

Desdemona
Tag Cavello
Copyright 2018 by Tag Cavello

“By now you will, of course, have understood
how little of the truth they see who claim
that every love is, in itself, a good;

for though love’s substance always will appear
to be a good, not every impress made,
even in finest wax, is good and clear.”

Dante, *The Purgatorio*, as translated by John Ciardi

*For all the ones we’ve lost, and all the ones we have, and will have, with love in every
world*

DESDEMONA

SOMMARIO

∞

CHAPTER ONE... ..DANTE

CHAPTER TWO... ..HORATIO

CHAPTER THREE... ..SUNNY

CHAPTER FOUR... ..NASCOSTO VILLAGIO

CHAPTER FIVE... ..LOCKER SIXTEEN

CHAPTER SIX... ..MERMAID PIZZA

CHAPTER SEVEN... ..MARIS

CHAPTER EIGHT... ..THE GLASS BLOCK

CHAPTER NINE... ..A DRIVE NORTH

CHAPTER TEN... ..GIRL TO GORILLA

CHAPTER ELEVEN... ..DINNER AND A PHONE CALL

CHAPTER TWELVE... ..SELF-LOATHING

CHAPTER THIRTEEN... ..LOVE RHYMES

CHAPTER FOURTEEN... ..HOSPITAL VISIT

CHAPTER FIFTEEN... ..HAPPY NEW YEAR

CHAPTER SIXTEEN... ..FOR DUKEY

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN... ..I THINK A MAN SHOULD BE STRONG...

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN... ..THE GIRL DOWNSTAIRS

CHAPTER NINETEEN... ..DEPLOYMENT

CHAPTER TWENTY... ..SUNNY COMES TO DINNER

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE... ..THE IDES OF MARCH

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO... ..DOGS ON ICE

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE... ..SUNNY AND MARIS

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR... ..WIN ON THE ROAD

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE... ..CONVALESCENCE

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX... ..IN MEMORIAM

CHAPTER ONE: *Dante*

Norwalk, Ohio is strange. Or so the boy, whose name was Dante Torn, had in his thoughts always arranged.

Especially in the early dawn light. Every summer he delivered newspapers for a local publisher, which obliged him to wake before sunrise and tie his bundles with rubber bands, stuff them in a bag, and take to the quiet streets.

Though the bag was heavy, he was able to ride his bike during the week, his tall, wiry frame accepting the load with little complaint. Helping with this task was the fresh smell of flowers from neighboring lawns, and the twittering of birds from high in the ancient trees that lined Norwalk's streets.

Of course during the week it was already a little bit light out when he left the house. He would step off the front porch of the fine, federal style brick mansion at 54 West Main Street where he lived, with the sun already peeking over the eastern hills between here and Cleveland, a cheerful eye. Also, the papers were light, especially on Mondays. What news came on Mondays, the day after everyone was supposed to rest?

"We pray on Sunday," Dante's father once said, "so there will be no news on Monday."

He'd spoken it on a Monday morning whilst watching his son bundle papers full of meaningless fluff. School lunch menus. Artists with bad paintings and no one to come to their shows. Museum pieces.

Dante supposed it was one prayer to which God always acquiesced. If only humankind would take up its habit for supplication to invisible deities on Saturday as well. Then Dante might not have to get up *before* dawn on Sunday mornings to tie papers *three times* as large as the weeklies. Then he might not have to carry them in a wagon instead of a bag. Then he might not have to be unnerved by streets that were sometimes a little *too* quiet, even for a small town. For it wasn't just heavy papers that made Dante dread the Sunday edition.

He'd seen things along the dark streets. Caught between wakefulness and dreaming, the town would every so often lose face. The Civil War mansions of Main, State, and Newton Street no longer looked like friendly old men, their doorways smiling, their gabled roofs fancy hats in want of a hand for tipping. Oh no. In the humid August shadows their doors rather seemed to gape, as if in awe for his temerity to disturb the stillness. And the roofs resembled furled, hairy brows over angry black eyes. They were faces, all, that would lunge at Dante—if they could—to swallow him whole.

Sometimes they tried. Halfway down Newton Street was a railroad crossing where he'd once seen a squirrel fall out of a tree. It lay still after hitting the sidewalk. Concerned for its well-being, Dante had approached it with caution. He knew these beasts carried rabies. And yet something about its mass of black fur made him curious. Closer and closer he had pulled his wagon of papers, until he was nearly on top of the thing. Then the fur had rolled to reveal a woman's tortured, screaming face with accusing red eyes. Her long black hair coated the sidewalk like ink. With a gasp of terror Dante had leaped back. That was when the face, or whatever it was, disappeared, leaving him alone in befuddlement.

