

Quail Hunting

Nun sacciu, nun vidi, nun ceru e si ceru durmiv.

I know nothing, I didn't see anything, I wasn't there and if I was there I was asleep.

The Garduna originated from Spain and transplanted to Naples when the Spanish took over that town in the 16th Century then became *The Camorra*. Initiation ceremonies, blood oaths, and secret signs are just the beginning for a prospective member. The test of loyalty for final recognition is to commit murder. The rural version of *The Camorra*, which is primarily city-based, is *Ndrangeta*. *Nrangdeta* differs slightly from the city-based *Camorra* in that it originated in impoverished Calabria, the toe of Italy. *Ndrangeta* is a Greek word meaning heroism and virtue. The *Ndrangeta*, along with all such organizations, make free use of the Roman Catholic Church as a cover. Some people have suggested that priests and other church officials have been involved one way or another with these groups for centuries. The marriage between Church and secret groups is uneasy, secret and destined. They lie in bed with one another in threatening and unintended sexual ways. Perhaps it is intended. There is always a cutting intersection between sex and violence—those who bleed often confess if they die. If they live, they may lie about confession. Those who make others bleed confess and bleed and lie about confession. All of them lie under the Ionian Sea at one time or another; in their dreams or waking moments and in those moments between dream and wakefulness.

Ndrangeta does not adhere to the pyramid structure of bosses as do the Sicilian branch of the mafia. They use family-based 'blood relationships' intermarriages or 'Godfathers' as a way to structure power. Each group is named after their village or the Godfather or leader. The leading Calabrian family is the Siderno Group and their boss is Comiso, *The Quail*. To become a member of *Ndrangeta* one must go through a ceremony which consists of a series of obscure questions and answers spoken rapidly in the Calabrian dialect with implied violence spoken in flowery phraseology.

Florianna walked along the shore in Rocella Jonica thinking much and noticing little. As she walked just below the level of conscious mind deep blue and silver gray reflections bounced off the water. Peach peaks crested every wave that came toward the shore. Clouds came and changed every color to its complement, pink, orange, purple and white. The cold wind threaded inside her clothes, making her wish to return inside before it turned into a cold injection--as her family often said, becoming like 'gelatoso'-- ice-cream"-- when someone is cold and feels cold to the touch. The coldness she felt was more than just the wind and the water—it generated from the inside of her heart and radiated as waves of energy outwards. She was as the water and the wind, but she thought nothing of this as she walked. The Ionian Sea perhaps brought a wish of the ancient sailors who once traversed this tip of Italy, but Florianna could no more think of the history of her place as she could of why she was there. Friday night was her husband's night to be with the boys and their girlfriends. Wives were to stay home with family and children and not ask questions. Luca never entertained his girlfriends in Rocella because of Florianna's mother. Instead he took her to nearby Giossa. His 'girl' was barely out of school and filled with silly dreams of something or other. She was necessarily an outsider. Her family did not have relations with Luca's family. She also did not realize that once she became a girlfriend she would never become a wife.

Florianna turned back from the shore and walked up the steep road to home. Her mother Cecelia was minding her two children and cleaning the house. Will I become nothing more than a maid and servant to my children? The thought of becoming old and fat with nothing to look forward to except death made Florianna cross herself and send up a mild prayer to the clouds, where she felt God resided, and thank Him that for now it would not be so.

The priest from the local Church sat in her kitchen drinking the strong, bitter coffee Cecilia made for him on his regular visits. The strong smell of fresh linen and pungent odors of spices mixed together to bring a familiar taste in Florianna's mouth. Memories of childhood flooded in whenever her mother presided over the kitchen, her ample body reducing everyone around her to total respect and a subtle feeling of bitter fear. Cecilia made no bones about the fact that as Comiso's Godchild she held in her hands a great deal of power. It came out of her eyes in dark shoots of energy—a quick

look or glance from Cecelia could silence even the priest. Out in the distance the sound of children shouting to one another and the bells of the Church greeted Florianna as she stepped into the house.

And where have you been? Cecelia asked.

Walking along the beach. Where are the children?

They haven't come back from school yet. You should know that.

