It would still be nice to think that he, at least in passing, also noticed me. I have never seen a guy this handsome. Not in films, not in the flesh. The waiter beckoned to me once again and continued to offer round the tray of canapés. He was immediately followed by an equally gracious girl with a tray of champagne glasses. She had nothing to say. Unlike the impeccability of her male colleague, her impeccability was so hollow that it was in some intangible manner offensive. As if she knew precisely that I happen to be at this vernissage at the very centre of Florence thanks only to the unbelievable geriatric whimsicality of the legendary curator Arturo Bertorelli, and she just cannot be bothered to go about bruiting about it. Actually the old man who tirelessly introduced me to everyone had already enthusiastically explained, left, right, and centre, how we know each other through Haruki, the Japanese guy who provides the museum with technology, and how I was writing a thesis on secular Baroque and whilst these new acquaintances smiled

politely, it all went in one ear, out the other, why should they care for comparisons of the Baroque in Slovene castles with all the stuff in Florence. And the old man soon moved on to enthuse about something else anyway. Just as Haruki had also disappeared, home most likely, to signora Amalia. This guy was my housemate, rolling in money, but a room at this garrulous old woman's was more than enough – very Japanese of him, putting up with any kind of hardship.

So nobody bothered me as I quietly daydreamed about Alessandro who, all shiny, was hovering in ever smaller circles. What would he want to speak to me for? And, more strangely, why would he let me know via the waiter? There were hordes of beautiful female students in cocktail dresses, he could flirt with them till he dropped, why pick me? Because I have an Art History degree? They do as well! If possible combined with some other crazy subject. However much I might have liked to believe it, the waiter's story seemed too far-fetched, and besides, it was becoming quite clear that the guy is more interested in the paintings than people, probably looking forward to getting rid of the annoyingly attentive cortège and being left alone with all this art. You couldn't really say that anyone else, all chatting away casually, had even looked at anything and most likely didn't notice that the subject of the exhibition that good old Mr AB had prepared with such love and devotion was rather naughty. Under the dullest of titles, *Baroque Florence from Private Collections*, what was exhibited were small, private works that rich dirty old men ordered for their most secret closets, for their hunting mansions and love nests, here there was all kinds of stalking, from mighty mythological to biblical. Besides the already-mentioned Susanna being eyed upon from behind the bushes by a pair of lascivious signori, there were many images of the Egyptian's wife with Joseph, son of Jacob, in between a few of Delilah using rather stale tricks to try and get to Samson's secret, and it was

impossible to count all the various fauns chasing with their goatish frivolity after naked nymphs in the forest. Triumphant little devils danced in the eyes of the miraculously rejuvenated curator AB who was proving with this exhibition that Florence was most interesting precisely when its most bombastic fame was more or less over. This way he almost found comfort in nostalgia for the times when Florence was ruled by the degenerate descendants of the Medici manipulated by religiously-crazy grandmothers and great aunts. For the times when illegal debauchery flourished and it was all great fun. He knew how to talk about this period as if he had been there himself and it was always wonderful to listen to him, though to me this time, everything else but Alessandro simply vanished. Did the old man, famous for his insight, realise what I was gawking at? Alessandro! To my greatest horror, I could no longer avert my gaze from him. Even with less staring I could have noticed that, in between chatting to those lurking around him, he was looking at the pictures with superhuman concentration but at the same time does not perceive them as borderline pornographic. A weirdo? But still - an opportunity missed is an opportunity lost. Am I supposed to just let him soon leave and disappear into the unknown? Would it be worth the risk to do something really stupid? I absolutely shouldn't ask him what the time is or how to get to the main post office, such questions are outdoor questions, and asking him whether he likes the picture would seem downright idiotic (of course he does! Isn't it obvious?). The opinion that this is not exactly the best of examples is something I might better keep to myself, just as (well, especially!) a comment suggesting that Susanna looks a little too fat. So what could I talk about? What, damn it? As he will stare at me with those deep eyes, the most beautiful eyes in the world, and see before him little more than a miserable wreck of nerves. As long as I don't come out by mistake with something about him reminding me of Dürer's self-portrait! Of Philip the

Handsome from that film about Joanna the Mad! It would make me look like the guy from the budget accommodation for single men who hangs around the train station every Sunday afternoon (Miss, you remind me of an actress, now which one is it?).

