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Appetite

Written by Philip Kazan

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APPETITE



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I

Night is falling very gently, shaking the light from the dusty air. After the clamour of the day, the city is settling its affairs, settling down, grudging, grumbling, a caged lion submitting to its pallet of musky straw. Behind, in the house, footsteps tell me someone is doing this or that. Whatever it is, there's nothing urgent. In the eaves of the loggia a fat brown gecko has woken up too early and is fussing among the beams. The cathedral dome is turning from red to orange, hanging over our rooftops like our own setting sun. The whole city is lion-coloured, and out beyond Careggi the mountains are already fading.

There is a bowl of peaches on the balustrade, ripe enough to have lured a single hopeful wasp. I'm trying to remember something, but remembering can be so hard in a place like this, where every stone has some meaning or other. Florence is always remembering itself, and at the same time creating new things to remember. Confusing . . . Perhaps that's why we have the dome, sitting on us like a giant's paperweight: to keep all the memories in order. Anyway, I have enough to keep in my head. Menus, orders, a man coming up from Pisa with shrimps and cuttlefish. I ferret idly through my thoughts, but it's all distracting. Even the air is complicated. The smells of cooking are weaving through other scents: pine trees, rotten fruit, rubbish piled up behind the houses. So I let myself surrender to Florence, like I always do. I do not have a choice – I've never had a choice. I am up here on my balcony looking down, but I am not separate. I'm just another ingredient.

The peaches are beautiful. They are blushing to the same shades as the dome: the red of the tiles, the gold that's winking off the orb on top of the lantern. A friend of mine helped put that up there. I don't know where he is these days. The world seems to have got bigger lately. But that's the world beyond the

walls. Something about the light, the way the city appears cupped by the mountains, makes Florence seem like the centre of everything – it thinks it is, of course. But I don't care about that. I just want to remember something. So I reach out for the ripest peach, pick up the soft ball, feel the nap of its skin. It smells a little like the bowl, and a little of camphor, the way very ripe peaches sometimes do. I don't really like the feel of peach skin against my tongue so I just bite, and let the gobbet of melting fruit burst inside my mouth.

The flavours settle across my tongue in shapes and colours. Sweetness pools, smug and tarry, like pitch seeping from a sun-warmed beam. Quicksilver balls of sourness skitter for a moment, then freeze into shards and fall like icicles brushed from a window sill. Tiny pricks of vinegar mark out the footprints of the wasp. I let it all dissolve into golden light.

A hand settles on my shoulder. I lean my cheek against it, hold up the peach. An everyday gift. It is accepted. I close my eyes, feel the dying sunlight brush against the lids. The city breathes, and its breath is fifty thousand voices, fifty thousand souls waxing and waning, rising and falling. This evening it is hardly a whisper, but I have heard it roar. Many times: when so many beautiful things were burned; when they burned the priest who hated beauty. When our rulers fled; when the French marched in. When the great bell of the Signoria tolled for a boy who was butchered under the great dome, and the dead were dug up and dragged through the streets. When dead men hung like black pears from the palace walls, and the wasps went mad from gorging on spoiled meat. These things have happened: I saw it all. And still the peaches taste of amber, and of drowsy wasps. So much is lost, but should we miss it? The dome still holds us all in place. The fires are lit and food begins to fry, to boil. Smoke rises up in threads like the warps of a loom. I breathe it all in, all this perfume, all this life. My life, threaded across this great loom.

The hand at my shoulder is gone. Then it returns, brushes my cheek. I turn and catch a finger between my lips. The taste of peach is there, and something else. Another thread of the loom, the thing that takes the complication out of the air, that makes

sense of our great beast, our city; of our lives. I've found it, hidden in plain sight. Because it was never lost. It was there all along.

So. Now I remember. Now I can tell you.

2

Florence, 1466

My mother died the day before I turned fourteen. I watched her take her last breath, which was a long, shuddering gasp. It didn't make much difference, really. The figure lying in Mamma's bed – a waxy creature with the translucent skin of a slaughtered hog after it has been bled empty – had stopped being my mother days and days ago. The room smelled of sweat, of lavender and sage and chamber pots: and when the priest gave me a little shove in the direction of the corpse, and I knelt at the bedside, took her already cold fingers, raised them reluctantly to my lips, her skin smelled of the same things. I rested my lips against the veins ridging the back of her hand and did what I had always done: flicked my tongue against her skin and tasted it.

