

Linehan's Trip

By Bryan Murphy

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Linehan's Trip

For once, Sean is happy that his flight is diverted, because it takes him somewhere he would rather be: Turin instead of Bergamo; the smog-free provincial city instead of the fog-shrouded capital.

His neuros are more welcome here than their owners, and he feeds a few into a line of luggage trolleys to release one. The trolley is not impressed.

“Only notes accepted,” it snaps, indignation apparent in its metallic voice.

Sean decides his luggage is light enough to carry, and stomps off to pay for it.

“Hey! Come back,” the trolley insists. “Please ...”

Even though it is barely ten in the morning, a passenger café is already open. So is a lightly-stocked news vendor. Sean buys “Padania Libera” for disguise and “Terzamano” for information. Then he eats as many doughy pastries as he can force himself to, and washes them down with coffee-stained hot milk, before going through the gates into the arrivals hall.

If he had landed at the international airport in Bergamo, there would have been a delegation, or at least someone from the Padanian Football Association to meet him. There has not been enough time for them to get someone to Borghezio Regional Airport, and Sean is on his own. Taxis are few, and the queue for them is long, but the airport shuttle is operating today. After having his luggage inspected and his wallet lightened, Sean is allowed on the bus. During the drive past wild fields into the city, Sean locates the ad he has placed in “Terzamano”, seeking a specific type of

ceramic statuette made in the Lenci factory in Turin nearly a hundred years earlier. The diversion to that city has given him a good chance of fulfilling his quest.

The shuttle dumps him outside the main railway station, and he sets off on foot down Via Sacchi, under the arcades, to the hotel they should have booked him into once they found out where he would be landing. There are not many people about. Their clothing lacks the sharpness and elegance of the Italian days. Some are even wearing what look like cassocks, although they cannot all be priests or choirboys, or even boys at all. The dominant colour is green, in various shades, mostly dark. Sean gets several wary looks, and a few hostile glances, but no-one challenges him. He understands why he had been asked to wear the Irish team jersey.

“Nice to see you again, Mr. Linehan,” the receptionist says.

“You’ve got a good memory,” he replies.

Sean remembers the Art Hotel Bossiton, but not the receptionist, from a previous visit. There had been a Lenci exhibition on. He had gone, been captivated by the statuettes’ mixture of naivety and optimism, colour and craftsmanship. He had started his collection soon after. The hotel had a slightly different name back then, and it was decked out with examples of contemporary art, Italian and foreign. There are far fewer now, and Sean does not recognise them. The receptionist notices him looking askance at one.

“That’s a Cerea. And the one next to it is a Bogianen.”

“Those names sound familiar, but I can’t quite place them.”

“They’re pseudonyms. The artists want the regime’s money, but not to be seen taking it. So they paint under names fashioned from words in dialect.”

Sean wonders whether the receptionist would have used the word “regime” if he had not been talking to a foreigner. As he takes his key, he asks who the airport was named after.

“Borghesio? A local independence hero. Assassinated on a tram.”

Sean notices a flicker of derision before an expression like mourning settles over the man’s face.

The instructions from FIFA headquarters in Zurich are to go out into the street as little as possible. Sean thinks that is an exaggerated precaution, but nonetheless takes the meagre lunch on offer in his room, while he tries to make sense of the sports pages of “Padania Libera”. There are laments about the parlous state of Padanian football, caused by foreign interference. After the pogroms made Padania a pariah state, most of the clubs, desperate to keep the television income they got from international competition, decamped – south to Italy, or north to France or Switzerland. The surrogates who replaced them were not up to scratch, and the only threat to Atalanta’s hegemony these days is a resurgent Pro Vercelli. Hundreds of professional players left, too, until the Wall made the very attempt a dangerous option. To make matters worse, Italy won the World Cup again in 2018, with a squad that included five “black” players, one Vietnamese–Italian and several born in Padanian territory who had the temerity to consider themselves “Italian”. Sean understands why the PFA is so keen to join FIFA, the world game’s governing body.

As he devours his lunch of sub–standard ingredients cooked well, Sean takes a call on the fixed phone from the PFA delegation. They will be there in two hours or so, depending on road blocks. Two hours is a long time in a hotel room.

“How about a girl?” Sean asks. “Like, now.”

“Sure,” comes the answer, “any preference?”

“Dark.”

“How dark?” There is worry in the voice.

“Oh, I get it. OK, Mediterranean.”

“All right.” Relief in the voice. “The receptionist will send her up in half an hour.”

An hour later, there is a knock on Sean’s door. He looks through the spy-hole then opens it cautiously. The young woman has a haunted look, but she is slim and raven-haired.

“OK,” says Sean. “You’ll do. Come on in.”

He keeps them waiting. They do not look much of a challenge to him. Sean strides into the hotel’s dimly lit meeting room and sits himself at the head of the long table.

“Only two?”

“One now, one tonight. That’s what you asked for, isn’t it?”

“Two of you. I know I’m not Uwe Splatta, who couldn’t, who could never ... but you did ask for me personally, Sean Linehan, out of all the FIFA officials on the planet, of whom there are many.”

“We, too, in Padania, have Celtic roots. Among Celts, there is a feeling, an understanding.”

“Well, this Sean Linehan was born in Kentish Town.”

“Kent?”

“London. Now, where’s my expenses? I had to pay for my luggage, pay for a luggage trolley, pay to jump the taxi queue, pay for the taxi, tip the bloody driver and his guard ...”

One of the Padanians takes a brown envelope from a pocket inside his dark green blazer and proffers it to Sean. Sean takes it. It is reassuringly heavy.

“OK,” he says, “let’s get straight to the matter in hand. You want to join FIFA, and we can’t let you in.”

