

Christine Simon grew up in a very large and very *loud* Italian family, where it was considered a major milestone amongst her countless siblings and cousins to surpass their *nonna's* towering height of four foot, ten inches. She lives with her husband and four children, who are also extremely loud, and the crowning achievements of her life are learning to read knitting patterns and teaching her otherwise-unscrupulous miniature schnauzer to ring a bell when he wants to go out.



*The*  
PATRON  
SAINT  
  
SECOND  
OF  
CHANCES  
CHRISTINE SIMON

  
SPHERE

SPHERE

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To the founding members of  
the Read, Write, or Draw Club,  
Jack, Emily, Juliet, and Zoey

I love you



## Who Will Pray for the Pipes?

Signor Giovannino Speranza, self-appointed mayor of the diminishing village of Prometto, population 212, knew from his sixty-two years of experience in this world that, in dealing with plumbers, one must never show even a hint of weakness. A plumber was the circling vulture of home repair, smug in his knowledge that pipes were the very circulatory system of polite society, and that his poor dope of a client, whoever they might be, was undoubtedly in over their head, and therefore as putty in his unscrupulous hands. These scoundrels were also organised. They had got together, perhaps on a plumbers' getaway weekend, and decided that their services ought to cost a minimum of a hundred and fifteen euros an hour. If one still thought in

lire, as Signor Speranza did, that came to two hundred and twenty-two thousand, six hundred and seventy, a number which, if one could even fathom it, was patently criminal.

This knowledge of the depravity of plumbers, and all their known associates, was why, on this particular July morning, Signor Speranza was taking great care to maintain the upper hand. He was standing in the bathtub eating his breakfast, which, of course, was a power move, while a junior plumbing inspector from the Regional Water Commission prepared to cut a meticulous hole in the plaster under the bathroom sink.

‘Are you sure you would not be more comfortable at the table, *signore?*’ the young man had asked timidly, upon regarding the circumstances under which he would be expected to work.

‘I always eat breakfast in the bath,’ Signor Speranza lied, not breaking eye contact and producing a salt cellar from behind the bottle of Ultra Dolce di Garnier. *Go ahead*, he thought, twitching his black moustache from side to side. *Tell me that I don’t.*

The young man coughed, and dropped his gaze, and Signor Speranza gave a small snort of triumph.

The Speranzas’ hotel, a ten-room establishment with a coin-operated Jacuzzi and a rooftop terrace, where they lived and which they had inherited from Signor Speranza’s wife’s parents, was not the first place in the village the inspector had visited; indeed, it was the last.



He had already made the rounds, he and his little clipboard, to a random sampling of homes and businesses throughout the rocks and cliffs of Prometto. His visit had been a long time coming. In fact, Signor Speranza had been putting it off for two years now, through a co-ordinated system of avoidance. Whenever the Water Commission's number had shown up on the caller ID at Speranza and Son's, the vacuum cleaner maintenance and repair business Signor Speranza had inherited from his father, and whose premises doubled as his mayoral office, he would shout for his assistant, Smilzo. Smilzo would then race to plug in the Hoover WindTunnel 2 floor model and hold the nozzle up to the receiver.

'SORRY, I CAN'T HEAR YOU!' Signor Speranza would shout. 'BAD CONNECTION!'

This method of postponement had worked like a charm until some diligent civil servant had finally followed up in writing. The date had been set. The inspector was to come and examine the pipes. Any pipes discovered to be in disrepair were to be fixed at the expense of the municipality. For small municipalities that could not afford the cost of repairs and who did not qualify for a payment plan, the water would be cut off, and the Commission would assist with the resettlement of displaced individuals.

Signor Speranza had lingered over this last line, and in particular those two words, *displaced individuals*, with a queasy feeling in his stomach. Then he had

laid the letter aside, and in its place opened the large volume he kept on his desk for just such emergencies, titled *The Complete Compendium of Catholic Saints and Blessed or Beatified Persons*. He had opened to the Ps, running his finger down the appropriate column, and found what he was looking for – St Vincent Ferrer, patron saint of plumbing. He'd closed the book with a satisfied snap and begun immediately. *Ciao, Vincenzo*, he had prayed, clasping his hands – with the exception of the rosary, he liked to keep things casual. *It's Signor Speranza. I'm sorry to bother you, but could you take a look at Prometto's pipes? I know it's a pain in the ass, but there is no money here.*

Now, from his perch in the bath, Signor Speranza glared at the junior inspector. Just look at him, he thought, shovelling the last of the scrambled eggs into his mouth. The young man was crouched alongside the washbasin, carefully affixing a square of blue painter's tape to the area he meant to cut open. When he had finished, he leant back to examine his handiwork, and, finding it infinitesimally crooked, patiently peeled it off and began again.