I'll meet them at the road, Florianna said as she took off her sweater. Her high, firm breasts were revealed by the pale, peach shell she wore, the color of the peach setting off her deep green eyes and olive skin. The priest was not unaware of Florianna's special beauty—it was noted by everyone in Rocella. The fact that she had been trapped into a marriage with Luca because of her family connections made a sensation inside of his breast every time he set eyes on her. Perhaps, he thought in secret moments, if he had not been a Priest he would have married her instead and taken her out of here. The closeness of the town, the incestuous connections, the blood ties—well, he had a calling and yet he was always a part of the fabric of the place. His moving in and out of people's lives as a Priest gave him a certain protection born of his station and the distance he maintained—yet the garments of the priest hung lightly upon him. And the truth of the undercurrents of violence and sex always brought him back to fervent prayer and a constant feeling of distaste.

Hello Alberto. Florianna dispensed with formality. She and Alberto were childhood playmates. They had gone to school together and even after Alberto went into the church she continued to call him by his Christian name. He had been an ancillary member of their family her entire life. She could no more distance him by referring to him as Father as she could distance her own father, who had died when she was twelve. In fact, Alberto had become a kind of intermediary protector of Florianna until she left school and married Luca. Alberto had performed the marriage ceremony.

Luca wants to go to America in the fall, mother.

I know that. He's visiting our cousins in Chicago.

It's not Chicago, mother, it's a small town about a hundred miles from Chicago.

I know that.

It's not Chicago.

All right.

Will you stay for lunch, Alberto? Cecelia asked to change the subject.

Oh—

You must, Florianna said, pouring herself a cup of coffee.

I must get back to the Church. I have a class this afternoon. Young boys.

So? That's not until later. Stay.

All right. No one can argue with Cecelia, Alberto said, throwing his hands up in mock protest. Florianna hated his social graces, they smacked of hypocrisy and sometimes even worse, of a kind of obsequiousness she despised. What happens to men when they take the priesthood? Obviously they don't cut off their dicks, but what do they do with them? Her brother had told her over and over about homosexuality in the priesthood but she refused to consider it, and certainly not with regard to Alberto. He was safe from that sort of mistake—he could control his urges, she assured herself. But what of those urges? Did all men have them? Did she? She knew of her own sexual explosions—the kind that Luca never witnessed—the kind that gave her a sense that it might be time to leave this small town and make her life in America permanently. But then she also knew that in America she and Luca would be part of a vast extended family that had all these rules and obligatory behavior patterns and expectations and relationships and blood feuds and—she felt trapped inside of her own body. It was why she had decided to take on a lover, even though she knew the danger of it, even though she knew she could never confess it to Alberto or the old priest who often sat behind the confessional screen, Father Augustino, a fat old man from Sicily who held his religious beliefs like a cage of iron behind a velvet curtain.

The night wind, heavy with florid smell and the taste of salt, the odor of cooking and the shouts of men in bars drinking and playing board games filled her head as she walked toward the top of the hill, shawl pulled tightly around her shoulders and draped over her long, dark hair. Roberto pulled his scooter into the back lot of Agapito's Bakery, the smell of fresh bread obliterating his senses. She saw the red tip of the scooter and the sleeves of his dark blue jacket. He raised an arm.

We're going over to my sister Alessa's.

Alessa, the dark-haired full-breasted whore, *una donna di mistero* they called her,

made herself a name with two children, two fathers and no husband, living alone on the edge of the town. Her work sold in galleries in Florence and Milan and even Rome—what did she care of the town's thoughts? She had all the money she wanted, her children were grown and she felt at peace looking at the sea. This was all she wanted. As Alessa walked through town she ignored the stares of the black matrons with their ugly, shapeless bodies and hooded eyes. Whenever she felt like it she stayed in Florence with friends, or traveled to Greece and had even a welcome mat in New York City where she went to get exuberant moment-to-moment experiences. The conversations that flew in and out of her life, the men, the lovers, both women and men, her own craving for the physical and mental stimulation were no one's business. *La sua vita era la suo propria*. Her life was her own.

She's in New York.

She's lucky. I wish I could run from here, disappear into that city and never be heard from again!

And what about me?

You can go too.

Hah. That's a joke.

Even if I go to the ends of earth—China—Roberto, I will never be able to get away from this place.

