

ITALIAN LESSONS

1

A grasshopper appears out of the bent dry grass. It lands on a rock near her bare foot and starts to chirrup incessantly. But Anna doesn't notice the grasshopper anymore than she notices the way I cannot keep my eyes off the brown roundness of her shoulder. So close to mine I can feel its warmth. The lake at our feet stretches away grey and motionless, empty apart from a fisherman in his old boat. Every now and again he pulls in an empty line with a sigh that reaches us across the water. The distant low hills are hazy in the heat. It is just after lunch. Other people will be sitting in the cool of their houses with the shades drawn. It was I who insisted we come down to the lake. I can't get enough sun. Just three months ago I was walking back to my bed-sit in the rain after finally signing off the dole.

Inhaling deeply, I take a drag of the last cigarette we have left between us and hand it to her. She accepts it without taking her eyes from the book leaning on her knees. We have smoked a whole packet in under an hour to ward away the mosquitoes. With the cigarette burning fast between her fingers, she points to the page in front of her.

'*Dai, Yan. Try to concentrate!*' (Anna, like all the Italians calls me 'Yan' instead of 'Ian'.)

She squints sideways at me with a half smile and taps her foot on the rock. The grasshopper leaps back into the grass.

'*Allora: Parlo, parli, parla. Please to repeat!*'

I can feel my eyelids start to close. I shake my head.

'Pahloh, pahli, pahler.' I say.

'No, no, no. Make attention!' She turns to me with a mock-severe expression wagging her finger. Her bare shoulder for a moment grazes mine. 'I told you that you like too much to drink red wine. You must to say your 'r's. Like this...'. She opens her mouth wide and makes a long 'rrrrrrr', pointing to her tongue curled against her top teeth.

I try to copy the position of her tongue, but the sound that emerges is only a kind of hiss.

'Come on. You must to try again.'

Sitting next to Anna, without touching yet feeling her warmth, trying to repeat words after her, reminds me of learning to read with my mother when I was six. We had just moved from York to Birmingham. When I went to the new school, I found I was the only one who couldn't read. But once I started, I had the feeling of a whole new world being opened. And here next to Anna, learning the very basics of Italian, I am filled with that same sense of endless possibility.

2

The glow from the street lamp is cut by shutters into thin strips across the wall and tiled floor. Although we have both showered, there is still the weedy smell of the lake on our skins. She is almost naked in my arms, snoring gently against my shoulder. We are lying under a single sheet, the dark curls of her hair spread across her temple and cheek. She has her thumb in her mouth like a baby. I have never seen a woman sleep with her thumb in her mouth. It's still so hot she has left the windows open. It must be nearly one in the morning, but I can hear loud voices, punctuated by laughter, from the bar next to the small station on the other side of the piazza.

3

A line of sweaty faces in a horseshoe shape against white walls. The man with the heavy moustache frowns deeply when I fire a question at him from behind my white lectern. His shirt is stained with wet under the arms.

'Do you generally wake up early?' I ask. And then again without a pause: 'Do you generally wake up early?'

Since he hesitates, I start the answer for him: 'No, I don't –'

'No, I don't –' he repeats, but the 'o' in 'No' and 'don't' is short like the 'o' in 'God'. He crinkles his forehead and loosens his collar still further.

'Not "dont" – *dohnt!*' I say.

At this, all the faces break into a grin. There is momentary relief from the pressure I am putting them under. The Italians think that the English 'o' is hilarious. It's a sign of

stupidity with a strong whiff of effeminacy. Laurel and Hardy dubbed into Italian speak with British accents and exaggerated *oh's*.

I grin too, to keep them on my side.

‘No, I don’t –’ I start.

He repeats the answer with me, word for word, wiping his forehead with an already soaked tissue: ‘No, I don’t – generally – wake up – early – but – I – generally – wake up – late.’

I look down the page of my book. I shoot out the next question and repeat it as fast as I can:

‘What *time* do you generally wake up? What *time* do you generally wake up?’