In any case, curator AB was soon back (I had not even really noticed that he had suddenly disappeared, but he always did that anyway), and this evening he too kept swirling around an ever more limited space, unable to hide his enthusiasm. At that moment he was obviously entertaining the possibility of introducing Alessandro to me, or me to him, and had brought him towards me as if he had just captured him especially for me. Strangely enough, the guy did not seem to resist being ushered along. You could say they didn't even notice my embarrassment, their conduct was charming, only really close by was there an air of mysterious automatism that often serves to hide burnout and pitiful exhaustion. With every handshake and polite chitchat, they continued to remain in the same lively gear. They each played their role with such ardour that I could but wonder whether they even saw me.

Alessandro! As soon as the old man fluttered off somewhere else again, his attention suddenly jumped to me, all of a sudden I was all that existed for him in the entire world. As if he had awakened from a deep self-hypnosis. He was talking to me! Alessandro was now talking only to *me*. We were no longer standing before the picture of the bathing Susanna with the ogling old men, now we were at the image of the bathing Bathsheba (with King David himself doing the ogling) and two or three times it occurred to me that I had no idea what he was talking about, though the conversation was going pretty smoothly and I somehow still managed to nod at the right points. I even laughed precisely when I was supposed to, clearly he was one of those utterly serious jokers who stay dead cool while they constantly prick everything around them with tiny flashes of wit. Anyone who doesn't realise they are actually funny is toast but I have

clearly passed the test, with flying marks it seems. Appearing in his voice was even an inkling of a possible warming, whatever that was supposed to mean.

“Should we go to my place?” he suggested in the kindest of ways when the cleaning lady threatened us with her broom because she wanted to tidy up quickly and go home to watch some series on TV. How long has it been since I have had someone ask me something like that? Everyone had long left, one could say they vanished into thin air, and I was left alone with a guy who was inviting me into his bed, for what else is such a question if not an indecent invitation. One after the other, the brazen mythological scenes sank into darkness as the cleaning lady began switching off the lights in order to get us to leave as soon as possible. Undoubtedly she would also have attacked us with some piece of her terrifying cleaning equipment had we not got out in time, but it will ultimately be her fault if Alessandro devours me in a single bite! It’s nice though that the basic things in this world go without saying! You can say that, yes, you’re interested in his small art collection but in fact this means that yes, you would sleep with him. Even by just turning towards the exit (or at least glancing at it), you have essentially already fallen. And feigned indifference just speeds things up anyway.

If only my friends from primary school could see me at this moment! The ones that made fun of me, saying I was as flat as a plank and clumsy as an ox! Or the girls from our class! Who foretold me eternal virginity! Or all of those who so liked to speculate whether I might be a lesbian! And Miro, who would come rushing madly in and slap me! Where are all my exes? And where the village boys who would let this Italian know that you can’t just feel up their women like this, behind their backs and without their consent!

It was already totally dark outside and I still couldn’t believe I was strolling along with such an imposing guy. Just as

I began asking myself whether all of Florence could hear my crazy heartbeat, we found ourselves on the Piazza Santa Croce, however improbable it was to reach it from the direction we were walking in. It was immediately clear to me that I was also only half-looking at him, in the end I no longer knew whether I was walking or floating a metre above ground, the evening shattered into millions of particles reflecting each other, constantly overtaking us with the speed of light. If anything, one thing was absolutely clear to me – something like this cannot possibly end well and I would pay for all of this, probably heavily. But before that what awaits me is a night you might wait for for centuries if not millennia.

I played a little dumb as we turned from the Piazza towards the Cathedral, as if Alessandro could possibly know that we were walking straight past my window at signora Amalia's place. Of course my room was dark but all the lights were still on in the rest of the house and it appeared almost festive. Well, everything was festive anyway, the whole world, and the old bag was probably, as usual, playing cards with one of her lodgers and possibly also the priest whose Fiat with which he drives here from his parish twenty kilometres away I also seemed to spot. Blurred shadows on the first floor spoke of peaceful satisfaction with innocent entertainment and probably not even the priest could suspect that I was walking right past him on my way to commit a sin.