Florianna got onto the back of the scooter. Roberto navigated little pathways and excursions to his sister's house. The walls of Alessa's home exploded with color and violence—the unmistakable pallet of her imagination and her art. Two bedrooms, once for the children, lay empty waiting for guests that came and went with incessant regularity when she was home. Even when away people she met on her travels often came to stay to soak up the sea air and reminisce about their fantasies of a small town in the south of Italy.

Florianna held their moments of magic in this small house assured that no one in the village would know or follow them. No one really wanted to get close to Alessa or her home—her world was the world beyond—the village just a backdrop to her coming in and out. The disapproval, the fear that maybe her kind of behavior would rub off in some way, kept the old women and their daughters and granddaughters away. Everyone

knew everyone's business yet Alessa's business was no business of theirs.

Alberto had taken to allowing himself long meditative walks in the evenings. It did him good to clear his mind and feel the air, think about things that go beyond the lives of those in this small town. He needed to forget their lives for an hour or two each day and work on a deeper communion with God and his place here. Invariably, God and His place stayed far from his thoughts and instead his mind turned toward other issues of more personal struggle and sacrifice. He enjoyed walking to the sea, but on some evenings he preferred to go away from the sea into the hills where dotted cottages and homes grew sparse and he could feel the breath of the mountains enter his soul and make a nest there. *Il Dio mi da il solitude*. God gives me solitude, he told people.

Florianna looked at herself in the mirror above the dresser.

I've met an American girl in Milano, Roberta said, leaning against her back, on business.

Was she on business?

She's studying art. Just for a semester.

I see. Is she beautiful?

Oh, most definitely. I am not in love with her.

Why not?

Too arrogant I suppose.

Is she rich?

I imagine she's from a comfortable family, not rich per se.

So, you should marry the girl and get out of here.

And leave you alone?

Roberto took the shawl from her shoulders and kissed her under the stray wisps of hair on her forehead.

We can't ever really make anything of this and eventually it'll all just blow away like everything else around here.

Except Cecelia.

Except Cecelia.

They undressed quietly in Alessa's bedroom. The bedspread, made of lace eyelet and woven threads of deep gold and *colore rosso di anima* gave off the smell of sex and flowers and food. It had been the bed of many lovers old and young; it held within the tiny threads secrets of erotic fantasy, limbs and faces; strained tears and some guilty pleasure and certainly torrential moments beyond mere pleasure all etched into the weaving as some kind of invisible strand of thought—energy that passed from the humans who lay there to the cloth of the spread that wounded those who came upon it with unspoken memory.

Undressed, Florianna had a girlish appearance. The woman dropped away and her small, thin body appeared frail and vulnerable. Her breasts, small, apple-shaped and perfect in their symmetry, made Roberto want to burn the house down and declare war on the town—at least on Cecelia and her Godfather Comiso and the whole Camerra family. Instead he warred with his erection against Florianna's long, deep golden thigh, moving closer into her sacred places, listening for the sounds from her throat to signal his time to thrust inside pushing into her and out of the time. Time was of no importance when they met inside Alessa's house—exactly the opposite. Time ran counter clockwise—back into childhood or pre-existence or something even more amorphous than dreams.

The two lovers fell onto the bed entwined around each other's bodies like weeping wet vines clinging to the sides of churches or huts or dwellings made of rocks. Shadows from the trees outside the window signaled the coming of evening, a salt air penetrated the window, Florianna exhaled with the breath of climax and felt her body plunge deep into Roberto's. Her thoughts stopped and started like a car with mechanical problems.

I've got to go now. The children are probably eating dinner.

Cecelia is probably thinking you went to Church or something like that. How are you going to cover your tracks tonight?

I am not going to even try anymore. It's useless. Alberto will never lie for me if ever he had to.

He won't have to. Why don't you go to confession right now and hurry home?

Oh forget it.

She got up from the bed, took some Kleenex from the dresser and wiped his

semen from her thighs and the outside of her vagina.

You need to take a shower.

I know. Luca's out tonight anyway, you know.

I know.

She dressed quickly.

I'll walk.

No way, Florianna—it'll be dark by the time you get home.

Then drop me off at the bottom of the hill. Never mind. The scooter makes such a stupid noise. I'd better walk.

She put on her shoes, flat-soled sandals with a thin strap along the ankle, and twisted her skirt around to fasten the hooks.

Your bra.

Oh yes.