Some people call a talent like mine a gift, and some call it a curse. It is both. I doubt that most people would like to know what death tastes like – we might not like to share the dinner table with those who do. But I, not quite fourteen, discovered it for myself. You will perhaps be disappointed when I tell you that death has no taste. I'm talking about death itself, the moment that removes us. Dead things have flavour. We like some of them, or we would not hang our meat. Really, we wouldn't eat at all, or perhaps only oysters. But death itself is flavourless. It is a void on the tongue. My mother's skin had the saltiness of sweat and the rankness of the consumption that had killed her. I didn't expect to find those tastes I loved: garlic and onions, water from the well in our courtyard, sometimes ink, always the flower water she bought from the apothecary near the Palazzo della Signoria. I was expecting sickness and soap, and there they were, but the tastes were hollow. I staggered to my feet and ran upstairs, stuffed myself into a corner of the loggia and rocked on my heels, dumbly, trying to shut it all out. It was not that

Mamma was dead. I had been expecting that, and people died, didn't they? They died all the time. It was that I had just realized she had had her very own flavour, and I had discovered it only by its absence. It had gone with her, and I would never quite know what it had been.

She had wanted her brother to be at her bedside, but Filippo wasn't there. He hadn't lived in Florence for years, although the whole city knew what he'd been up to in Prato: how he had made a nun pregnant, run off with her, and then managed to persuade the Pope, no less, to let them marry. He was always a charmer, my uncle Filippo Lippi, but in Florence they still remembered how he'd been caught embezzling, tried to blame someone else, and been racked for it until his guts had popped out – only a few guts, mind, because he'd been sewed up again and sent off to do more mischief. They all remembered that. The fact that he was the greatest painter of our age was less appreciated, though his glorious work was everywhere. Which just proved that flapping tongues are mightier than keen eyes.

But Filippo would have been there if he'd known. If my father had bothered to tell him that Mamma was dying, he would have ridden the shoes off his horse to get to her bedside. He was only her adopted brother – a cousin, from the Lappacchia side of the family – but they had loved each other as if they'd slipped out of the same womb. He couldn't have saved her. I think it would have made it easier for me, though, if I could have seen his stubby, tonsured form at her side. And he would have drawn her, alive and dead. It seemed to me, in the days that followed, as my mother's corpse lay amongst candles, and then was slipped, without much fuss, beneath its plain marble slab in San Remigio, that if I could have seen it all through Filippo's eyes, through the lines he made with charcoal on paper, trying to capture what it was his eyes saw – really *saw* – it would have made more sense. Filippo might have showed me something I had missed. Because I understood, even then, that Filippo's eyes did something to him, in the same way that my tongue, my palate, did something to me. A real artist has hungry eyes. Filippo, with his appetite for everything, certainly did. He saw things other people missed. I tasted them.

⋆

I was still slumped against the wall of the loggia. My father was calling me; pigeons were scraping around on the beams above me; and footsteps were clattering, down in the street. I wanted to scream at them all to shut up, to give me peace, but this was Florence where there is never peace. I got to my feet, slowly, painfully, as if Mamma was dying all over again in every unwilling muscle. Papá called again. I looked out over the balustrade, half hoping to see a friend there: Arrigo, Tessina, the Lenzi boys. But I saw only heads, balding or greasy or capped, and no faces turned up to where I stood. So I pulled myself together and went back downstairs to kneel by Mamma's bed. The priest and the surgeon were muttering to each other, gossiping about a magistrate. Papá went out to arrange the funeral. Then the others left, and I was alone. Mamma's mouth was open, her lips almost white. I tried not to look at her, but I could not bear the dark oval of her mouth, and so I tried to shut it. The looseness of her jaw terrified me, and as I bunched up the damp sheets to prop it closed I winced with the horror of what I was doing, the horror of what life had brought me to. Mamma was gone, but her corpse was still here, an empty thing. Something with a mouth that could not breathe, or speak, or taste. Empty: a crypt. I finally got it closed, and buried my face in my hands. Mamma's absence settled and clung to me like a wet sheet until all I could feel was the pulse of my own heart.

