

Once a young man was on a visit to Rome.

It was his first visit, he came from the country – but he was neither on the one hand so young nor on the other so simple as to imagine that a great and beautiful capital should hold out finer promises than any where else. He already knew, too, that life was largely illusion; that, though wonderful things could happen, nevertheless as many disappointments came in compensation; and he knew, too, that life could offer a quality even worse – the probability that nothing would happen at all. This was always more possible in a great city intent on its own business.

Thinking in this way, he surveyed the momentous panorama stretched before him. He listened to the swelling hum of the evening traffic and watched as the lights went up against Rome's golden dusk. Shining automobiles slunk past the fountains and turned urgently into the bright Via Condotti, neon-red signs stabbed the shadows with invitation; the yellow windows of buses were packed with faces intent on going somewhere – everyone in the city seemed intent on the evening's purpose. He alone had nothing to do. So the young man kept to the quieter, older streets on his solitary errand home.

In one such street, a pavementless alley between old yellow houses, a street that in Rome might suddenly blossom into a secret piazza of fountain and baroque church, - he noticed that he was alone but for the single figure of a woman walking down the hill toward him.

As she drew nearer, he saw that she was dressed with taste; that in her carriage was a soft Latin fire; that she walked for respect. Her face was veiled, but it was impossible to imagine that she would not be beautiful. Isolated thus with her, passing so near to her, and she symbolising the adventure of which the evening was so empty – a greater melancholy gripped him. He felt wretched as the gutter; small, sunk, pitiful. So that he rounded his shoulders and lowered his eyes – but not before casting one furtive glance into hers.

He was so shocked at what he saw that he paused, he stared, shocked, into her face. He had made no mistake. She was smiling. Also – she had hesitated. He thought instantly: "Whore?" But no – it was not that kind of smile, though as well it was not without affection. And then, amazingly, she spoke.

"I – I know I shouldn't ask you ... but it is such a beautiful evening – and perhaps you are alone, as alone as I am ..."

She was very beautiful. He could not speak. But a growing elation gave him the power to smile. So that she continued, still hesitant, in no sense soliciting.

"I thought ...perhaps... we could take a walk, an aperitif..."

At last the young man achieved himself.

"Nothing, nothing would please me more. And the Veneto is only a minute up there." She smiled again.

"My home is just here..."

They walked in silence a few paces down the street, to a turning the young man had already passed. This she indicated. They walked to where the first humble houses ended in a kind of recess. In the recess was set the wall of a garden, and behind it stood a large and elegant mansion. The woman, about whose face shone a curious pale glitter – something fused of the transparent pallor of fine skin, of grey but brilliant eyes, of dark eyebrows and hair of lucent black – inserted her key in the garden gate.

They were greeted by a servant in velvet livery. In a large and exquisite salon, under chandeliers of fine glass and before a moist green courtyard where water played, they were served with a frothy wine. They talked. The wine – iced in the warm Roman night – filled them with an inner warmth of exhilaration. But, from time to time, the young man looked at her curiously.

With her glances, with many subtle inflections of teeth and eyes, she was inducing an intimacy that suggested much. He felt he must be careful. At length he thought the best thing might be to thank her – somehow thus to root out whatever obligation might be in store. But here she interrupted him, first with a smile, then with a look of some sadness. She begged him to spare himself any perturbation; she knew it was strange, that in such a situation he might suspect some second purpose, but the simple truth remained that she as lonely and – this with a certain deference – something perhaps in him, perhaps that moment of dusk in the street, had proved to her inescapably attractive. She had not been able to help herself.

The possibility of a perfect encounter – a dream that years of disillusion will never quite kill – decided him. His elation rose beyond control. He believed her. And thereafter the perfections compounded. At her invitation they dined. Servants brought food of great delicacy: shellfish, fat bird flesh, soft fruits. And afterwards they sat on a sofa near the courtyard, where it was cool. Liqueurs were brought. The servants retired. A hush fell upon the house. They embraced.

In her bedroom, to the picture of her framed by the bed curtains and dimly naked in a silken shift, he poured out his love, a love that was to be eternal, to be always perfect, as fabulous as this their exquisite meeting.

Softly, she spoke the return of his love. Nothing would ever go amiss, nothing would ever come between them. And very gently she drew back the bedclothes for him.

But suddenly, at the moment when at last he lay beside her, when his lips were almost upon hers – he hesitated.

Something was wrong. A flaw could be sensed. He listened, felt – and then saw the fault was his. Shaded, soft-shaded lights by the bed – but he had been so careless as to leave on the bright electric chandelier in the centre of the ceiling. He remembers the switch was by the door. For a fraction, then, he hesitated. She raised her eyelids – saw his glance at the chandelier, understood.

Her eyes glittered. She murmured, “My beloved, don’t worry – don’t move ...”

And she reached out her hand.

Her hand grew larger, her arm grew longer and longer, it stretched out through the bed-curtains, across the long carpet, huge and overshadowing the whole of the long room, until at last its giant fingers were at the door.