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Tourism

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EYES HALF CLOSED, pretending I'm asleep, I watch her. She moves lazily; every few steps she stops, kicks up a spray of Italian sand, then glances around to see if anyone's looking. She gets closer. I sit up and look at her body, which is petite, slim, with fine legs and a lovely chest. She pays me no attention and lies on her sunbed, several feet away from mine. Rolling onto her stomach, she unfastens her bikini and spreads the straps out either side. I've been waiting to see her topless, without luck. But her swimsuit shows her nipples, jutting beautifully whenever she steps out of the water. I think of them in my mouth, between my teeth.

When I first saw her, some days ago, I thought she was eighteen. My estimation has since fluctuated between fourteen and twenty; like a hologram, she switches shape according to the light. Sometimes she's the perfect ingénue, unsure of her wonderful new body; other times she's so assured, flirting with the lifeguard, playing with her hair, amused as he hangs on her every word.

We tried talking this morning. We smiled, we nodded, we said 'Buongiorno' and then we floundered, unable to bridge the gap between her English and my Italian, gawping in silence like imbeciles instead. Saving the moment, she offered me her bottle of water. I took a swig and gave it back. Looking at me, she held it to her lips then, not quite accidentally, let it spill onto her chin and into her cleavage. I said nothing as she sat there open-mouthed, her gaze darting between my face and her breasts - shining like polished apples - as if it were the most amazing event. She got up, said 'Ciao', then walked away, waving and disappearing into the phalanx of beach tents. She returned an hour or so later with her companion, and subsequently ignored me.

He's as curious as she is. He's old, well over fifty, and he's with her almost whenever she's here. I don't think he's her father - there's no great affection between them. Their conversations sound perfunctory, to the point. She sunbathes and occasionally swims; he keeps himself chalk-white under their tent, quietly watching the world through huge Versace sunglasses, sipping daiquiris and smoking Gauloises with merciless contempt for his body. His hair is immaculately cut, dyed black, oiled and combed back over his skull.

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He sits like an old duchess taking tea; a hand rests on his knee, one leg slung over the other, his cigarette held between thumb and forefinger, a signet ring glinting on his upward-pointing little finger. The flesh is draped loose and rumpled over his bones; his shoulders poke obscenely from either side, his breasts hang like soggy dishrags. There's a hideous dignity to him, like an expensive, now haggard and disused leather bag.

When he's here she doesn't look at me, but she still toys with the lifeguard who goes out of his way to walk past her. What does the old man disapprove of? My colour? The girl, caramelised in the sun, is as brown as me - there's the occasional Italian who's darker. Maybe he's seen some trait I share with the Afghans who shuffle about the beach, hawking trinkets and shawls. Maybe the duchess might like me for himself. His manner - weirdly content as he sits inert and blank-faced in the shade - is either the boredom of the very rich, or the hauteur of the very gay. Quite possibly both.

I look at him for a few seconds, with no idea if he's looking back. I nod, and his features unfold into the emptiest, most ingratiating smile I've seen in months. His teeth are unreal, perfect and brilliantly white. He tilts his head and says, 'Ciao.'

'Ciao.'

Rasping slightly, he sighs a few musical sentences of Italian, then laughs with the grace of a courtesan.

'No speak Italian,' I tell him. 'Parli inglese?'

'Oh! You are Ingleesh? So sorry!' He is effusive, and speaks open-armed, like Christ.

'Don't apologise. I ought to speak more of your language.'

There's a stiff silence; he continues smiling.

'I've only been here a few weeks,' I say.

'I seee. You are on 'oliday?'

'Yes, I am.'

'Very good.' His joyous, obsequious grin holds fast and he asks, rather intrusively, 'Where you are staying?'

'Ostuni.'

'Oh good. Very good. That is very very good place.'

'It's lovely.' I look at the girl who watches us emptyeyed, not understanding a word. She has feline cheeks, pale brown eyes with thick lashes, and tight black curls. She is an original, very natural beauty.

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'Thees ees my . . . my . . .' - he looks up and searches the air for a description - '. . . my seester's doe-tah.'

'Your niece.'

'Si . . . My niss.' He speaks to her in Italian, and she smiles at me as if we've just met. Her name is Chiara, he tells me, as though introducing a contestant on a game show, a seventeen-year-old student from Bari. Being a little stupid, she doesn't speak English, but she's a lovely girl and a wonderful dancer who ought to be in an academy instead of all the time watching television, or fretting on the telephone with her friends about make-up and boys. Her mother, Maria, had an operation on her kidney, so Chiara stays with her uncle at the family cottage while his sister recovers quietly at home. His voice is louche and seductive, reverent enough to address the Pope, and his name is Marcello Massimo Marchiagiani.

He's a television producer who splits his time between his home in Milan and his office in Rome, where he makes a plethora of celebrity shows. He has spent the summer in Puglia since he was a boy. Unsolicited, he tells me all this and more, making tart, shameless remarks while dropping names into his monologue - Berlusconi, Deneuve, Prodi, Zoff . . .

He asks me what I do.

'I'm a writer.'

'Oh! Very good!' His face loses none of its ersatz euphoria. 'What you are writing? A novel?'

I look down at my journal on the table beside me. 'Yes,' I lie.

'What about?'

I extemporise a quick plot that involves desperate young men, a bank robbery and a dismal bloody end.

'Brilliant!' he cries with unabashed mendacity, sitting up and clapping his hands. A silence follows. I sense a movement behind his dark lenses and know he's appraising my crotch. I recline a little, giving him a better view. 'That is good,' he murmurs. 'Very good . . . If you don't mind . . . I can read it?'

'Well, I've only written notes for it so far.'

'It can be a brilliant film, I think.' He shifts forward in his seat. 'I know many people making films. Producers are always needing the scripts.' He pauses, lowers his voice: 'I want to make a film myself, but I need a script. Maybe we can help each other?'

'That's an idea.'

'We must talk about it.'

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'Sure.' Unsurprised by his insistence, I'm still somewhat unnerved.

'But not now,' he says, his smile as sheer as a cliff face. 'Let's eat now . . . Please, you will join us?' He turns and speaks to Chiara who, curious and uncomprehending, still watches us. She nods and encourages me with a smile.

'Thank you,' I reply. 'I'd love to.'

He calls for the attendant.

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