Another occasion found him on Manahan Avenue with his route nearly finished. Six papers remained in the wagon. Dante was glad, not because this morning had been particularly frightening, but because the thunder, which had begun half an hour ago, was getting louder. The sun had not arrived on schedule that day. Charcoal clouds, shot with lightning, roiled low in the sky. Dante was glad because he still had a chance to make it home without getting wet.

Hoping the rain would hold off, he heaved one of the papers. It landed hard on Mr. Jergenson's porch. Dante winced. *No tip for you this week if you woke him up*, he thought.

An abandoned Magnavox, left on the curb for disposal, regarded him with its blank screen. Dante paused for only a moment to look at the broken knobs protruding from a cracked wooden frame. The console looked old and heavy. Left over from a forgotten time. When the screen began to flicker he assumed it was a reflection of lightning. He glanced skyward. Nothing there but more gray. Deeper now. Ever threatening.

Clenching hold the handle of his wagon, the boy began to move on...

Except there was a face on the TV screen now. A misshapen visage of dark eyes and horned forehead. Scowling with its sharp teeth, it snarled a message through the console's broken speaker:

Carpe noctem!

Next moment, the face had gone, and the skies were raining so hard Dante could hardly see.

∞

Those things had happened a year ago, in 1991, when he was eleven. This summer had been much more quiet. In June he'd been frightened. Every Sunday morning was a minefield of weirdness he and his wagon traversed like soldiers of the mundane. When nothing happened in June his confidence increased. Rather than the pup's face he'd had on since school let out, he faced July with something more regal, leaving the house each Sunday with a determined tug on the wagon, his chin high, his eyes keen. It all worked, or at least seemed to. Because nothing happened in July either.

Now here he was in August, two weeks before the start of school.

"You're in love!" a girl said presently, as Dante made his way down West Main.

"No I'm not!" another insisted. "I just really like him. A lot."

The two girls—teens—stepped around Dante's wagon, not looking at him. But their giggles rose through the branches of the maple trees, and when Dante turned back, they both wore smiles like the sun, which had risen directly on time this morning. Neither of the girls, Dante noticed, had red hair. Too bad. For even if they liked him, he knew he could not like them back. At least not in that way.

Do either of you know Sunny Desdemona? he almost asked, like an idiot.

They might have laughed harder at this. Or maybe they would have grown curious. Made inquiries. Though only twelve, Dante was already developing into a handsome brown-haired boy, his frame tall and lean. Carrying newspapers all summer worked wonders for his muscles as well. If these two girls liked him, shouldn't they know more about the competition?

We don't know her but who is she? they might have wondered. *Come on! Tell us!*

"Nah," Dante said under his breath. "Wishful thinking."

Less than a minute later the girls were just two distant figures on the sidewalk. They were headed downtown, though for what Dante had no idea. Most of Norwalk's shops had relocated north to Sandusky. North to where the action was. Cedar Point, Perkins Mall. Marblehead Peninsula and Kelly's Island. And of course Put-In Bay, the hottest little island on Lake Erie. These days Norwalk was just a town you drove through on your way to better places. A town of closed shops with soapy windows that read *closed* or *going out of business*.

Dante turned to look at the girls again. They'd reached the Methodist church and were crossing the street. This puzzled him even further. Not only were the teens out early, but they had ventured to a side of the street where nothing but jewelry shops (all closed on Sundays) and banks stood.

"Hey kid!"

Dante jumped. A man at number ninety-nine glared at him from a tarred circular driveway. His house, like so many others on West Main, was huge. A Grecian beast with white pillars and green shutters.

"How 'bout a newspaper to go with my coffee?" he asked.

"Sure," Dante said.

He remembered the man's name as being Ken or Keith. Ken or Keith did not expect to have to walk to the end of his driveway to get his paper. He expected the "kid" to bring it to him. This was clear by the way he put his hands on his hips. To Dante he looked like an umpire listening to Mike Hargrove gripe about a questionable call. Whatever. He pulled his wagon onto the driveway. The tar looked immaculate. Deep and rich. Would he sink if he stood still for too long?

"Hand it over," Ken or Keith said.

Like Dante, he was tall and lean. A pair of rimless glasses decorated his face.

Dante handed him his paper. "Kenny Lofton has never agreed with a called strike in his life," he then couldn't help but let spill.

It utterly confused the other. "What was that?" he asked.

"Baseball," Dante told him.

Now the man sneered. "I don't watch *baseball*."

"Sorry. Enjoy your paper."

The boy turned to go. He got halfway to a row of hedges near the sidewalk when Ken or Keith called, "No tip for you on Thursday!"