I point my pen at a plump lady who is wearing a blouse and skirt which are too tight for her. She jerks back in her seat.

The idea behind the ‘Erlebnis Method’, which claims to teach English ‘five times faster than any other method’, is that the ‘pupil’ must not be given the chance to translate, but must learn to ‘think and speak directly in English’. The teacher has to fire off questions twice at top speed from the Erlebnis book and only at the end of the question point his pen at a pupil to ensure no one’s attention wanders for even the briefest moment. If the pupil knows the answer, then the teacher repeats it after her word by word. If the pupil doesn’t know the answer, then she has to repeat it after the teacher. When I first ‘observed’ a lesson in the Erlebnis school in Bournemouth as part of my ‘training’, I was amazed that the ‘pupils’ answered so well. I didn’t realise that they had heard the same questions many times before – the Erlebnis method is based on endless repetition.

The plump woman is blushing, waiting for me to begin the answer for her. It’s so hot I’m almost afraid the red dye in her limp hair will start to run. There’s a smell now of farts as well as sweat. But if I open the bay window, the roar of traffic by the river will fill the room.

‘I generally –’

‘I generally –’

‘– wake up –’

‘– wake up –’

‘ – at – ’

‘ – at . . . ’

I wait, the class waits, to find out what time she gets up. Her plastic chair cracks as she shifts her weight from one buttock to the other.

‘ At seven o’clock?’ I suggest.

‘ At seven o’clock?’ she repeats, with the same rising intonation, her face crumpled with doubt.

‘ Okay! Good!’

Constantly praise the pupil for effort, exhorts the Erlebnis Teacher’s Manual. And that is what I am doing.

I look at the timer on my lectern. Dictation time. Thank God for that.

While they all dutifully write ‘ Most people in Italy live in flats, but most people in England live in houses . . . ’ I look out of the bay window. Cars crawl like ants on the road which runs by the river Dora. Not far from the main bridge over the river is a smaller bridge, *Il Ponte Vecchio*, which dates back to Roman times and which Hannibal with his elephants reputedly crossed when he invaded Italy. Perched on the rock behind the bridge is an old, rose-coloured house, so tiny it looks like a doll’s house in a fairy tale. I often stop on the bridge and try to get a glimpse behind the net curtains, wondering who lives there. Once or twice I think I see an old woman’s face, but I’m not sure.

Nearby I can see the *Albergo Falcone*, where I spent my first few nights in Italy. The cold tiles against my bare feet when I got out of bed in the dark morning were proof that I really was in Italy.

Tiles like the ones in Anna’s flat where I woke up this morning.

In just a few minutes I will be teaching her, will have to pretend that nothing has happened. When I look into her eyes, I will have to forget how green they were this morning when she first opened them and looked into mine.

4

The staffroom is a converted storeroom. It’s so narrow, it’s only just possible for two people to squeeze past each other. Between lessons all seven teachers have to go in there to get course cards and books for the next lesson. On each course card is written the name

of the class, named after a British town. Rows of numbers show the page in the *Erlebnis* book reached in the last lesson, with a recommended page for going back to in the next, since 'the method' is based on endless repetition.

In the melee, there are frequent jokes about the Italian students. It's just a way of letting off steam, but it smacks of chauvinism.

'I asked one of 'em that question "How often do you have a shower?" and he said "once a week", the filthy blighter!'

There's a chorus of laughter.

Robert, the 'vice-director' of the school, shakes his head in sympathy: 'The class I just had was on Book Two. Jesus, they're barely literate! I'm gonna have to take the bleeders *right* back to the beginning of Book *One*.'

I'm usually as bad as the rest of them, but this is too much.

'Robert,' I say, 'I'm sure they're quite literate in their own language, and however bad their English may be, it's certainly better than our Italian!'

He makes a quacking sound in reply. I wonder for a moment if this is some reference to my frequent trips to the lake. However it's time for my next lesson.