I don't know how long Alessandro and I walked after that, or where exactly we went, the Arno seemed to appear before us at least three times, always from the most unexpected direction. If I would allow it to, the unusual quietness everywhere, incredible for a town with so many tourists, might get on my nerves. Did they all suddenly fall silent due to some unknown reason or could I just not hear them? The silence, if this is even possible, seemed to intensify. Were all those quiet streets actually empty or did everyone simply become mute? In my head I only had space

for the lights that endlessly reflected each other. In passing I also thought about those leaflets about sexually transmitted diseases and firmly pushed that memory into my subconscious. How can you even mention a condom to someone like Alessandro? (Is AIDS not curable to some degree now, well, at least it is no longer fatal?) But he continued to lecture, talk and talk, one of those guys, it seems, with a verbose manner of flirtation. I was silent most of the time, not wanting my voice to betray me. Betray what?

Of course he lived in a *palazzo* and the building recognised him instantly. Even the entrance let you know that serious wealth was hiding behind it and that they just didn't allow anyone to come inside. It was also news to me that people actually lived in palaces with an inner courtyard with an arched colonnade and even (a working!) fountain. Just don't be too disappointed if he then never calls you again, was all I could say to myself in terms of encouragement. Old girl, this is something so strange and unexpected, the mad aristocrat seems to have tired of those sweet, curly beings that poutingly enunciate art-history terminology and might want some cantankerous woman instead, though we all know he will see things with different eyes by the morning. Only I don't need to be reminded of this at this moment.

I've know quite a few guys, known them well, but certainly none of them had a flat like this. Without a mother or other relatives, of course, and with a view of Palazzo Vecchio which greeted us like a nosy neighbour (I had never before seen it from this height). Close up the top of the Torre di Arnolfo looked like an owl gazing upon the casual elegance of the flat with an air of conceit although the blue colour of the walls probably pleased it. A shade of blue I would like to remember though I knew I would never be able to recreate it convincingly. This was more than obviously the digs of a single man. Single and filthy rich. Rich and educated. Educated and with incredible taste, with a rakish,

melancholy angle. At that moment I was least concerned with the fact that for such a view he should be living in a skyscraper and not on the first floor, on what is known as the *piano nobile*. As if it was not enough that we were breaking the venerable rules of Renaissance perspective, Alessandro now suddenly appeared from somewhere with tea and biscuits (cookies perhaps?), without ever stopping talking for a single moment. Well, he also conjured up a couple of glasses of Chianti. Even the messy coffee table seemed to tidy itself up, or what? Catalogues from various auction houses mixed with ordinary old newspapers, five different ashtrays, some full, some empty, competing for space with statuettes of the most varied provenance and exceptionally disparate artistic value, and cups with dried up dregs, he handled all of these with such dexterity that there was instantly space for our nightcaps. As I said, talking continuously. And it was not as if I could remember a single word of all the things he had said. What saved me from embarrassment was an apparently unassuming object, lost amid Alessandro's fascinating clutter. How come I hadn't noticed it earlier? A *mazzocchio*! And, damn it, if it didn't look exactly like one that the great Paolo Uccello himself might have used in his drawing studies. The object, though it looks most like the headdress that women out in the countryside might have used to carry jugs of water, is surprisingly difficult to draw and you need to be very familiar with the rules of perspective. Uccello was rather proud of his perfect version.

"You'll just have to believe me that it really is Uccello's," Alessandro said as if he was reading my thoughts. Indeed he was! "I can't say I was there when he studied it, the maestro was born a whole two hundred years before me, but I would still like to prove to you that I have acquired the real thing, the original!"

Two hundred years? Is he trying to convince me that he was born at the end of the sixteenth century? Might not changing the subject be the best thing to do? In all probability something

should have begun by now, yet here we were, each sitting on our own sofa opposite each other, sitting ever more comfortably, that much I should say, in the end almost lying down. At any moment he could stand up and, glass in hand, sit next to me. And then put down his glass. Who was it that said that guys think about sex a thousand times a day? Or just don't stop thinking about it at all? The tension was becoming unbearable. He asked me something and I even replied, though I didn't have a clue what, I just heard myself talking, and he was also satisfied with the answer, his voice changing in an instant, taking on a soft and warm lustful tone. And he just continued to talk, as if he had not even noticed it, though I wondered whether he had chosen those narrow, light-coloured trousers deliberately. They made his erection crazily obvious. Was he deliberately trying to embarrass me? Oh, questions! In truth all I was certain about was that we talked about all sorts of things apart from sex.