You mean no tip for me ever, Dante thought, because never once had this customer laid extra coin in his palm. Not looking back, he kept pulling his wagon.

"Sunny Desdemona!" Ken or Keith yelled.

Dante froze. Slowly, he turned to look at the prim, privileged man standing beside his stately manor. And in a quivering voice he said: "I'm sorry?"

"Money says I owe ya," the other repeated. "But a smile says I'm your friend. Try one on sometime."

"Of course," Dante nodded, without smiling. "Of course. I will. Good morning."

"And good morning to you, young man."

The wagon trundled along behind him, a dog on a leash. Tiny bumps on the sidewalk made it jounce. At the corner of Main and Pleasant stood a dentists' office slash residence. It too was large and quite old. Dante tossed a paper onto its wooden porch.

WHAP! No one came out to retrieve it. The dentist, whom Dante knew was female, was probably still asleep in her basement coffin.

You're in love, he heard the teen girl say again. Only this time the girl was referring to him.

No, Dante thought, *no. I don't want to be in love.*

Why not? he asked himself.

Because she won't love me back. It's all wishful thinking.

All good things start with a wish, Dante. All good things.

Now who had ever told him that? Someone wise. Or maybe someone foolish. His uncle maybe. Kind but foolish. A drinker, a gambler. A man who got philosophical with his beer instead of angry. Had he once waxed poetic to Dante during some holiday eve party?

Please please please...

No, that wasn't his uncle. That was The Smiths. Morrissey wishing on some star that wasn't really a star at all, but a rock burning through Earth's atmosphere. Wishful thinking.

All good things...

"Shut up," Dante said aloud. He turned left on South Pleasant. Here the houses got a little smaller but still looked nice enough. One after the next, he delivered his papers. Dogs barked from back yards. Birds twittered. It was a lovely morning to be out for a walk.

Sunny Desdemona was a lovely girl. The prettiest Dante had ever seen. Last year, attending sixth grade at Norwalk Middle School, he had fallen in love with the back of her head. That was in room 105, Applied Math. The first day of classes. The kids had been restless from summer break, fidgeting in their seats. Pencils and notebooks, all brand new, shined under fresh tubes of fluorescent lighting. Sitting near the back row, Dante had looked up to get a bead on some rookie female teacher just out of college. He got something else instead. Fire. A blazing calligraphy of red-orange that capered on narrow shoulders. Within he could see a jewel, a glimmer of gold, shining like forbidden treasure lost to magmatic depths. It was, Dante realized, an ear-ring, and quite a beautiful one at that. Its shape resembled a trident.

WHAP!

Another paper, another porch. The wagon's load continued to diminish, so by the time he reached the valley of Pleasant Street he had no trouble pulling it down. Here the houses backed away to provide room for a park. Breezy trees stood watch over a playground, a picnic shelter. Water gurgled on one side. Norwalk Creek, carried off by a culvert under the street. Normally Dante avoided the park on Sundays. Woodland bordered it on two sides. Or rather, *encroached* it. For Dante the dark trees seemed to lean a little too close to its tennis courts, its flower beds. Once, back in 1978, a rash of Sasquatch sightings had broken out between Norwalk and Monroeville. One such sighting was said to have taken place right near the tennis courts, where a trail led behind West Main to the old Baltimore and Ohio rail line.

But today the valley looked fairly inviting. Dante decided to cut through the park on his way up to Elm Street. He left the sidewalk. Dewey grass got the wagon wheels all wet. Near the shelter, he stopped to pick up some trash. Teenagers were always messing the place up on Saturday nights. Even the picnic tables had been violated. Their normally

militant rows were now crooked. Twisted askew by crazy kids with stolen beer and garish girlfriends. Dante set about straightening them, then sat down at one for a breather.

Crude carvings in the wood provided a harsh welcome. Ridiculous thoughts laid down by untalented hands. Some were pornographic, others comedic.

Why? one wanted to know. The word had been written in weak felt, faded but legible. Beneath lay a piece unlike all the rest. A paragraph, composed with the same marker, its words dim, its message anything but.

Why?

Why did you leave me? I'm sitting here watching our children play. Eve is on the swing, Aaron the monkey bars. They're having fun, while all I can do is pretend. I thought our marriage was good. I thought you loved me. I was wrong. Now you're with her somewhere. You're with a better woman I guess. Someone prettier than me maybe, someone smarter. Eve and Aaron sometimes ask where their daddy is. I always tell a lie. But I am running out of lies to tell myself. I thought we were happy, Jacob. Why did you leave me?

Why?

Dante stood. Grabbing his wagon, he struck off towards the creek. A quaint little wooden bridge crossed it. He looked down at the water, saw his face looking back.