She tossed the bra into her satchel and kissed Roberto affectionately on the ear.

I'm just fine. Don't worry.

He sat on the bed naked and watched her shadow from the small lamp next to the bed making dark flames up the wall.

Ciao. She blew him a kiss and started out down the hill to home. Lights were on in the all the houses.

As she jumped down onto the path to her house her feet slid on the gravel.

Shit. A tiny hole had ripped her skirt near the hem. As she got up a hand reached down to her.

What are you doing out here? I thought you would be home with the children.

I went for a walk. Her breath came in short gasps. Alberto noticed her hair was loose and messed up, the shawl hanging lazily along her left arm.

I missed them from school—I need to hurry back.

I'll walk you, he said, giving her the wing of his left arm.

I've skinned my knee.

Alberto bent down to look.

Oh yes you have! Nothing to do about it now. When you get home wash it—

I know what to do Alberto.

They walked in silence.

I love these nights, he said.

I don't. I hate them. Everything shuts up and dies. *La morte della notte*.

Night is not a death—it can be a rebirth, don't you think? He asked.

She looked at him without answering.

I'll be glad to go to Illinois and get out here.

You are definitely going?

Luca has a contract with his cousins. You know—some kind of building contract.

They want to build apartment houses or something.

Apartment houses.

Don't you believe it?

Alberto saw a white stone on the ground and bent to pick it up.

This is something from the sea, all smooth and round and soft.

And cold, Florianna said.

Not cold now. I held it in my hand. Feel.

He handed her the small stone.

It's just a stone Alberto! What the hell's the matter with you? Oh! I'm sorry—I didn't mean to swear in the presence of a priest, she said with sarcasm.

I don't care if you swear and you don't mean it anyway. I am more friend to you than priest. And here is the Church.

He kissed her lightly on the brow.

Tomorrow.

Ciao, Alberto.

She ran swiftly along the path to her home. Cecelia stood inside the light of the kitchen window staring out at the darkening sky.

Why are you so late? These walks of yours are endless.

I need to think.

The kids are in the sitting room doing homework.

Good. I need a shower.

Cecelia sniffed the air.

You do. You smell of weeds.

I fell on the path.

In the shower Florianna washed the blood from the gash—bigger and deeper than she thought. Time stood still as she allowed the scalding water to beat down on her head. She had to find a way to think herself out of this situation and yet she could not think. Instead, emotional waves flooded her thoughts out and surrounded her body with a feeling of heaviness and death. She hated this feeling of death! The odor of it stank and it was all over her, her mother's house, Rocella—the sea—nowhere to go to wash out the blood and the stench of this heavy death! It was this stupid village with all these silly, unreasonable people, everybody screwing everybody else, no one talking about it, the simple little wink of the eye, a raised eyebrow and nothing! She knew Americans were more direct, even if they were lacking in something—oldness, maybe—it was such a young civilization. Well what of it? She was young! Why should she spend her entire youth wasted here with Luca spending all the money on his girls!

After the shower she slipped on a tank top and her yellow silk pants that Luca had brought back from one of his many trips and peeked into the den where her two daughters were playing a video game.

Have you done your homework?

Yes, mama.

Let me see.

The younger one, Josie, went over to the desk and pulled out her school folder.

See Mama—I did perfect in Math and I am writing a story.

A story?

About a boy who is in love with a dolphin.

That sounds interesting. Will you read me the story?

Josie pulled out the writing tablet from school. Her older sister Ilanna didn't bother to look up from the video game. At eleven Ilanna was already showing signs that her girlhood was passing into something else. The budding breasts, her long tanned legs—the boys were noticing her and her long, curly hair. With deepset green eyes and dark heavy brows Ilanna was already in danger--the Comisos would begin making moves on her, inviting her to the parties and the teas and other family events. Before she knew it Florianna's oldest daughter would be married off to someone in Luca's family, a

cousin perhaps, and their lives would revolve around the same dance over and over; this time with Florianna in her daughter's kitchen wearing some shapeless dress and cooking dinner.

Illanna—

Mother hush—I'm busy.

Have you done everything?

Yes!

All right. Come in the living room Josie and read me the story. Cecelia sat watching the news and working on her endless knitting. She was always knitting something for someone's daughter or cousin or nephew.

Read.