Despite everything, I decided I would tell the girls back at the faculty that we got carnal. What would they know about it anyway? And they wouldn't believe me if I said we hadn't. It was not hard to imagine their giggles and their questions. They would not believe me but still be jealous, just in case. Sex with a genuine indigenous aristocrat was never included in the price of a package holiday, it was never part of the 'all inclusive', and if it was, it was a gift from the heavens and would probably stay that way for all eternity. I could console myself that I had at least tried, that I did not just let such a beautiful once-in-a-lifetime opportunity pass me by. And Alessandro? Should I just say that I need to leave, immediately? Then it would be pretty obvious what in fact he wanted from me.

I didn't have to say anything to him. Glancing at me Alessandro suddenly fell silent and became serious, as if he really could read my thoughts. Not a trace of the playful tipsiness that had overcome us both in the meantime. When he noticed that I was instead eyeing the exit, he was suddenly next to me, all attentive and gallant. "Is anything wrong?"

"Where's the door?" I was scared to death. How can something like that just disappear? Indeed where I recalled there being one previously was now a smooth blue wall, no different to all the other walls in his flat. Blue like nothing else in this world. Alessandro blue.

"The door? What do we need a door for now? Doors are so boring." His speech became astonishingly simple and down to earth, and it finally also alluded to me, from then on I would remember every single word of his even if we stayed together forever; instead of a lecturer I suddenly had beside me a knight, concerned for the damsel in distress. Concerned just enough that he could still be romantic, and romantic just enough not to be cheesy. Putting it more directly, a Latino star from a Spanish soap. Women who turn up their noses at admirers of this kind just prove that no such man has ever looked deep into their eyes, let alone looked at them with the serious infatuation that reaches straight to the heart (and then with no less intensity also further down). A look that shatters you. And it shattered me, something I tried to hide, of course. I was no longer sure whether I should be afraid or impatient. Should I be angry? Or pretend to be fearless? Or turn it all into a joke? But the truth was that it was only at this point that he became present, it was as if he had woken up from a spell. As if he suddenly became real. "No worries, I'm sure we'll find something, won't we? If you want. If you insist.

Though I seem to be a little absent-minded recently, I apologise.” Entirely unfazed, he continued looking for the door. Eventually, when we had already walked round the whole room a few times, one seemed to appear almost as if out of deep nothing. It was locked, though. “Oh, and now also the key,” he muttered. “That’s even more difficult to find. It could be anywhere.” Apparently losing the door was not worth commenting on, just a kind of harmless, cute sloppiness, it seems. Every so often a passing light that appeared from behind the window, as if down below cars could actually drive past, would light up the wall, revealing every time a portrait of Alessandro that hung there, sketched in a hurry on a sheet of paper, a drawing I oddly enough had previously not even noticed though it was instantly clear that it was a work of a genius, though someone totally unknown.

I had firmly decided in advance, even in the gallery (at the first signs on his part), that I definitely should not behave like some shy country podge, defending her flower of virginity even though it is long lost. I am sure that Italian folklore is also full of mothers who in a good Catholic manner warn their daughters of lascivious strangers who might trick them. But playing dumb with him turned him into someone else, someone alert and attentive, this was clear, with what seemed like great fervour he rummaged through drawers, complaining about his own carelessness. Throughout this he happily ignored the fact that if he had really wanted to find something it might have been a good idea to at least switch the light on. It was only now that I realised that we had for some time been sitting in total darkness. When did we switch off the light? Had we even switched it on? And how could I then have known with such certainty that he had a hard-on? Oh, questions... All had to remain unexplained, including how I suddenly felt the key in my hand. A huge, cast-iron key, one that opens castles. Once again he was right next to me in a single leap.

“Well, now you really will be able to leave. Shame.” Surprisingly he actually managed to unlock the door with that huge key from a theatre prop room, even though the door looked almost painted, part of the set. Opening up before us was a peaceful, wide staircase, basking in moonlight. He set off to walk me to the front door, also locked at night. He did not mention any problems with keys any more. Now he was like an endlessly polite host, aware of his duties towards his guest. With impeccable manners that freeze your blood in your veins. Very appropriately, he was now walking down the stairs next to me. So, leave, if that’s what you want! See that you don’t even know yourself what you want!