Sunny Desdemona's face had not disappointed. He had waited all through that first day of class just to see it, not paying attention to the lesson. When the bell went off, he'd leaped from his seat, bumping his knee on the desk, so it was with a slight limp he saw her eyes for the first time.

They were green. The shimmering green of Aurora Borealis in an oxygen storm. Cinnamon freckles dotted her nose and cheeks like dragons at play on a pristine snowscape. Beneath that snowscape, a cutting-blade ridge of blood—her lips, to breathe, to kiss. And yes, to ultimately wound.

Dante did not think these things when he saw her. He felt them. And when the girl (he had not known yet that her name was Sunny) sneered at him for staring, he felt that too. Like her lips, it wanted to cut.

This girl is not going to be easy, he thought. Then: *I'm going to have her anyway.*

The girl—Sunny—had turned away from him. Dismissed him. Two other girls left the classroom with her. Dante noticed how they seemed to reach for her, though she was not the tallest in their group. They smiled as they talked, but not Sunny. Sunny only listened.

A bee flew over the wagon. Dante watched it buzz towards Hogan's Hill, where kids liked to go sledding in the winter. Once, Dante's toboggan had crossed the field at the bottom too fast and crashed, sending him head first into a frozen Norwalk Creek. The other kids had run to get a look, some concerned, others laughing. Good times. Crazy, frostbitten fun.

He pulled his wagon to the top of the hill. Here he met a younger boy—Michael Roberts. Dante knew Michael because the Roberts' house was on his route.

"Hey Mike," Dante said. "Here's your paper."

Michael took it. He was only seven. The paper looked very large in his hands, like a trout caught for breakfast. "Thanks," he said.

"How's that new swimming pool?"

"Good."

“Haven’t peed in it yet, have you?”

The boy’s eyes grew wide. “No!”

“I’m just kidding,” Dante laughed. “I know you wouldn’t do that. Tell your mom I said hello.”

“Okay!”

The boy ran to the porch of his house, leaving a toy truck on the sidewalk. Dante waited. He didn’t want to see Michael’s truck get kicked or stolen.

Ten minutes later he was done with Elm Street. Only four papers remained. All of them went to houses further down West Main. Dante passed Michael again on his way back, waving hello. This time he did not cut through the park. He went to the culvert where Elm ended and Pleasant began. The creek flowed beneath him. If you followed it deeper into the woods you would come across an old stone bridge with an iron rail. Dante had learned this himself while playing guns with his friends years ago. The bridge had looked very strange and out of place, just sitting amidst the trees. It seemed to have no purpose other than to help wanton children cross the creek for further adventure.

His love for the red-haired girl had seemed purposeless as well, at least at the outset. He had even made fun of himself that first morning. A dozen Peanuts strip references played across his mind. He thought about asking his mom to buy him a yellow sweater. He thought about joining a little league team, going out for pitcher. Maybe one of the other kids would hit a line drive and knock off all his clothes.

By lunchtime, however, none of it was funny. Dante thought about her all through English class, and then all through World History. He had gone to lunch that day with his head somewhere between heaven and hell. Standing in line for Salisbury steak, he saw her sitting at a table with five other girls. The five other girls were talking to her. Talking, talking. The red-haired girl would only nod occasionally.

“That’s Sunny,” someone standing next to Dante said.

He turned to see a dark-haired boy with glasses and a cagey smile. “Who’s Sunny?” he asked, doing his best to sound innocent.

The dark-haired boy hadn’t been fooled. “The girl with the red hair you keep staring at. I saw you staring at her in Applied Math too.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, really. You want me to tell her you like her?” The boy’s smile flashed. Under the duel assault of it and his glasses, Dante thought he might go blind any moment. Also, he wasn’t sure he could answer his question, so he countered it with one of his own.

“What’s her last name?”

“Desdemona,” the boy answered, as if he had known the girl for a long time. Turned out he had. “She was in my class last year. Pretty much every boy had a crush, but she never let any of us so much as buy her a milkshake.” His eyes had wandered as he spoke, to where Sunny was sitting, and his voice had gone dreamy.

“You had a crush too?” Dante asked. Or he might have stated it, so aloof was the boy’s tone.

“I did,” the other replied. Then he’d blinked as if coming awake, and looked at Dante pugnaciously. “So what? You won’t get anywhere with her, either.”

“She doesn’t like boys?”

“I don’t care what she likes or doesn’t like. Not anymore.”

“I’ll leave her alone,” Dante told him, just for something to say.

Hearing this, the boy's cagey smile had clicked right back into place. "No you won't, you liar. But you're going to get bitten, you'd better believe it. You're going to get bitten."