Anna isn't there when I walk into the classroom. I'm both relieved and disappointed.

5

Although this is not the first time, I cannot quite believe that Sal is lighting up a marijuana joint in a pizzeria. True, we are sitting in an alcove, hidden from view and it's almost closing time, but the smell is bound to reach the few remaining customers as they drink up a last *grappa* on the house.

Sal grins mischievously as he hands over the joint to Martin. He doesn't speak a word of English and is the one person we can practise our Italian with for any length of time. There is quite a rivalry between Martin and me as to who is learning Italian quicker. He has an advantage in that he has an 'A' level in French; on the other hand, I am more prepared to throw myself into the language, not caring too much about all the absurd mistakes I make.

'*E allora – ti piace questa musica?*' asks Sal. So, do you like this music?

The sound of Bob Dylan's Street Legal comes fuzzily through an ancient loudspeaker tied with a wire to a hook just below the smoke-stained ceiling. Sal is a Dylan fan, even though he depends entirely on Italian translations to understand the lyrics. His shining brown eyes look at me with eager expectation. I have a slightly privileged status among the English with him because I am the only one who likes Dylan. I'm not crazy about this particular LP, but I don't want to disappoint him.

'Molto bella questa musica,' I say.

'Bel – la,' he corrects me, emphasising the double consonant. His Mexican-style moustache stretches across his face as does so.

Sal is *Sardo*, from Sardinia. On the whole, it seems easier to make friends with people who are from the south of Italy and who seem to be looked down upon, treated as foreigners, by many northerners. Like us, Sal has only been in Alba for a few months, working as a waiter here. The Pizzeria Paradiso is run by Fulvia, a plump 40-year old with wide hips and large breasts, and her husband, Sergio, whose sweptback unruly hair and long moustache make me think of photos of Nietzsche in his final years. Fulvia and Sergio seem to spoil Sal rotten. He does what he wants, spends as much time talking to the customers, making them laugh, as he does bringing pizzas or carafes of local red wine. My friend, Martin, has pointed out that other customers, just like us, will come and spend money here because of Sal. But letting him smoke dope with customers? What if one of the *carabinieri* – a branch of the local police – were to drop in?

Martin takes a deep drag of the joint and passes it to me. He pushes back his thin corn-coloured hair and frowns. This is usually the cue for a definitive statement of some kind.

'The Italians are much saner than us when it comes to drinks and drugs,' he says.

He starts talking about the party we went to at the weekend, where the Italians sat in one room 'getting mellow' on red wine and marijuana while the English drank beer in the other and ended up having a fight.

'You and I were the only Englishmen to be in the right room,' he says with a smile of complicity which confirms our superiority among the ex-pat community.

'Ma che cosa dite?' What are you saying? Sal doesn't like it when we speak English like this in front of him. He regards it as bad manners, typical of the British.

Martin raises his palms in a mock apology and belches lightly.

‘*Scusa!*’ he says.

‘*E va bene!*’ Sal gives Martin a slap across his upraised palms, first one and then the other.

The conversation turns to the relative merits of British and Italian girls. Sal thinks English girls are ‘*simpatiche, ma non belle*’ – nice, but not beautiful. The Italian girls are beautiful, but they can be cold and calculating. He tells me once again I am wasting my time with Anna, I will never get anywhere. She is just using me to keep her company until her *fidanzato* – her beloved – comes to join her from Naples. Our talk takes a downward turn – with Sal teaching us the verb *chiavare*, meaning to turn a key or, more properly, ‘to screw’ – until Fulvia pops her head around the alcove and tells us it’s time to close. Wine, olive oil and coffee stains merge interchangeably on her apron, criss-crossed with flour from the pizza dough. Her pale blue eyes always look even paler at this hour. She half-closes them wearily and points to the crushed joint stub in the ashtray, says something to Sal about *mettere le cose in ordine*, putting things in order, which I take to have a double meaning. As she turns away, I find myself staring at the way her apron strings dig into her hips. I imagine putting my hands on those hips.