There was once in a small village like Rocella—at this Josie smiled at Florianna, like our place mama—

Right Josie.

In Rocella a boy named Joseph had a very special friend who was a dolphin. This dolphin swam in the sea and they would meet secretly at night on the beach.

As Josie's voice spun out her fairy tale, Florianna's eyes fastened on the wall behind her mother sitting on the couch. Displayed were the pictures of her grandfather and grandmother and Luca's parents and her older brother Nathan who had left the family so many years ago and then died, some say he was murdered in Rome but of course no one actually said it aloud in her house, a picture of Nathan swinging a golf club and wearing those silly gabardine pants of his. All this family seemed tight and choking—she could hardly breath. The darkened night brought the sound the sea in the distance and cicadas whispering their night spell. Car lights splashed into the window sending a beam across Josie's face.

Papa's home!

Josie jumped off her mother's lap and ran toward the drive.

Luca came into the house with Josie on his shoulders.

Mama! He kissed his mother first, then Florianna.

You look nice, he told his wife, and that is some new perfume? The bottle I got you last week?

No—I just took a shower.

Luca looked over his small home with a proprietary air. This was his and he knew it. Something in his body language told Florianna that his mistress had given him something she couldn't or wouldn't. Whatever it was, his cocky stance and the way he thrust his buttocks out brought a bad taste to her mouth. She turned away from him and sat down on the chair.

Josie, finish your story.

Not now, mama, I want to play with papa.

Josie had her arms flung about Luca's neck as if he were the savior of her life. Ilanna loped into the room like an impetuous deer, her tall, elongated body held erect and aloof.

Hello Papa.

Luca, with Josie still clinging to him like a monkey, leaned over to embrace Ilanna but she shrank back from his embrace and gave him a small peck on the cheek.

What is this? Are we getting too old for a hug from your papa?

Not now.

She walked back to the den to her video game.

She's like you, Florianna—thinks she's too good for everybody.

Florianna and Luca locked eyes in the love-hate stare that had been going on for years. Ever since Luca had made known his intentions to make regular visits to a girlfriend here or there, Florianna had seen no reason to invest anything but what was required of this marriage, and that, to her estimation, was as little as possible. She knew she was expected to shut her mouth and do her duty but what for! So she could end up a widow like her mother knitting until she dropped dead?

Luca put Josie down on the divan next to Cecelia.

I want to sit down with you and talk about our plans, he said to Florianna.

Not now, Luca—I've got too many things to do. And I have to go to work tomorrow.

You don't need the job.

I like the job.

Stop arguing in front of the children, Cecelia said, it's not necessary.

Let's go in the bedroom, Luca announced and walked toward their room.

Florianna stood still in the middle of the living room.

Go with him, his mother said.

What for?

Because you are his wife.

Does that equate with slave?

Cecelia gave her the look that meant no further dialogue. The generation gap was insurmountable, Florianna realized. There was no way Cecelia would ever allow herself to understand Florianna's boredom and anger and feeling of hopelessness. The only joys she had were brief moments with Roberto, her children and her job—twenty hours a week booking travel tickets for strangers! To places she would never in any likelihood see.

Luca—

Come in here! Luca's voice ripped through the still night air from the bedroom. Florianna turned in anger and walked toward the bedroom, the silk of her yellow pants making a gentle whispering noise as she walked.

I like those pants, he said as she watched him hang his shirts up in the closet.

Thank you. You bought them.

Yes. From Rome. Want to go there for a shopping trip?

I don't care, she said as she lay face down on the bed.

I'll take you. You can spend as much as you like. I don't know why you need to work that silly job. You don't make any money.

This is the 21st century Luca and women have the choice to do other things with their lives than sit at home and knit and wait for their children to come home from school!

There is nothing more noble than being a mother, Florianna. *La maternita e sacred.*

What's so sacred? Every Goddamn woman on earth does it!

I provide for you—

Your mother—

Forget it, Florianna. I've long since given up trying to control you.

What's happening with Illinois?

We're going in April.

And the children?

My mother and the children too.

What about the house?

Florianna--I have brothers and friends—they'll all keep an eye on things.

Comiso?

I won't talk about this with you; you know that.

Florianna grabbed his cell phone from the bed stand paging through the list of numbers to see who had called. Luca took the phone from her hands.