Thus far his prediction had not been accurate. Dante had gone through the rest of sixth grade without being bitten. Curiously, the boy with the glasses had disappeared. Gone off on Christmas break with his family and never returned. Timothy, his name had been. Timothy...something. Dante couldn't remember what.

Anyway, he had not been bitten. Then again he was not holding Sunny Desdemona's hand today, either. He had yet to even come close.

∞

Three of the final four papers in the wagon went quietly, without incident. Dante's last stop was number 114. This was an old, old mansion that looked like a Greek temple. It stood on the opposite side of West Main, at the corner of Pleasant. Its huge windows and old, cracked pillars towered over unkempt grass (the man who lived here rarely strayed outdoors). Dante supposed it looked haunted, though he normally paid it little mind. Nearly done with another day's work, he approached it now with cavalier deportment. The unmown lawn encroached its front walk. Some of the windows lacked shutters; all were badly in need of fresh paint. Dante took a step closer. A set of broken steps led to a set of double front doors. He tossed the paper...

And for whatever reason the shot went too hard. Maybe it was baseball. Steve Olin's submarine had been smoking that year. Or maybe his lack of progress with Sunny contributed an element of frustration to his delivery. Whichever the case, Dante's throw was aggressive, and when it struck number 114's twin doors, one of the windows shattered. Jagged glass fell on the steps, disrupting the morning stillness. The sound frightened a murder of crows from a nearby tree; they rose, cawing, like black balloons from its branches.

Dante couldn't believe his eyes. He looked at the shards of glass. Glittering, they lay on the mossy stone. In one piece Dante could see his face, his own guilty face, sickened by what had happened. The customer who lived here—a tall, rotund man who tipped light and never talked—was not going to like this. Oh no, not remotely. Sometimes on collection day Dante thought he detected a trace of irritability in the large man's bulbous eyes, a trace of impatience, as if he felt the boy wasn't meeting his standards. He always plunked his two dollars into Dante's hand without a single word, or even the slightest hint of a smile.

Wait, Dante thought, that's not true. He DID speak to you once. Earlier this summer.

And what did he say? Could Dante remember? Of course he could: "Be careful how you throw those papers, son, or you'll break a window."

The man had not sounded nice when he said it. If anything, he'd actually growled the words, and his face looked tired and mean. This after Dante had tossed one of the weekdays onto his step just as neatly as anyone could please.

Now he'd gone and spit in the eye of that warning; he'd gone and broken a damned window. Soon the rotund man would burst out, his face red with rage, his hair on fire. He would scream at Dante, call him names. Maybe even shake him by the shoulders.

Look what you did, boy! LOOK WHAT YOU DID!

Dante looked. The glass on the other door had a scripted B engraved into it. That could only mean the broken piece had been scripted, too. Marvelous. So not only was it destroyed, it was expensive. A one of a kind signature article.

Dante approached the door. Like it or not, he had to knock. He had to get the customer out here and confess his guilt. His stomach was in revolt. Eating itself from the inside. His hands were sweaty.

Run away. Just grab the paper and run away. No one will know.

Yes they would. Who else but the stupid paper boy could have come along at six-thirty in the morning and broken a window? And anyway, this house had neighbors. Others like it—huge and old—stood all along West Main. At least some of their owners had to be awake, had to have heard the crash.

Dante mounted the steps. Glass crunched. Feeling more like an idiot than ever, he kicked a few shards. Then he knocked on the other door—the one still intact. He knocked good and hard. Because hey, this incident needed to put to bed as soon as possible. Lord did it ever—

“Ow!” he cried.

A sharp pain from his ankle. Looking down, Dante saw it was bleeding. One of the shards had somehow gotten under the edge of his shoe. Now his sock was turning red. He was about to kneel for further assessment of the damage when the sound of heavy footsteps approached the door’s opposite side.

Oh man, Dante thought, oh man, here we go.

“Who is it?” the large man called, sounding like he’d not had his coffee yet. “Who... *Good Lord!*”

He had yet to open the door, but the cause for his exclamation hardly needed detective work to comprehend. He was looking at broken glass on the other side. No doubt it decorated the floor of his anteroom quite prettily in the morning sun.

“Has somebody lost their *mind?*” Dante heard him cry. The words carried a slightly warbled, somewhat coiled accent, as if bent to fit their speaker’s tongue. “*Perche? Perche?*”

What in the world does “perche” mean? Dante had time to wonder.

And then the door was flying open. And the large, round man was there, over six feet in height, his hair hanging in black curls around a face sculpted by angry hands: eyes thumbed deep and dark, nose blotted and smoothed crudely about the edges, lips stretched too far towards ears squeezed and molded with hasty, impatient need.