Martin and I start to say goodnight to Sal. Maybe we’ll go for a quick beer at the *Ponte Vecchio*, the pub by the old bridge. But Sal has other ideas.

‘*Prendiamo la macchina. Andiamo da qualche parte.*’ Let’s take a car, go some place.

‘*Ma tu non hai la macchina!*’ Martin says. But you don’t have a car.

‘*No – ma ho queste!*’ No, but I have these. Sal dangles the keys to Sergio’s land rover in front of us. The land rover is a sign of prestige – it shows that Sergio and his family have a house out in the country.

I hesitate. I don’t know how to drive. The beatific smiles on the faces of Sal and Martin show just how stoned they are. But the idea of an adventure is too hard to resist.

6

With Sal at the wheel, Martin in the front, me in the back, the land rover bumps down the cobbles of the main street. One or two people coming out of bars stare at us as we pass. This is a small town, and people know that the land rover always parked outside the

pizzeria in the evening belongs to Sergio. But Sal seems unconcerned. He nods his head and smiles. He drives slowly, not because he wants to be careful, but because he wants people to see him driving this big car.

‘*Andiamo al lago.*’ Let’s go to the lake. There’s a bar there Sal knows. It’s just a few miles outside town.

We are outside the Standa supermarket, away now from the cafés and bars. This area is normally packed during the day, but there’s no one around at this time. Although we’re still going slowly, the car’s starting to swerve from side to side. I think about jumping out while there’s still time. But I’m not given the opportunity to think about it further.

‘*Cazzo!*’ Sal says and slams down on the brakes. A police car, which seems to have come from nowhere, has cut in front of us and stopped. *Cazzo* means ‘cock’ or ‘prick’, but is used as an expression of extreme frustration, something like ‘Bollocks!’ or ‘Fuck!’ in English.

A plump, unshaven man – almost a kind of parody of a southern Italian cop – gets out of his car. He walks calmly to where we sit, tilts his head to one side to get a good look at us properly, then makes a quick gesture for us to get out. I have seen him before somewhere. Yes, I have seen him out of uniform on other evenings eating with another man in the pizzeria we have just come from, joking with Sergio and Fulvia. He rests one hand on the gun in his belt, more it seems because his hand’s comfortable that way than because he feels in any way threatened by us.

‘*Tu sei Sal, vero? Lavori alla Pizzeria Paradiso?*’ You’re Sal, isn’t that right? You work at the Paradiso?

‘*Si, sono io.*’

He looks at Martin and I askance, jerks his thumb in our direction.

‘And who are these two?’

Sal explains that we’re two English friends, that we work at the Erlebnis school.

‘And who was driving?’

Sal hesitates only for the briefest of moments before indicating Martin with a nod of the head. As the *carabiniere* turns to Martin, Sal opens his eyes wide and twists his face behind the *carabiniere*’s back in a desperate appeal for Martin to go along with the story.

The *carabiniere* turns an imaginary steering wheel and jabs Martin’s chest. ‘*Tu?*’

But Martin pretends not to understand even the obvious, forcing the *carabiniere* into making a ridiculous series of gestures.

The *carabiniere* takes out his own driving license, waves it in Martin's face, and again jabs his chest with the question 'Tu?' This doesn't seem to be done with any hostility; the man just assumes that Martin as a foreigner will not understand a word of Italian.

'It's in England,' Martin answers finally.

'*L'ha lasciato in Inghilterra,*' Sal translates just in case Martin's answer isn't clear.

The *carabiniere*, obviously not in the mood for another mime show, speaks to Sal in a warning, yet avuncular tone. It's difficult to understand exactly what he's saying, but part of it sounds something like warning Sal to treat Sergio with more respect, and to avoid 'these English who make trouble.' The episode has become a family affair between southerners.

