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Learning by Heart

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Extract

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Sicily: Easter 1973

It was after midnight when they came out into the Via Roma. They could hear music in the street towards the cathedral, locked behind its roofs and steps, now cloudy in the darkness, only the vaguest shapes of buildings showing. She let the others go ahead, and waited on the corner of the piazza by the hotel, to see if the band would come towards her.

Her husband's friends were walking across the square, threading between the wooden trailers and the sports cars, over discarded flowers and candle stubs. She looked again up the dark street and saw that, while they had been in the restaurant, all the torches that had been burning high on the walls along the route of the procession had been extinguished. Where the crowds had stood, silent on each side of the road as the guilds of the churches went past, carrying lanterns or wreaths, there was no one now.

Cora stood in the closed doorway opposite the smaller church of the piazza and tipped back her head to gaze at the sky.

It was then that he stepped into the doorway next to her, put his hands on her waist and kissed her.

Then she heard the band coming down the hill, playing loudly and fast. Pietro stepped back and she stood with her hands on his shoulders.

'They are celebrating,' he said.

And she thought, The beginning of the vigil until Easter Sunday. She looked at him, at his shadowy profile, as he lifted her hand, and turned it so that the palm faced upwards. He kissed it, then her wrist, and overwhelming desire, which felt like desperate thirst, suddenly astonished her. She hadn't felt it in years; perhaps she had never felt it like this – the racing, inarticulate need to have his mouth and hands on her. And somewhere in the back of her mind, the objective part, the part standing to one side and watching them in this darkened doorway – perhaps the part that Richard had made in her, of unemotional scrutiny – she heard the wife criticize the lover, the abandonment, the selfish carelessness of it all. Yet she still put her arms round his neck, this virtual stranger, and pressed her body to him.

At last, they stood back from each other. As guilty and dazed as greedy children, they began to smile.

'It's the end,' she murmured, meaning that it was the end of the Good Friday mourning, the end of the candles, flowers and torches, and the end of the crowds that had pressed hard down the narrow hill, and filled the balconies and rooftops, the steps of shops, public buildings and galleries, and pressed close to the doors of the convent. The crowds that had pressed all the way to the end of the town on its rocky outcrop, to the gates of the cemetery, where the wreaths and garlands multiplied; and the smell of the almond trees in bloom, ashy canopies in the shadows, was almost too sweet.

'It's the end,' she repeated, and tried to remember the look he had given her an hour ago.
'No,' he replied. 'It's not the end. It's the beginning.'

Sicily: Easter 2004

It was the warmest April that anyone could remember, so warm that the hills were green by the time the month began, and fruit was on the trees.

Some people in the hilltop town said that it was summer for Caviezel, so that he might enjoy the last weeks of his life as he had lived them.

But that was only the women: the men indulged no such fantasies. It was only Caviezel dying in that redshuttered place, with its overgrown garden, its fading, iron-fenced balcony, and the upper rooms where he lay with the windows open, the air rushing through, even the evening chill. By all accounts, he was still himself: foolish, talkative, barefoot and grinning, joking with the nurse from Syracusa. Still turning his face to the light as if he were thinking of writing about it – as if he had not written enough – listening to the cathedral bells and comparing them with the lesser voices of the other churches, talking about a woman, even on the day he died.

Caviezel had seen the priest in the last few hours of his life. There had been no raised voices – impossible, now, for Caviezel's voice to be heard above a whisper, he who had sung so often and who could dazzle any company with his talk. Caviezel, who had become thin and stooped, who had been so upright and dark, no longer fired with the electricity that had made his hands move, his voice run breathlessly. Caviezel had become a grey-haired ghost in his dawn forays, whispering his poems to himself, sitting on the Casina Bianca, looking at the fountain, or at the coffee-shop bar, eating the almond kisses, refusing the syrupy chocolate he had once enjoyed.

They buried him as he had wished, according to the instructions he had written for them: a plain coffin, the cheapest they could find, few prayers.

There was a shower of rain, unexpected, as the coffin came out of the cathedral. The mourners held back, for a moment, at the great copper doors and watched the clouds race over the rooftops. Caviezel had asked for something absurd, two white roses on top of the coffin, and as the bier halted, they fell to the ground. A murmur ran through the church, an intake of breath. A woman pressed her hand to her throat, and the words and breaths vanished, driven upward to the roof as the rainy breeze bore inwards. The roses fell down the steps, and the sparse congregation stared at this moment of Caviezel's, this line of his verse come to life: the falling of the flowers.

Afterwards, when she was clearing his rooms, his housekeeper Grazia found the book. It was held together with a plain rubber band. Once a fine leather, it had been rubbed pale red over the years. Grazia had held it on her hand, with the desk drawer wide in front of her. She was tempted to open it – very tempted.

She could see that there was more than just journal pages inside: the little book was stuffed with other papers, newsprint, from what she could guess, and thicker sheets, like the kind of cartridge paper he had used for drawing. She weighed it speculatively in her hand, and wondered if it was full of secrets, like the man himself. And she thought suddenly that she might open it and find the names of people she knew, women, on the pages, that it might be thrilling for a moment, and devastating for ever afterwards.

So, ten days after he had died, and two days after the flowers had fallen onto the cathedral steps, Grazia sat down, took a large brown envelope from the desk and put the journal inside, with all the receipts and bills and magazines that were in the couple of drawers she emptied. She sealed it and addressed it to the lawyer, as Caviezel had asked her.

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