The man’s eyes fell directly upon their target. Dante watched him bare his teeth. They were surprisingly white considering their house of residence, surprisingly straight. The man scowled for a moment longer. The scowl dropped. Then, to Dante’s complete amazement, it became a smile.

“Now what did I tell you,” he said, “about throwing those papers too hard?”

And that was how he met Horatio Donati.

CHAPTER TWO: *Horatio*

A new friend brings many stories to tell, especially one who has travelled well.

The man introduced himself as Mr. Donati. Horatio to his friends. He told Dante this as he swept glass off the step, occasionally pausing to hoist the pants of his blue pajamas. The glass fell into a broken dustpan that made Dante wince. In less than one second it had gone from timeless to trash.

“How old was the window?” Dante then asked, bracing himself for the worst.

He got all of it and then some. “1830, I believe,” said Mr. Donati after a moment.

“Oh no.”

“Oh no indeed. But then nothing lasts forever, boy. Not even the stars.”

“I’m really sorry. My name is Dante, by the way.”

Mr. Donati set the dustpan aside. “I remember. I also know you are sorry. You were very brave to knock on the door. Other boys would have simply run away.”

“I—“

“The window, however, is irreplaceable. I am sad that after so many years it came to its demise under my care.”

“Are you going to sue me?” Dante spluttered. Over the past few minutes the sun had grown very hot. He could feel it on his neck, trying to set the nape on fire.

But Mr. Donati only laughed at the question. “Sue you? Good heavens, no! What could I achieve by suing my paperboy, other than a comic write-up in the very paper he delivers?”

“You mean you’re not angry at all?”

Dante looked at the other window. It looked every bit as old as the man in blue pajamas had told him. The gold letter *B* was scripted in such a way he somehow knew hadn’t been used for many years. It looked quite regal and masculine.

“What was the other letter?” he asked, before Mr. Donati could answer his first question.

“I must go inside now,” the man said by way of reply. He had stopped laughing, and his heavy shoulders were slumped. Dante caught his eye wander again to the broken door. He was taking things well, but he was still hurt, that much was clear. “I come from Sicily,” he continued, “where we sometimes eat ice cream for breakfast. *Brioche*, it’s called. And it will melt if I don’t eat it soon.”

Dante nodded. He felt awful all over again, as if he too would melt, and very soon indeed.

∞

They did not speak again until the start of the school year. It was the last Sunday of August, and as always, Dante had saved the final paper on his route for number 114. Rather than throw it, however, he walked it carefully to the door, as if it were a girl at the end of a date. He placed the paper on the porch, taking in the fact that the glass had not yet been replaced. The doorframe was still empty. Through it he could see Mr. Donati’s anteroom. Coats and hats. An umbrella cane.

“Good morning.”

The man himself appeared from round side of the house, looking cheerful. No pajamas adorned him today. He wore a pair of faded blue jeans with boots and a yellow t-

shirt. A garden spade hung from one hand. The other clutched a twisted mass recently murdered weeds.

“Good morning, Mr. Donati,” Dante said.

“Is that my paper?”

“Yes sir.”

“Good lad. And to judge by the empty wagon, your route is done, yes?”

“Yes sir,” Dante repeated. “Done for the whole year. School starts on Tuesday.”

“So I have read,” Donati told him. “Which leaves me perhaps another month to do my gardening. Perhaps two. The weather in Ohio is so *volubile*.”

“Volu...what?”

Donati smiled. “That is an Italian word. It means ever changing.”

“Oh.”

“Nothing at all like this house, mind you. This house is *costante*.” He gestured the upper windows with his spade. “Built in 1827 and still standing, just as strong as you please.”

Dante’s eye went to the windows, but only for a moment. The house’s huge pillars drew his gaze upward towards an ornate pediment that could have once been part of Siculus’ ancient wonders. “It’s Greek, right?” he said, neck still craned.

“You mean the style?” he heard Donati reply. “Indeed it is. Greek architecture was quite popular in 19th century America. This house was originally a seminary for young girls. A boarding school.”

Now Dante looked at the man. Here was something he certainly hadn’t known about 114. “This house used to be a *school*?”

“A long time ago,” Donati nodded. “And if you don’t believe me, I can show you one of the old chalkboards. It’s still in place on the wall.”

“Will you? That sounds really cool!”

Donati winked. “If you promise not to throw my newspaper at it, I will.”

∞

It occupied one of 114’s two living rooms off the main hallway. A crooked black slate, cracked in places, took up most of a dirty, peeling wall of dismal beige. The whole thing looked to Dante like a very old man holding in his last breath of life. Seeing it instantly made him feel that Donati was telling the truth. The dark texture looked almost liquid, ready to ooze off the wall at any moment. To lay chalk to it would no doubt make it fall apart on the floor.