7

We leave the car where it is, walk the mile or so back to Pizzeria Paradiso

Sergio is sitting on the doorstep smoking a cigarette when we arrive. He takes the car keys from Sal with a shrug.

'We'll talk about it in the morning,' he says to Sal, not looking at Martin or me.

He seems strangely indifferent, faraway, as if his mind is on other things. Rumour has it that Sergio is partial to a joint himself. He puts the car keys into the large pocket in the front of his apron, which is much cleaner than Fulvia's, stubs out his cigarette and slowly stretches his arms before getting up and going back unsteadily into the half-lit pizzeria.

Sal whispers that it's okay, that Sergio is big friends with the police. But the warm hand Sal puts on my shoulder is trembling. He invites us to his flat a few yards away for 'one last smoke'.

8

Sal's flat is tiny but has a large double bed, with white sheets rough to the touch. We lie all three of us on our backs, passing the joint from one to the other.

Martin and I are still trying to take in what Sal has told us – that middle-aged Fulvia is his lover. To prove his point, he has shown us a stain on the sheet from menstrual blood mixed with sperm. The stain, he says, is ‘both her and me.’ They made love just a few hours before earlier during the day.

‘*Ma non dite niente a nessuno!*’ Don’t tell anyone. Sergio would slit his throat if he ever found out. Sal draws his finger across his Adam’s apple with a hissing sound to make sure we understand.

We lie in silence, thinking about Sal with Fulvia. Every now and again we hear footsteps and voices passing in the street – late night stragglers returning home.

‘Why don’t you both sleep here tonight with me?’ Sal says. ‘*Per compagnia*’. For company. He doesn’t feel like being alone.

It doesn’t seem like any kind of sexual overture. He is more like a child afraid of the dark. But I can’t imagine sharing a bed with two grown men. Martin is waiting for me to answer. I say no as gently as I can, try to explain I need to sleep alone. I don’t know how to say ‘beauty sleep’ in Italian.

9

It seems as if the thickly-packed stars are just on the brow of the hill waiting for us, as Martin and I climb Via Arduino. I hear the church bells chiming midnight. A slow breeze has started, bringing a dank smell from the river. Goose pimples come up on my arms.

When we reach the top, we stop and light a cigarette. We smoke in silence, looking down at the river which stretches away into the darkness.

10

Only the sound of our footsteps and breathing, and the slightest of breezes stirring dry leaves when Anna and I pass a ragged-looking tree. Not even the cheep of a sparrow as we walk up through a field where the corn is just starting to grow. The Italians, I am told, have killed most of the small birds, which they consider a delicacy. Thinking about

sparrows, I am momentarily homesick for England. *Ho nostalgia* – I have nostalgia, almost like a kind of sickness.

Anna walks ahead of me with a determined stride. She has not drunk any wine and is faring better than me on our return to her flat after what will be our last trip to the lake together. In her straw bag she carries both my bathing costume and hers, along with wet towels. She always insists on carrying everything herself for both of us. She seems to treat me now as if I were her child. When I stay with her, she cooks for me and even washes my clothes in her washing machine while I lounge on her bed reading my Penguin book of Italian short stories with parallel English text.

We speak sometimes in Italian now. She uses simple phrases and talks slowly to help me understand. When I don't understand, she translates into English and I get cross, which makes her laugh and reach out to let her finger nail slide softly over my cheek.

I watch her buttocks sway in her yellow shorts, think of the nights I have spent awake with her while she sleeps. I wonder for a moment if now that it is our last day together she will, finally, let me make love to her. Tomorrow, her *fidanzato* – her beloved – is coming up from the south to join her. He will be working in the office next to hers at Ferrero.

'Come on,' she says, stopping and turning her head. She smiles with her wide mouth and slings the straw bag back over her shoulder.

We stop at the railway crossing to wait for a train to pass. Opposite us is a group of laughing school children on their way down to the lake. They poke each other and burst into screams as the train approaches. We feel the rush of air from the train on our faces. The children duck under the barrier just as it starts to rise. They dash over the track, almost pushing us aside.