It was as if he could not believe that I had fallen simply by accepting the invitation for tea! He escorted me to the front door as if he didn’t have a clue about Freudian symbols (key, staircase, fountain and balustrades, especially the balustrades) which seemed to shamelessly multiply all around us, each winking at us in their own way, in any case very suggestively. He opened the front door as if he really could never know what, at least according to Freud, if not also Jung, unlocking and opening the door meant. Together we gazed out upon a silenced Florence that had in the meanwhile long gone to sleep, the street was like Sleeping Beauty.

There in the distance, northeast of the railway station, some three hundred miles away, my normal life awaited me. All those so-called normal guys awaited me. Even Miro awaited me, though he happened to be in Thailand this week. Awaiting me were all my former and future and potential boyfriends, all suspiciously alike, and awaiting me somewhere in the distant future was also being shunted into the respectable-mother-and-wife siding.

“I can save you from all that,” Alessandro whispered passionately as if he had just read my thoughts again. They probably

weren't hard to read anyway, not even in the dark. When I turned towards him with astonishment he once again sounded totally different, with him everything was solemn, full of tragic inevitability. Hanging in the air was also a primeval regret, older than humanity, in all the colours, shapes and scents that are impossible to resist.

"It will cost you all you have. I will take your soul, I will take your heart. Then you will be lost to this world and the other," he hummed as we sought each other with our lips. "I shall kill you," he whispered with infinite tenderness. "But I shall also love you."

3

The bed seemed to appear out of nowhere. Of course it was the most beautiful bed I had ever seen, though this was the least of what fascinated me. Alessandro became impatient, all of a sudden he was like all other guys, but then it was different than with anyone else. Even the fact that this was the first time it was absolutely clear to me what I needed to do. With my heart, pounding in my throat, we followed each other in all directions at once. We became lost in each other, that's it. Together we set off to track the flame that kept getting away. In the end I felt I needed to only move a little more and he would explode. With ever greater thrusts he pleaded with me to do so but I preferred to wait a little longer, not wanting it to end so quickly. Whence suddenly all this knowledge? In the middle of the wildest riding, he grabbed me gently and kindly by my hips and held me there but I kept putting off what was coming. In the end we lay there, glued together, and we would probably have looked like some sculpture by Canova had good old Antonio been a little more daring. But this is the impression an onlooker would get, what

surprised me was the child-like simplicity and grace with which he said that he would like to hide with me from this world and the other. I too could stay like this for all eternity. I would never again go anywhere. Would that even be possible? I could at least be grateful that at that moment I didn't have to think about anything.

But then I realised that our bed was standing right in the middle of the staircase, on the spot where it all started. People began walking past and this sobered me up. Just the kind of terrible snobs I would have preferred to avoid only a day or two ago. It is not that they noticed us, that I really cannot say, and in fact they didn't just walk past but even through us, but still. I shot up furiously.

"Such a triviality and you allow it to disturb you, incredible," Alessandro muttered almost to himself as if not quite prepared to face a new round of female caprices. "Incredible," he was still repeating as new passers-by, women and men dressed as if attending an operatic premiere with some notable soloist. After the performance which would have been triumphant from start to finish, they must have attended some gala reception, not that the consumed rivers of champagne showed. Of course not. Did they even notice that they were stepping into the bed of a freshly bonded pair? It is not as if anyone can be *so* gentlemanly that even something like doesn't throw them off course. Alessandro would really like to know what I was playing at.

I yelled at him, just in case, excessively, lest he thought he could make a fool of me. And stormed out, remembering just in time to put my clothes on. This time I didn't want him to escort me. I made my own way down the staircase though all the residents, every last one of them, had in the meantime disappeared, almost as if they had vanished into thin air. Reluctantly I also recalled that we had been rather noisy during our lovemaking, that we had become quite wild before going totally mad, and

that we didn't hold back during the serial orgasms, so the entire scene must have seemed downright crazy.

Out in the street I was stopped by a couple of guys who looked like detectives or quazidetectors. Dawn had not yet broken but was about to. Their professionalism was laughingly perfect. It was as if they were with great but slightly childish ardour imitating role models from films. Without doubt they had seen where I had come from and it was possible that they had been waiting for me for some time. "Allow us, Miss," they hurried up to me. "Just a few questions." They produced a pair of badges in protective covers but as I could immediately read, they were not detectives at all but exorcists. Exorcists? "We won't keep you long but we would like to ask you whether you believe you are still among the living."