The rest of the house, Dante soon discovered, quartered similar issues. Cracked paint and faded wallpaper—all beige—surrounded not only the chalkboard, but everything else as well. Crooked pictures, their frames caked with dust, hung despairingly from rusty nails. Fireplaces with cold, forlorn hearths stood in both living rooms. What little furniture Donati had chosen to decorate with did not look antique so much as merely old. Old and cheap. Still, he showed Dante the ground floor without the slightest trace of shame, explaining that there had once been a wall to separate the two living rooms.

“So there could be two classrooms?” the boy asked.

“Two classrooms,” Donati answered. “I purchased this house for a song, due to its dilapidated condition. In fact my words are almost literal, for I was once an opera singer. Can I get you some cappuccino?”

He showed Dante into the kitchen. It was a tight, narrow room behind the chalkboard. Seeing it nearly caused the boy to gasp in horror. By far it was the worst-looking room on the ground floor (who knew what ruin lay above?). Strips of paint hung from a sagging ceiling like jungle vines. Stained counters, all crooked, lay atop droopy cabinets of rotting wood. The floor had once been white but was now stained so deeply that Dante thought it would never come clean.

“Cappuccino!” Donati said again. Near the stove stood a silver, clumsy-looking contraption. Smiling, he poured a cup from it, then another for himself. “I could never drink too much cappuccino. In my mind it would be ridiculous for one to say ‘I have had too much cappuccino.’ It’s like saying you have too much money, or too much love.”

Dante nodded. In truth he knew nothing about cappuccino. The stuff was almost as alien to him as Jack Daniels. He took a sip. It was thick and warm—not at all hot.

“Good?” Donati asked, looking hopeful.

Dante found it surprisingly sweet but still good, and told him so. Then he asked: “Were you really an opera singer?”

They went back to the living room to sit by one of the cold fireplaces. Here Donati explained that he had once travelled the world, performing on the small stage (his voice was good but not, by his own admission, exceptional). He claimed to have played almost all the popular operas, from Vivaldi’s *L’Olimpiade* to Mozart’s *Le Nozze di Figaro*.

“Albeit *L’Olimpiade* became awkward at times, for my troupe lacked money for set pieces. We played almost all of our operas on an empty stage, to small audiences in candlelit backwater theaters. Set pieces were usually trivial, provided the singers were good. And many of us were damned good. Marie Comfit. Louise St. Claire. Alfred Puissance. They could sing. Oh my, could they ever.” The older man seemed to have forgotten his drink. His eyes had filled with the mist of years gone by. “Nor did the time of day matter much,” he continued. “To us or our audience. Parents would bring their children to see Pinocchio at two in the morning.”

“Didn’t your singing disturb people who wanted to sleep?” Dante asked.

“Not at all. The theaters we used were always well off the larger streets. Hidden venues in back alleys. Paris is rife with them. As are cities like London and Madrid. Even Manila.”

Dante put his cup down. “Manila? Where’s that?”

The question brought a not unkind smile to Donati’s lips. “That is in the Philippines,” he said. “A hot city. So very hot. Now you tell me, boy,” he went on, before Dante could ask anything else, “how old are you, and what grade are you in this year?”

“I’ll be thirteen in October,” Dante said. “I’m in seventh grade.”

To this he watched the opera singer’s expression very closely. Experience had made him bitter. His dad’s friends—golf players and yacht owners—were a most condescending bunch, and became even more so when it came to his age. They liked to ruffle his hair, using names like “tiger” and “chief” and “big guy” rather than his real name. Then they would tee off, or duck down into their boat for another cold drink. They never gave drinks to Dante. Ever. Once, on a Lake Erie weekend, Janet Jones had ordered pizza. She had given a slice to her Great Dane. But none to Dante. Those were his dad’s friends.

To his great relief Donati showed no signs of being like them at all. The opera singer looked him in the eye as he spoke, nodding, with full attention trained upon his response.

Nor did his gaze seem penetrating or disquieting. Rather, it was simply interested. Quite respectful. For the first time Dante began to feel comfortable around the man. And comfortable, indeed, with number 114, though he'd yet to see the upstairs. Despite its run-down state—and despite its huge rooms with high ceilings—the house did not feel like a scary place. Like its owner, it looked old but friendly. And willing, perhaps, to lend an ear of its own.

Donati's next words made him feel even better. "I never liked school," he uttered. "But then I was not your typical student. I found it difficult to absorb material from a textbook. Children like me wanted education through doing. What is it boy?"

