

THE OLD ITALIAN

By Owen Mould



In the middle course of his life, no, past that mark, wellllllllll past that mark he thought, he saw the old Italian in Il' Pagliaccio Café on the edge of the District.

The man sat quietly at the window with a tall glass one quarter full of some kind of reddish liquor and another of sparkling water.

He was old, as old as an old weathered oak, and he wore one of those black half-cloaks he had seen on the shoulders of men beside the bocce courts, and in the Three Musketeers films and he had on a black beret above a fall of absolutely pure white hair. When he briefly turned, Jim could see the man's face sported a trim white beard and an elegant moustache.

The old man sat so still, he had not noticed him for the longest time, but now he could not look away, for something about the old man evoked some kind of admiration in the way he sat there calmly, with dignity, secure in himself, alone but not lonely.

To Jim, this figure embodied everything that he wanted to be when he got to be that man's age, although his own ancestors hailed from dour and foggy

Manchester. More than anything he had ever wanted in his life, he wanted to be just like that man. Some day. When he had gotten older than he was. When he got up and paid, the old Italian man still sat there as a last ray of the fading day streamed in, and he seemed a perfect reflection of the old Dutch Masters, those guys whose names he never could recall.

Jim went down the street, taking his time as he walked, for the next three days belonged to him, fancy free from the sales floor, and there was plenty of time, with nothing much to do other than go back to the apartment to water the ferns again and screw the cat. So he dropped into the Mulier Galleri where an opening was in progress. He vaguely knew one of the artists there, a friend of somebody who knew Susan or Sandra or Sally or somebody like that.

In any case, there would be a buffet with free eats.

Inside there was a tremendous bustle of going to and fro, people carrying things, the caterer wheeling in big trays on what looked like hospital gurneys, and any number of artists looking like they had not slept a minute last night; the official opening for the Season was still 90 minutes away and, as usual, nothing ready on time. So he lent a hand to one artist, an attractive woman with chestnut hair having a time of it hauling in a sculpture that appeared to be made of a solid redwood log until after they got the ponderous thing in he saw had been hollowed out and lined with hammered copper into all sorts of intricate shapes.

Looked vaguely Greek, he imagined. Romanesque or Baroque or ... something like that. Ancient pre-Christian something or other.

He helped her bring in a few more things and as she bent over a box with her back to him her jeans rode a little lower while the bulky sweater rode a bit higher.

Hm. Wears black lace under that.

Oh heck, look away now! What's this thing here? Looks like brass. Absolutely positive – it had to be brass and not copper. Her work featured a lot of graceful forms made of metal wrought or cast into the shapes of plants, leaves, living things, while she had carved wood, or what appeared to be heavily lacquered wood, into solid metallic things. He didn't know anything about art but he liked what he saw.

The gallery cards showed her name as Mira Herz. From Helena, Montana.

When he turned back she had stood up, brown eyes looking at him beneath feathery bangs.

For a moment he was at a loss for words, unusual for him, until he managed to say a few platitudes about how much he liked her work and for some reason feeling like an incredible nimbus fool.

When she smiled at these compliments her entire face lit up. She mentioned that she had just arrived that afternoon after driving all the way from Helena. A smidge over 800 miles. And so much still to do. Her first exhibition in a big city. That piece over there?

She stood back, put her hands on her hips. That's \$27,000.

"God I am famished!" she said, rooting around in a box again. "The buffet isn't ready yet?"

Black lace. Again. But this time he just tilted his head a bit to one side.

She held out a small baggie as she put something in her mouth.

"Chocolate?"

As he took a piece, a friend of hers showed up, a small dark woman, older and with glasses. The friend apologized for being late.

Nevermind. Got help. Brief introductions. Did you bring the fantod stand? No, its out in the car. Well, lets get it.

So the three of them hustle through the growing throng down the packed stairs for what turned out to be a small iron contrivance the use for which Jim could not imagine, but which needed only one person to carry. There was a crowd growing around the door, though which Mira pushed her way, waving her Artist badge, followed by her friend.

Friend? No, the way she said Oh well. Maybe she's not

As he stood there a familiar voice called to him from the sidewalk.

"Jim! We'll what are you doing here?"

It was Denby, his neighbor.

"Going to the Show, I see," the garrulous man said as the crowd in front of the doorway slowly oozed inside like an amoeba working its way around an irritating obstacle.