Anna is biting her lip nervously.

'Everything okay?' I ask.

She takes my hand without answering and starts walking. Instead of going back to her flat, she takes me the station.

On the platform, I lean with my back against a colonnade. The front of my t-shirt is soaked with her tears, but she has stopped crying now. We watch the sky slowly lose its

blue. Conversations I don't understand drift across from the tables outside the station bar. They seem closer when I close my eyes.

I am the only person to get on the train. Leaning out of the train window, I kiss Anna for the last time.

11

High, brown plastic seats. Sepia photos of Italian cities on the cheaply panelled walls of the compartment. Writing in elaborate letters underneath. A shelf of netting for luggage. I keep looking from one thing to another, feeling as if I'm in the middle of an old movie.

The train stops in the middle of a wood. I open the window of my compartment and stick my head out to see what's happened. Further down the train, other heads are sticking out, too. I hear a voice muttering and a fist bang against the flimsy wall of the compartment next to mine, then a woman's voice speaking in soothing tones.

The air is heavy with the smell of blossom. If I stretch out my arm, I can touch the coolness of a silver birch's branches. The sky seems fuller of stars than I have ever seen it before.

12

Lying in bed on a Saturday morning I spend an hour looking at the small heaps of dust on the marble floor. I draw figures and patterns there in my mind, just as I did when as a child I lay under the covers and stared at the condensed air on the window. I am filled with a delicious sense of relief that I don't have to teach today.

My flat is situated on the top floor of a renovated block, part of a joined up building which stretches all the way along the street, and which was originally built in the 1700's. Through the open window, I hear the sound of children on their way to school. In Italy, schools are open six mornings a week. In England I might find the sound of children a nuisance, or even vaguely threatening, but here they are only a confirmation of my new life.

I am far more aware of sounds here. The result of having no TV, no radio, no record player. It's really only my records I miss. I sometimes go through songs in my mind, note by note, over and over again. The songs make me remember friends from home. But I only have to think back for a moment to my bedsit in Nottingham, to the effort it seemed to take just to get down to the shop on the corner for a bottle of milk, to having to count out every penny I spent, to the feeling of dread each time I had to go and sign on at the social security and confirm that I was still unemployed but 'actively seeking work'. Here everything feels more real, more alive. I look and listen in a way I haven't done since I was 14 or 15.

Now the clatter and whack of the greengrocer's blind next door being pushed up by Tiziana is exquisite for no reason other than it is happening here in Italy.

'*Pasquale! Pasquale! Vieni qua che mi devi aiutare!*' Tiziana shouts impatiently at her son to come and help her.

Pasquale is 24, the same age as me. He is nagged and bossed around continually, while for me Tiziana has only the sweetest of smiles. She will even reach up to cup my chin in her hand or to give my cheek a pull between her rough fingers and thumb. Placing a slightly muddy lettuce in my hand, and refusing my half-hearted offer to pay, she will tell me I need to find a good Italian girl to fatten me up.

Yesterday evening when I stopped as usual to say hello and try out a little more of my Italian on Tiziana, I saw, from the corner of my eye, Anna walking down the street hand-in-hand with her *fidanzato*, her tall, blue-eyed, but (thank God) balding beloved. She was smiling at something he'd said. I tried not to look at her, but when they passed, Anna turned her head vaguely toward me. Her green eyes caught mine for a moment, then turned away.

I watched her bottom sway in her yellow shorts the same way it did when we walked back from the lake together. She tossed back her hair and laughed.

Tiziana poked me in the ribs.

'*Ma che cosa guardi?*' she asked. But what are you looking at?

She made a sideways chopping motion with her hand and laughed softly. She touched the side of her nose knowingly.

'*Ah, le ragazze italiane!*' she said. Italian girls! As if this summed up the most important thing in the world.

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