Dante had begun to smile. "You didn't like school, so here you are, living in a school."

"Ah. A fine *ironia* indeed." His head tilted with sudden thought. "Perhaps I bought this house in effort to overcome the old disliking. Eh?"

"Perhaps," Dante said.

"But no. It is not true. Love is what brought me to Norwalk. The love for an opera singer, like myself." The man hesitated. "Wait. Not like myself. Better. Beautiful and better. Georgina Esposito. Have you heard of her?"

Dante answered that he had not, but his voice lacked strength, and his eyes were restless. Donati's confession of love for a woman had made him immediately think of Sunny. He glanced out the window—

And just for a moment, saw her. A girl in green, with long red hair all ablaze 'neath the morning sun. She was looking at Dante intently, as if to say: *How dare you give your heart to me?*

"She lived a long time ago," Donati told him. "I loved her voice. I still do. In 1896 she came to Norwalk—"

Dante forced his attention away from the window. Now he looked back. The patch of grass where he'd seen Sunny was empty again. And the patch, of course, was green. Next door he could just make out the hood of a parked red car. So that was it. That was all it had been.

"—to sing at the Methodist Church. On Church Street," he added, "where it used to be. Not this larger cathedral on West Main. I came to Norwalk five years ago to see where Miss Esposito had once performed, only to find the building gone, and an insurance company standing in its place."

"You mean Nationwide?" Dante put forth.

"I do not remember its name. I was so surprised at what I saw—so *stupito*. I came for a church and found what looked like a gas station instead, then the gas station turned out to be an insurance peddler. *Non potrei credere ai miei occhi.*"

"What does that mean?"

"I thought my eyes must be lying."

Dante knew Church Street well enough. It wasn't part of his route, but you couldn't ride downtown without seeing it. Not that there was anything to see. Two parking lots, one for a furniture company and the other for the Universalist Church, were all it had to boast.

"I never knew the Methodist Church used to be there," he told Donati. "Just the other one, which is empty as far as I know."

The other nodded. “The Universalist Church. It’s empty. Though a young couple recently purchased it. They mean to turn it into a restaurant.”

This was news to Dante’s ears. The old man’s tone, however, was of a man speaking the grim truth.

“You don’t sound happy about it,” the boy delved.

“It will never happen,” replied Donati. “I’ve seen the inside of that church. It’s too far gone to restore. And the couple...” His eyes dropped to his cup before returning to Dante with a sad smile. “They’re very sweet but very young. Immature dreamers.”

“You’ve met them?”

“Ted and Martha Billings. They’re going to lose a fortune.”

“I’m...going to lose something, too,” Dante suddenly told him. “In fact I think I already have.”

The old man’s smile faded. Yet he was still listening, and quite intently. For his eyes had not changed. They had returned from the cup with an air of sadness. Now they looked inquisitive as well, to form a third milky potion between them.

“And what might that be?” he asked.

Dante swallowed hard before answering. “I’m in love with a girl from my school.”

∞

He told Donati everything he knew about Sunny Desdemona, which admittedly wasn’t much. She stood maybe four feet, seven inches tall to Dante’s five three. She had long red hair, with freckles on her cheeks. Her eyes were a green, like swimming grottos on a stormy island. She had lots of friends—or at least knew a lot of girls who liked her.

And of course, she was poison mean.

“Does *she* like *you*?” Donati asked.

He had refilled their cappuccinos whilst hearing the story. Dante seized his mug, eager to hide his blushing face. Why had he felt compelled to spill his guts to this relative stranger anyway? Why couldn’t he have kept his mouth shut?

To his surprise, the opera singer came forward with an answer. “You are in love,” he said, “that is why you speak the way you do. You have the heart of a poet, which is lovely—except chances are you will never be a rich man.” He leaned back in his chair. “Now tell me. *Does* she?”

Placing his cup on the table, Dante said, “I don’t think so.” His so-called poet’s heart sank with the confession. “When she catches me staring she always makes a face. Like, *you’re stupid, kid, go away.*”

“I see,” the older man replied. “Well then, answer me this: Do you think you can win her, if you put your mind to the task?”

“Maybe my heart.”

“No, boy. It must be your mind. A fisherman’s palate becomes moist when he his hungry, but he must catch the meal with his mind.”

Dante thought about it. *Could* he win Sunny? Was there a way to make her look at him with interest rather than scorn?

“Your love will inspire you,” Donati went on. “That is where the heart comes in. But you must be wily as well.”

And from here he told Dante a little story of his own. Once, he said, in 1830, a boy from Norwalk fell in love with a girl who attended school right here at number 114. She was a very beautiful girl (of course), with tumbling black hair like tornado clouds, and

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