'Why don't you just smash it?' Signor Speranza asked, when he couldn't stand it any longer.

The junior inspector was aghast. 'Oh, no, *signore*. You must never smash plaster. That makes it very difficult to repair.'

Signor Speranza rolled his eyes to the ceiling. The

entire village was facing the wrecking ball, dependent on the report of this giant toddler with his clip-on tie and his sensible four-cylinder car, but yes, by all means, let us be careful with the plaster.

Signor Speranza balanced his clean plate on the edge of the bath and fidgeted. He had not been in this particular bathroom for some time, as there had been no guests on this floor of the hotel for at least two years. He had chosen this spot for the junior inspector to work because it was out of the way, but, as he looked around, he frowned. A memory stirred. A leak? Had there been a leak? And if there had been, how had they fixed it? He studied the checked linoleum, which was unique to the third floor, and got a sudden flash of it, swollen around the base of the sink: an enormous, water-filled bubble. His hands went clammy.

‘You know,’ he said, clearing his throat, ‘I wonder if you might prefer to see the pipes in the kitchen? It’s cooler there.’

The junior inspector looked up, surprised. ‘I have already taped, *signore*.’

‘Yes,’ sighed Signor Speranza. ‘I’ve seen you do that.’ They both gazed bleakly at the blue-taped square.

‘Well ...’ said the junior inspector into the awkward silence. He bent over his bag, and at that precise moment Signor Speranza glimpsed, gleaming round his adversary’s neck, a silver medallion imprinted

with none other than the pallid image of St Vincent Ferrer himself!

‘*Signore*,’ whispered Signor Speranza, his voice trembling with emotion. ‘You’re a friend of St Vincent?’

The junior inspector glanced down at his medal and smiled.

Feeling that it was now safe to let his guard down, Signor Speranza dropped to a sitting position, propping his elbows on the rim of the bath. ‘I’m very impressed,’ he enthused. ‘You do not often find this kind of devoutness now, in young people.’

The junior inspector nodded, and pulled on a pair of goggles. ‘It’s very important, *signore*. My father says people do not take care of things the way they used to. Someone has to pray for the pipes.’ Then he switched on the saw and began to cut into the plaster.

The junior inspector’s words, along with the buzzing of the saw, seemed to bounce and ricochet off the porcelain sides of the bathtub and ring in Signor Speranza’s ears. *Someone has to pray for the pipes?* He was reminded of a similar argument he had made to the village priest, Don Rocco, regarding vacuum cleaners. *How has the Vatican not considered the need for their protection, Father?* he had asked fretfully after yet another customer had failed to show up for their yearly service appointment, and a search of the otherwise ‘complete’ *Compendium* had yielded nothing.

Signor Speranza gasped and put his hand to his

mouth. He understood everything now. This upstart clerk was not praying that the nation's pipes might outlast their prescribed usefulness, as he himself had been doing. No! This dastardly pup had been praying instead for their deliverance!

At this instant of terrible reckoning, two things happened. The junior inspector, switching off the saw and pushing back his goggles, gently eased the freshly cut block of plaster from its place in the wall, sending a chalky shower of white dust on to the linoleum, and Signor Speranza, his black moustache trembling, recalled the means by which he had repaired the wash-basin. It came to him as a kind of vision – Smilzo, in shirtsleeves, perched on the edge of the bath, chewing pack after pack of pink bubblegum.

It was the junior inspector's turn to gasp, as he shone his flashlight into the hole.

'*Signore!*' he cried. 'What is this?'

Resuming his earlier sangfroid, which at this point was the only thing he had left, Signor Speranza glanced into the hole, crossed his arms, and sniffed.

'I think it's Hubba Bubba.'