"Well, you seem to know everything, so why ask?!" I shouted at them and hurried along. Clearly they had not expected such a stormy response. "Don't be surprised if some people will no longer recognise you!" they called out after me. "Only the ones born in Florence will, the rest of the world will forget about you!"

Well I never! Let these crazy adventures end, more than enough has happened in a single night. I will go and sleep it off! Despite all my efforts at getting out of there as soon as possible, I still clearly caught all their comments about chicken-brain women who don't know the difference between the living and the dead. Even seeing signora Amalia would have been a relief at that moment but I suddenly realised that it would not be easy to get home. The streets seemed to have become mixed up since we had wandered through here with Alessandro, tangling themselves into knots. Who knows how long I would have drifted around had not the waiter, the one from the opening of the exhibition, suddenly appeared before me. Still holding the tray with the same professional grace, though he had probably forgotten that he was holding it, and I forgot to check whether

there were still any people around him or whether he was holding it up for nothing. Though he clearly did not question the purpose of what he was doing, it was a relief that he instantly recognised me. He remembered me! Happy to see me again so unexpectedly, he became rather conversational. He showered me with extreme kindness and did not even notice that I was about to collapse with exhaustion. It felt as if his every word, perhaps even every letter, weighed a few kilos. Of course I asked him where in all this confusion was Santa Croce, and he just stared at me, surprised that I could not see what was right in front of me. And indeed, there it was, right in front of us, Santa Croce showing off all its eternal beauty. With all the famous dead people it hides inside.

4

Signora Amalia appeared at the top of the stairs. How she could even have heard me unlocking the front door will remain a mystery. Especially at this hour. Florence is not a town that can boast its sleeplessness and its residents as well as tourists, once again exhausted from all the guided tours they have tried to fit in, like to go to bed early. My silent arrival had clearly disrupted the old hag's snoring sleep.

"Poverina!" she shouted down towards me, theatrically waving about with her hands. As if a student returning very early (early in the morning) from a date with a mysterious aristocrat is something to pity and not envy. The date turned out to be odd but surely she could not have known anything about that. I could not in my dreams imagine how she could possibly have guessed anything. I certainly didn't have the feeling that the late night would show in any way, I felt awake and composed, as if I

had faced an exam panel and not the cock of a morbid eccentric. And indeed, signora Amalia's tastes are more akin to my home village than Florence but this doesn't prove in any way that we are related. Quite the opposite.

"Oh, you poor thing, who would have thought! But don't worry, I know a good exorcist and I shall put in a good word in for you!"

An exorcist? This is more than I can take! Twice in one night, what is it with you people, giving me a hard time with this! Simply the notion of expelling some evil spirit instantly awoke me from my fantasising that had previously always saved me from her monodramas. Fantasising about how her flat was mine. Behind her back I had always vividly imagined workers taking stuff away. The horrible set of sofas, that first. And the dark brown furniture in the living room. The kitchen cupboards are also high on the list. The chairs and table, plastic tablecloth included, and they are not particularly careful with the vase of plastic flowers so it topples over and smashes on the floor, the only place it is fit for. A devilishly handy and quick young man then starts using a scraper to remove the patterned carpet and is so efficient at doing so he is a joy to watch. As they carry things down the stairs they open cupboard doors and all the souvenir plates begin falling out, bouncing down the staircase towards their destruction.

"*Dio mio*," she kept crying out as if with this she might actually summon the Old Joker who for some unknown reason had made a cruel switch and brought her to life in Florence and me in Celje. Had she ever even thought that when you are fed up of staring at empty walls you could just paint them in some interesting colour. Brick red? Or petroleum green? Anything, just not wallpaper that looks like it had been bought forty years ago in some country in the Eastern Block. She genuinely seemed concerned, almost motherly, and for a brief moment I even felt

touched. Anyway, I wouldn't get rid of *all* her stuff. For example, I would keep that large, printed, pre-war, framed picture of Jesus the Good Shepherd stroking the head of one of his lambs at sunset. I would also hang on to the plaster cast of Our Lady of Lourdes and even the vase of plastic lilies of the valley in front of it. Religious kitsch has become highly fashionable recently if only you can make it look like a quotation and not something from the extremities of taste. And of course I would also keep her black and white photograph (heavily retouched) from the period when she still looked like Claudia Cardinale. Perhaps I would even, at my own expense, have its frame changed.