But as I shivered, my forehead pressed into Mamma's hand, a slight breeze rustled the curtains. I remembered the priest opening the window after it was over, and now the air brought me the most ordinary scent. Someone was making a *battuta*: frying an onion, parsley, beet leaves. The sugar of the onions, the metallic edge of the beet, the smoky, barnyard sweetness of the lard plucked at my misery: *This is life*, they said. *This is what we do every day: give ourselves up for your food, for the sake of your Florentine bellies*. And all of a sudden I felt the city all around me like a vast, dirty flower, and there I was at its centre like one of the lugubrious black bees that lumber through our gardens in summer. There was the house, the walls that held us. We were the Latinis, and we lived here, on Borgo Santa Croce. Around

the house, the neighbourhood curled, our *gonfalone* of the Black Lion, where people were frying *battuta* as if nothing had happened, and where they would go on frying it if the whole world was coming to an end. Further out, the quarter of Santa Croce with its great basilica, whose bells would be tolling soon, as soon as Papá paid the priests. And all around me, Florence itself, a cobweb of clattering streets, countless alleys, towers, workshops, tanneries, cloisters, churches and burial grounds, where the sky is a thin strip of blue above, and the earth is a dirty ribbon of cobbles, a great belly of brick-lined guts held in by the walls of the city, with its towers and gates. Out there, thinking of their dinner, sixty thousand citizens: paupers, tarts, guild members, monks, nuns, painters, apothecaries, bankers, cripples; their stomachs all rumbling now that the *battuta* was cooking. I wasn't alone at all. No one is alone in Florence, not even the dead. Mamma would go to dust and vanish into soil that was black with the dust of other Florentines from other times. And still the onions would be chopped, and the beet greens, and the parsley. The sizzling fat would heat patiently in pans that no one would ever count. And people would eat.

3

My birthday came and went. I spent it working for my father in his shop on the Ponte Vecchio. Papá was a butcher – the Latinis had been butchers for a hundred years or more, building up the business slowly and cannily. Papá was no different. He was as patient as the beasts whose flesh he cut up and sold. He had been in the shop the day before his wife died, and he was there the next day. I hated him for it, back then, because it would never have occurred to me that Papá might have feelings the way I had them. But when he asked me to help him with some sheep that needed preparing I said yes – not that I ever had a choice in those things, though perhaps it had been my birthday present, this pretence of free will – and found the hard, meticulous work to be a great gift after all. We stood side by side, sharing a whetstone for our knives, both knowing what to do, because I had already received the teachings he had received from his own father, and I was just the latest link in a chain that stretched back to the Latinis' past as slaughterers in the slaughterhouses of San Frediano, and before that, as farmers in the Mugello. There was comfort in that, or at least the absence of pain. I had been getting used to absence, that summer, but this pain was something new. It was as if Mamma had been my skin, and her death had left me flayed and raw.

It was difficult to look for comfort in Papá. Mamma had been soft and quiet, as neat as a turtle dove, and Papá was a big, untidy buzzard. Everything about him was solid and practical. His shaved head sat, squat and clenched like a pair of fists, on a neck as thick and corded as a Chianina bull's. His nose, a ridged beak, had been broken into a muscular sickle that curved down towards lips that were forever gathered into a belligerent pout. Below, the hard prow of his chin jutted like the spur of a galley. That year, he could still put one hand under my armpit and lift me high above his head – I was a big lad, but smaller than a side

of Chianina steer. He was always caught up in his work, always happier when he was somewhere other than our house. The house, and Mamma. How could I have known they'd loved each other?

I am ashamed, now, to remember how surprised I was that Mamma's death had upset him so much. I was the one who had loved her, because I had understood her. She had been quiet, where Papá was loud. She had read books and could talk about painting and music, and had grumbled about her husband all the time: he messed up her kitchen, his clothes smelled of the slaughterhouse, he spent too much time at the palace of the Butchers' Guild. She read Boccaccio while Papá crashed about, bellowing about the price of steers from the Val di Chiana. She had been close to her brother Filippo, who my father cordially disliked. So why did he miss her so much? He'd barely seemed to notice her when she'd been alive. She'd been a sort of neglected possession – even her epitaph said as much:

ISABETTA DI NICCOLAIO LATINI

Niccolaio Latini's Isabetta. And now he hadn't spoken to anybody for days, and was more or less living in his shop.