What are you doing?

Your whole life is secret from me.

Luca slid onto the bed turning her over to look at her face. He put his hands through her long dark hair; the thick wavy curls Ilanna had inherited.

Ilanna has your looks.

Don't kiss me.

Luca leaned over and kissed her hard on the closed lips.

I can smell her.

You cannot.

He got up.

Just take a shower Luca.

The next morning Florianna called in sick to work and waited for the children to leave for school and Cecelia to go over to the house of her old friend with whom she gossiped and drank endless cups of black espresso. She left the house wearing the silk pants, her tank top and a jacket in case the warm weather turned and the sea brought in some cool clouds or rain. She walked along the path to the Church. Inside, she lit a candle and knelt in front of the altar. Alberto was in his office working on some notes for a sermon and grading papers from the class he taught. When he wandered out of his office he sat the hunched back of Florianna. She turned when she heard his steps.

Alberto—

Flore—aren't you working?

Not today. I need to talk to you.

Come in my office.

Alberto's office was calm and orderly, the walls lined with deep mahogany bookshelves and filled with books of all kinds. She picked up a book from his desk absent-mindedly.

What is this?

Science Fiction-- but excellent.

About what?

Transcendence.

I see. She cracked open the book jacket.

You want to borrow it?

All right. She placed the book on his desk.

Alberto—I cannot stand my life.

What can you do about it? You made choices—you have to be responsible.

Oh responsibility! I'm sick of that! And anyway, Cecelia is always there to take care of the kids and Luca—

What do you want me to do? You can't divorce.

No—I just want to kill myself.

Don't talk like that.

What then? What's left?

What's left? You have two beautiful daughters to raise.

Florianna looked at the bookcase while Alberto appraised her profile—the tense and beautiful features transformed his usual detachment into a feeling of sorrow and pain and desire. The desire was always there no matter how much he wanted to deny it.

I cannot go against Luca and his family; you know that.

The Comisos have bought the Church! What kind of religion is it in bed with the Family?

Stop it, Flore—I won't go there.

I have to leave.

Where are you going? Let's have lunch. I'll ask Marie to bring us something from

the kitchen. Some sandwiches or—

No.

Florianna got up and stretched. Alberto saw the flat, golden taut rib cage when her tank top rose up from her belly.

You love me, don't you Alberto?

You'd better go.

You know—they did not cut off your dick, did they?

Shut up!

A deep blush of shame covered Alberto's face. The anger he felt was unseemly, unprofessional and too revealing.

I'm sorry—I didn't mean to get angry. But you cross the boundaries all the time, Flore.

All right.

Florianna walked around the desk, grabbing Alberto by the shoulders and pulling him toward her. Her right hand shot out from her body and rubbed the back of his head from the nape of the neck to the crown, feeling the soft dark curls, allowing her fingers, like talons to clutch the top of his head. She brought his head down to her mouth where she kissed him on the forehead.

All you men are children.

I am a child of God.

Your God does nothing for you! Better be a child of a woman!

She turned and walked out the door of Alberto's office. Alberto, breathing heavily, felt the top of his head where her hand had been. The memory of touch, the texture of her hand remained as though she had placed some burning erotic thoughts there and something hot and ugly had begun to seep into his brain. He needed a sandwich, a hot shower and a long day of prayer—none of which, he realized, he would do. As he looked out the window he saw her running past the front gate in her yellow silk pants, her high breasts catching the sunlight through her top, the dark hair flowing in long waves down her back. He hated her. This woman was a dangerous temptation to his soul and he made a vow not to allow her into his office ever again—at least not when he was alone, not in the middle of the day.

At the beach Florianna saw Michael pulling his small skiff onto the sand.

When does the next boat come Michael?

Not until tomorrow, Flore.

Better a train than a boat, she thought with a smile. Already she began planning a journey out of Rocella without consulting her own conscious mind—as if the moment of decision had already been planned for her by some unseen source and she was simply doing her best to comply.