As if she had actually heard my thoughts about these cult items, the old woman hurried back into the flat and returned with a real scapular. I stubbornly stood at the bottom of the staircase so she risked her life in high heeled slippers to tramp down towards me. She kissed the pendant two or three times and tried to hang it around my neck but twitched as if some unknown force was holding her back from performing her act of spiritual mercy. The genuine shock that enriched her chubby cheek surprised even me and, even though her all-too-well-hidden kindness had come to the fore, I would have given anything in the world to see her once again the only way I had known her until then, banal, nosy, and nattering. Gossipy. Exploitative towards her daughter-in-law of Polish origins. Extortionate towards her tenants. Even seeing her greedily eyeing my hardly-earnt coins was better than looking at her at this moment.

"My goodness, it's worse than it looks, much worse. We have a huge battle ahead."

Antonio appeared blinking at the door to his room. A lawyer from Rome, a reassuring combination of common sense and a well-nourished figure, a neighbour you could only wish for. He has returned to his native Florence temporarily to keep watch over his dying mother who refused to die anywhere else but the

process was taking rather longer than envisaged. The fuss signora Amalia made had clearly woken even him from his dreams of probate proceedings, his and others.

“Just like my *figlia*, what else can you expect from young girls! I can tell you, signora, that I also have two sons and don’t have half as many problems with the both of them as with my daughter, both of them stay at home, close to their mother.” He rolled his eyes in desperation. “But I can tell you, there are worse still. If only you could see my nieces! And my sisters when they were younger! There are loads of crazy women in our family, apparently even our *nonna*... when she was.... eeeh... still young...”

The old woman shook her head impatiently and let him know that he had missed the point. She looked as if she was on the verge of a heart attack when she clattered back up the stairs towards him, pointing at me with her shaking finger. Antonio understood even before turning round to take a better look at me. And I could clearly see that his nostrils flared even though according to the laws of perspective discovered in the Renaissance and in place since the beginning of time, this was something I should not have been able to see from where I was standing. Then he also, with very obvious suspicion, breathed in through his nose. He smelt me!

“Sulphur!” he sighed, obviously in shock. A moment later he uttered in panic, “What are you waiting for? Have you called the priest?”

“Oh, no, not yet! Oh, dear, how could I have forgotten that! Jesus!” she shot back into the flat, clearly to make the phone call. In the process, judging by the scream, she must have bumped into Haruki, the other lodger. This tiny night panic had awoken him too, albeit with a slight delay. Now Antonio took on the role of tour guide, explaining all about the sight. His finger also trembled as he pointed down the stairs. Into the hellish darkness. Towards me.

“This has something to do with dark forces,” he pronounced in an official judgement tone though, as far as I know, he was only a lawyer and not a judge. The Japanese cheerfully looked towards me with the genuine interest of a professional zoologist being presented with a new species of gecko. Short-sighted as he was he looked like a lizard himself. But after this he simply pulled a face in disappointment.

“What about her? I don’t even know her.”

Haruki! How could you! My colleague from Japan. The art historian from Kyoto! A friend you could only hope for! Well-read, curious, inspired, a living encyclopaedia, erudite on a world scale! After all the miles we have walked in front of paintings together! Hundreds, thousands of miles! After all the cappuccinos we have shared! After all the pizzas, pastasciuttas, tortillas, paellias and kebabs we ate together – art makes people hungry just as does walking in high mountains, though Haruki remained as thin as a rake! After all the beers with which we washed down the considerable portions! Alcohol-free for him! He could have at least pretended to know me! I wasn’t suing him for paternity! This intercontinental betrayal brought me to the edge of tears and at the same time also woke me up. I cannot listen to such stupid accusations! There’s nothing left for me here! You go and exorcise each other, I’m off! *Arrivederci!*

I packed my suitcase at record speed and the thought that my rent was paid for three weeks in advance stopped me only briefly. The signora was in the meantime pressing the buttons on both the land line and mobile, her hands shaking so much she kept pressing the wrong ones, her appeals to the Saints were replaced with swearing.

“Nico!” she eventually squawked after she had woken up quite a few wrong people. “Nico, come immediately!” and you could gather from her voice that Nico will come, immediately, dead or alive, without excuses. I just shot for the front door.





foto: Robert Kruh

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