I am laying out cuts of meat with my father. We have made stacks of chops, shanks, glistening frogspawn piles of kidneys, silken heaps of liver. Now I'm struggling to hang up dressed sides of mutton in the front of the shop. I'm not quite tall enough to reach the iron hooks that dangle there, though I will be, next year. I can't remember if I leaned against Papá then, after we'd done what needed doing, just rested against him for a moment. I'd like to think that I did. I would like to think he pulled me to him, so that we stood, father and son in bloodstained whites, for all the passers-by on the bridge to see. Perhaps he did. I hope he did.

The last carcass was hung when I saw, framed between gently swaying meat, the tidy black-clad shape of my friend Arrigo Corbinelli. He held up a hand, shyly, grinning an uncomfortable little grin. Papá saw him too. He patted me on the shoulder.

'You can go with Arrigo,' he said. 'We've got a lot done here.'

'Are you sure?' I asked, dubiously. I felt safe in the shop with Papá. It was as if, out there in the streets, all the horrors that had come with Mamma's death would find me and pick me to pieces. 'Aren't we going to cut steaks next?'

'I've got to give him something to do,' muttered Papá, jerking his chin at Giovanni, his assistant, who was lurking rather blankly in the back of the shop.

'But, Papá . . .'

'I can't make you work here all day,' he said. 'And besides . . .' He put down the knife with which he had been trimming flaps of skin away from the carcasses. 'Do you want to go back to the *palazzo*?'

I bit my lip, feeling the horrifying sadness coming up in me again. Mamma was laid out in the main room, candles at her head and feet, lilies all around her. The whole house stank of cloying lilies and guttering candles, but not of my mother, who seemed to have vanished as though she'd never existed at all. I'd looked in every room, but there was nothing. Her clothes might have belonged to someone else. Everything needed dusting and sweeping, though Mamma would never have left the dirt from the mourners' boots lie unswept. And yet there was this thing, this effigy, lying on a table in our grand room . . .

'I'll go with Arrigo,' I said. 'But I'll meet you back here, yes? At sunset?' Papá nodded. I went into the back and changed into my ordinary clothes. Arrigo was still standing in front of the shop, scuffing the toes of his shoes against the flagstones. When I came out into the noise and light of the bridge he took a step back, as if the death of mothers was something you could catch, but I understood. We were at the age when our bodies seemed too awkward for our brains. Children hugged, grown-ups hugged, but not fourteen-year-old boys. I folded my arms, just as awkwardly.

'Sorry, Nino,' he muttered. 'About your mother. My parents say . . .' He kicked at the stones again. 'Look, do you want to play dice? There's a game going on behind the church.'

'All right,' I said. I glanced back at my father, who was standing with his back to me, broad shoulders soft and sagging. He'd picked up the knife again, and a whetstone, but just seemed

to be staring at them. I wanted to run inside and stand there with him, but somehow I knew I couldn't. So I turned and took Arrigo's arm, and we set off through the shoppers, heading north.

'So what did your parents say?' I asked him, when we were away from the main street.

'Just that your mamma's with God,' he said.

'I know she is.'

'That's what I told them.'

Years ago, I'd often wondered why I was friends with Arrigo. I mean, I'd known *why* we were friends: because our fathers were confraternity brothers. Messer Simone Corbinelli was a middling-well-to-do lawyer who lived in Corso dei Tintori, and he and Papá dressed up once a year and carried a wooden saint around the streets of the Black Lion. Arrigo was skinny, tall for his age, and big-nosed. When we were small he always seemed to have a cold sore in the winter, and in summer the grass seed made him sneeze. Some of us called him 'Priest', because his mamma dressed him in black and cut his hair with a pudding bowl. He was bookish as well – not surprising, for the son of a lawyer. He had an older brother who was studying law at Bologna, and that was what his father had planned for Arrigo as well. I had been five or so when we had first clapped eyes on each other, suspiciously, in the basilica. Our parents had shoved us together and expected us to get along.

To the surprise of us both, we did. It turned out that we shared a love for the streets, for *calcio* – our Florentine game of a ball, thirty men and much blood, played by young nobles on feast days in our great piazzas and imitated by lesser mortals in the back streets and on the wastelands inside the city walls left over from the Black Plague – and for wars and intrigues. Arrigo was a reader, and Mamma had taught me to read as well, though I was never as diligent as my friend. And he believed, quietly but with huge conviction, in Our Lord. *Who doesn't?* you ask. Exactly so – but perhaps I should say instead that Arrigo saw the world as I think the saints must see it, whereas I have always approached God as the layman that I am. He wasn't a preacher, though, and

he wasn't pious – you can't be pious and play *calcio*, and Arrigo was the best *calcio* player in the Black Lion.