The train station filled up with old women carrying ugly satchels filled with bread and meat and cheese and dark, ugly drab clothes. There were young men in cheap suits smoking outside the door, a few families and children laughing and looking forward to a journey out of Rocella. No one went very far although sometimes they took the train to Rome, a very long journey in a hot and often stuffy train. Florianna realized she had no taste for a long train ride and turned to leave the station. As she walked past the groups with their satchels and tickets ready to board she saw a young man in a white suit idly smoking a cigarette. Something about his diffident manner and his deep-set melancholy blue eyes captivated her. There was something a bit corrupt about his manner that set him apart from the usual townspeople, something formless that made her feel as if he were a kindred spirit. He raised his head and touched the tip of his white panama hat as she walked by—she felt as if they were joined in a conspiracy that only the two of them knew, something that excluded all others.

Hello, the man said in English as she brushed past him. Her cheeks, luminous with the color of gold and olive and a faint tinge of pink made him think of the colors of the ocean. The gold strands in her deep brown hair caught the light.

Want a cigarette?

I don't smoke. You are a stranger here.

Yes.

Where are you from?

Sligo, Ireland.

You've come a long way.

I've come all this way to see the likes of you.

She laughed a deep caustic laugh.

Oh—my English is bad.

Not so bad, he said.

Well—with a ‘line’ as you say it--like that, how can you expect much?

It works with the young girls in the streets of big cities.

It won’t work here.

He smiled at her, smiling past her ripened manner, her full expression of disdain and the tinge of disobedience in her manner. He was used to women disparaging his flirtations—it usually meant a conquest further on down the line.

Would you be so kind as to accompany me about this lovely town of yours?

I don’t think so. I am a married woman you see. She held up her left hand.

Well—this is simply an offer from a tourist to a tour guide. Would you be my guide?

Florianna in her longing to be free of her life knew the impossibility of changing it even one small bit. The best she could do was to enjoy the oddities that came her way—the moments of illusion lit up with fragmentary and partial rescue, infidelity meant nothing any more. The intoxication of the moment was all she desired.

All right. How shall we travel?

I’ve rented a car, he said, over there in the parking lot. My name is James, by the way. And yours?

Rosaria, she said and laughed.

Shall I drive or you?

I will, she said and eased into the white leather seats of his rented car as if it were her own. I know of a lovely house by the beach a bit out of town.

Brilliant, said James as he slid into the passenger seat beside her. Off we go!

As he looked out at the ocean speeding past the window he noticed the peach peaks cresting the waves, the silver and gray clouds huddled above an impossibly blue sky. Italy was a peach of a place, he thought, slipping his hand across the back of the seat behind Florianna’s shoulder.

Florianna had no thoughts about death. How could something so intimate and destined hold anything but joy? Luca was not the arbitrator of her fate, after all, was he? James and his car were interwoven into the air of this day and of life itself and nothing

would interfere with that, she thought. A roguish act could never result in violent death. Blood relationships and kindred spirits were not the same thing, after all, she told herself as the car glided along the road beside the sea.

As they drove over the bridge James could see the hills beyond the village bathed in a glow of pink and yellow from the slant of sun.

This is so beautiful, he said.

Oh yes, Florianna told him, I could drive off this bridge right into the sea it is so beautiful!

James looked across at this new partner he had just acquired.

And would you?

Why not?

I want to live! he exclaimed. That's why I came here. I love this place!

I hate this place, Florianna told him as she turned the wheel of the car sharply toward the bridge. The plunge was only a hundred feet or so but the damage was extensive and neither one of them would remember a thing anyway. Small acts of boldness can defy even the most scrupulous logic.

Moments before the car ripped through steel and concrete and landed on the sandy beach Florianna saw a small baby tossed up into the air—as if it were her own, or herself. Small baby, the hands of alabaster bone, comparisons defy reality, the blanco white lies told and forgotten, silvered, white as sheet, flaxen, the heralded love she hated. She felt dun white, ashen, achromasia, her creaminess tarnished in the flesh of abbreviated life. You skinny man! she spoke to the screaming mouth of James, I hate you! Brought down to the nub, it was pure economics, an elicit business, he was Ragman to her Smuggler—playing roles as she flew timeless through the air to death, the contraband smuggled goods of a streetwalking, pimping life—it was all good for a night and the night would not come again. You got me wholesale! she screamed into a bloodshot wind, negotiated the deal cheap—I came for the transaction and thank you! The dirt was Dirt Cheap as metal enlightened her gaze and ripped into her soft body of dream she floated into the acquaintance of white sky once again.