Jim mumbled something about helping an artist "friend".

“Ah that gal with the sweater. Saw her as I was coming up.” Denby nudged him on the elbow. “Quite pretty. A bit out of your reach old man, you know.”

He laughed and Jim shrugged a diffident shrug.

“Well got to be going. Meeting Marlene at the Chestnut. See you around old man!”

By this point there were just a couple people in line as he pushed forward to be stopped inside the doorway by a man with the most aquiline features he had ever seen. The young man in a tuxedo had a jaw that looked like it could cut paper and he put his hand on Jim's chest.

Did he have an invitation? The Opening was by invitation only.

Well, he was helping one of the artists move stuff. Didn't he notice . . . ?

Sorry. Invitation only.

And after a woman wearing what surely was not in any way shape or form a PC faux fur stole glittered by him on the arm of a very patrician-looking man, the door was closed in his face and there he was on the street.

Damn, didn't even get her business card!

He went across the street into a bistro and entered the bathroom there, trying to think of a way to get past Colonel Klink there at the door, him with the sharp jaw.

Or he could just wait. Sit on the hood of her car. Hi there, just happened by. Coincidence! How was the Opening? Or maybe she might notice the absence and send for him.

It must be the chocolate that's working, he thought.

He tried to imagine the scene inside one of the most prestigious galleries in the City. Flashbulbs popping, throngs. Champagne. Legions of admirers. Her first exhibition ever. And. And! And her dark-haired friend there.

Blasted chocolate!

He looked up from the sink after rinsing out his mouth and groped for the paper towel, as a pang of disappointment slowly eased out of his body. A bit out of your reach, old man. Face stubbled with salt and pepper. A chin more like a tomato than a human feature. Now that was a chin that would have been proud to be anyone's kneecap! Bloodshot eyes too. He had gotten old. And, in truth, friend or no friend, she could not have been more than 25, more than half his age. And quite attractive. Wellllllll . . . perhaps a bit out of his league. So much for that! See you around. Old man.

He walked out of the bistro where a young laughing couple was engaging in some serious PDA in one of the booths there.

Reminded him of Valerie back in the day. She had been a pistol, that one.

He paused in front of the gallery, knowing that, really, he was old enough to find a way inside. But he would not. And so he turned to walk further down where the Avenue numbers got bigger, thinking now of all the troubles with Di, during his acting career phase, how that had begun so haphazardly only to end in recriminations and plates smashing against the wall.

And Ana, with her guitar, zest for life and everything so intense in every moment until it, well just was too much. So he never did learn to play the thing and become the rocker he imagined.

Then there was Lisa (from the glassblowing glass), and Di, and Marla (Spanish at the Continuing Education Center), and Sue (tango and waltz), and Hope – who had been there for all the years he spent trying to become an investment broker, and Wanda -- Wanda had really been something with the clothes and all her style (man what a woman she had been! Although unfortunately married to an Admiral) -- and . . . just when did it all sort of, without any conscious intent, . . . just . . . peter out so to speak.

Must have been after Di when he had felt blasted hollow for a long, long time afterwards. Numb and nothing worth it. Years pass, the cat gets fed, teeth get replaced, work happens, not much worth trying for and then one fine day there you are, standing outside the door, suddenly feeling something again.

Except it was too late for all that any more. The door had closed.

He had to slap himself. Buck up guy! Work that heavy heart and get it light again. Next thing you know he'd be mumbling verses from TS Eliot while talking long mournful walks on the beach!

Where he was headed right now. On the crest of a hill he could see the immense gray void, streaked with soft breakers uttering their soft inanities. The endless expanse of time and space, just muttering on and on in a grey muffle for no particular reason except to go on until the last rattle and cough marks what had already happened years before.

No, not that. Better to just have somebody shove a sock in his mouth and have done with it. And so he spun on his heel and walked back to the lights of the District, the hustle and rush of people passing on the street and popping in and out of doors like some movie by Fellini, exploding with life and light. He paused in front of a shop window. A mandelion. So that's what they call it. A mandelion. He was not to be kept waiting for he wanted that cloak and that hat right away and would not be put off.

Why wait to become anything?

He went in and bought not only a black mandelion, but a jaunty black beret and a walking cane.

So attired, he reentered the street, looking at all things with the dispassionate eyes of a man who has lived his life and planted his tree. And his cane rapped smartly upon the pavement as he walked on to whatever might be in store up the road.