'Who's at the church?' I asked.

'The Buonaccorsis, and the signorina.' The signorina meant Tessina Albizzi. 'Actually . . . It was the signorina who told me to get you, not my parents. *They* just sent me to pay my respects to your mamma.'

'Did you?'

'Yes.' He paused, and lowered his head. I wished he hadn't seen her; I didn't want anybody else to see the thing that everyone was telling me was still my mamma. 'I'm so sad for you, Nino. I really liked your mother.' He closed his eyes. 'You know, "it is in dying that we are born to eternal life" – Saint Francis said that.'

'But . . . Arrigo, she's just dead!' I burst out. 'How can she be so dead here, and alive somewhere else? I don't understand . . .' Oh, Christ. I couldn't cry, not in front of someone else. So I turned and kicked out, savagely, at a large pot at the side of the street that held a half-dead sage plant. It exploded in a burst of shards and dusty soil. Arrigo paid no attention.

'You have to have faith that it's so,' he said carefully. 'You have to believe.'

'Just like that? So easy?' I said bitterly.

'It's not meant to be *easy*. What's easy is me talking about your ma being dead, and how you should believe she's in heaven. But only you can do the believing. Saint Francis was really talking about letting your doubts die, so that you can be reborn on earth. That's what I think, anyway. You have to let your doubts die.'

'Have you done it, then?' I snapped.

Arrigo gave a little snort and shrugged his shoulders. 'Course not,' he said. Then he twisted his mouth into a half grin, as he did when he was trying to show he understood you. 'Come on, then! Someone's going to be angry about their pot.'

We found our friends in a passageway behind San Pier Scheraggio. Tessina Albizzi was playing dice with the Buonaccorsi twins, Mario and Marino. Tessina liked to gamble, though she was bad at it. But it didn't matter, because it wasn't her money. Recently she'd found a stash of almost worthless old

coins that she thought her uncle had hidden and forgotten about, and she'd go down behind the church and throw dice against the wall, swearing like a mercenary when she lost. Tessina's mother was dead, and her father as well. She lived with her aunt and uncle, who were horribly respectable, and if they'd ever paid her any attention they would have beaten her for the company she liked to keep.

I knew Tessina had heard about Mamma yesterday because the whole neighbourhood had known: *Niccolaio Latini's wife won't last out the week.* And Mamma hadn't, obliging and delighting the amateur prophets of the Black Lion. Tessina didn't say anything when I squatted down beside her. She took my hand and dropped the dice into the palm. Then she lobbed a clunky old coin onto the small pile that lay in front of Mario's bare feet. Mario was always the banker. Though he and Marino were dyers' children and had probably never touched a book or an abacus, Mario could do anything with numbers. Tessina nodded gravely, and I gave the dice a shake and tossed them at the pitted bricks of the church.

I lost, of course. But Tessina dropped her coins on the pile, one by one, and I threw the dice, and lost, until Tessina's purse was empty. Then we stood up.

'You've ruined me,' she said to the twins, and bowed. 'Coming, Arrigo?'

'I have to get home,' he said, dusting off his black tunic.

'Cowards, the lot of you,' said Marino, gathering up the dirty coins. He stood, and dusted off his knees. 'Sorry about your mother, Nino.'

'Very sorry,' said Mario, and the twins crossed themselves solemnly, in perfect unison.

Tessina took my hand and we wandered off down to the river. I don't remember what we said, or if we said anything at all. It was enough just to sit and watch the water, and listen to the noise of the crowds on the bridge. A man was catching eels, and another man was hawking grilled ones. Tessina bought a skewer of them with one of the proper coins hidden in her dress, and made me eat. They were good: the firm meat, rich with fat and faintly muddy, was hidden inside a crust of salt, cinnamon

and breadcrumbs. It was the first thing I'd eaten since Mamma had gone, and Tessina fed me, breaking the fish apart and holding it out so that I had to take it from the palm of her hand. Beneath the salty fish and cinnamon, I could taste Tessina, and the coins she'd held, and the dirt of the alley. When the eel was finished, she licked her palm, threw the skewer into the Arno, and led me back to the shop, and my father.