The Padanians glance at each other in consternation. “But ...”

“Why do you want to join us anyway? You’d never win a thing. Your best clubs have de-bunked. Your best players have escaped. Even so, you’re still a good bet to lift the Non-FIFA World Cup. Aren’t you better off as a big fish in a tiny pool?”

The elder of the two men in green blazers looks at Sean steadily.

“It isn’t about winning. As de Coubertin said, it’s about taking part. And about taking our rightful place among the family of sporting nations.”

“The founder of the money-grabbing Olympic movement may be held in high esteem in Lausanne, but we in Zurich are less impressed by such amateur sentiments. I’m sure you people understand local rivalries.”

“Of course we understand. You’re quite right. But what’s your exact objection to ... us?”

“Let’s start with the small things. White skin as an eligibility criterion. For the national team. Even for club sides. In 2019. You really are taking the piss.”

“It’s the law of the land.”

“Not according to our lawyers. They have scrutinised the Padanian government’s laws. And they do not stipulate who can or cannot play football.”

“Ah, but the spirit ...”

“And if they do, that becomes the big thing: government interference in the affairs of a national association. No way will you get into FIFA with that going on.”

“You mean, without that, there’s a chance?”

“Aren’t you the clever boy? But not while skin colour is an eligibility criterion.”

“Do you have a suggestion?”

“Double smart. You don’t want blacks in your teams? We don’t want to know. Set an eligibility criterion that is, to all intents and purposes, reasonable. They have to have been born in Padania. You can do without Argies of Padanian extraction. There’s only Siluri who’s any good. Those that were born here, and can play a bit, and haven’t left yet, well, you quietly offer them a lot of cash to go and develop the game in their ‘home’ countries. You haven’t got the cash? Apply to us. We hand out loads of grants ‘to advance the game in developing nations’. Am I making sense to you?”

There was a hush.

“And so on and so forth. But one thing you cannot get round, ever, is government interference in the affairs of the national FA. Now, you people *are* the FA. Do you want the politicians telling you what to do and what not to do? You do not.”

“We do not. You are right. We do not. But the government does not listen to us.”

“Who the bloody hell does it listen to?”

“No-one. Or maybe to you.”

“Then next time you drag me all the way from Zurich, make sure there’s someone from the bloody government here to ‘maybe’ listen to

me. And I'll have a redhead and an African. Tonight I'll make do with a blonde. With some flesh on her."

Sean closes the door softly, deeply satisfied with himself. If he can bring a government minister to the negotiating table, even in a place like this, his standing in Zurich will rise lucratively.

When the Padnet connection in his room finally stutters into life, Sean checks his e-mail. He finds two answers to his ad, each with a landline number. The young woman who answers his first call refuses to speak anything other than Piedmontese, but the older-sounding man who takes his second call is prepared to use Italian, and even makes the effort to understand Sean's version of it. They arrange for Sean to visit the next day and examine his Lenci collection. Sean feels his trip is turning out extremely well. He opens the fridge, but it is empty. Undeterred, he digs a flask of schnapps out of his suitcase, settles down with it in front of the television and zaps between the two channels as he waits for his blonde.

"Did you sleep well, Mr. Linehan?" The receptionist's tone is neutral.

"Like a baby," answers Sean, "with the windows open and that warm, clean air flowing in. Marvellous! Now, how do I get to Via Verona?"

"You'd better take the hotel taxi. Everywhere in Padania is safe, of course. But our taxi is armour-plated. Just in case."

"Of course. You never know."

The old man is welcoming, once he has opened the multiple locks on the door of his apartment. He offers Sean coffee liquor from an old bottle. Sean accepts. The Lenci collection is not extensive, but it contains a piece Sean is after: a footballer in action, manufactured to commemorate Italy's 1934 World Cup victory. Sean derides the fact that the blue Italian shirt has been painted over in green, but secretly he is

pleased. He can get the paint removed when he comes to sell it on, and meanwhile he can imagine it as an Irish triumph. After all, if they had entered the 1934 tournament, who knows? The old man resists Sean's attempt to knock the price down on that score, but when Sean pulls out his brown envelope to let him know that payment will be made in euros, they soon come to an agreement.

In the taxi, Sean mulls over the benefits Padania offers the foreign visitor – “poverty tourism” in the heart of Western Europe – and how the government could encourage it without compromising its principles. God knows, they need the money, now that industry is grinding to a halt through lack of manpower. They could make the Japanese honorary whites, like the old apartheid regime did in South Africa, but what about all the Chinese and Indian tourists? He thinks that if they offer him a large enough consultancy fee, he can find a way.

The taxi cruises up the boulevard that leads from the river to the main railway station. There are not many cars out. The crowd of pedestrians has spilled further into the road than usual, and there is a commotion outside a church. The driver double-checks the locks as he brings the taxi to a halt. The church courtyard is full of men in green uniforms. Some are standing around a small pile of red and brown clothes. Others are carrying cans and wood, as though going to a barbecue.

The driver tells Sean that a group of Filipinos took refuge in that church a week ago. “I guess their spokesperson just had their appeal for safe conduct turned down by the Greenshirts,” he adds.

Sean looks hard and sees that the pile of clothes is really a human body. Filipinos! “Aren't they Catholics like the rest of you?”

The driver nods.

“And like my own parents were brought up to be,” Sean reminds himself. The driver inches the car forward through the curious crowd.

Sean asks the driver to wait for him outside the hotel. Inside, he hands the Lenci footballer to the receptionist. "I want you to have this."

The receptionist recognises it. "But this is valuable."

"So much the better."

Sean goes to his room, packs, and brings his own suitcase down. The receptionist is admiring the ceramic artwork.

"I'm checking out now. I have a meeting with the PFA before they take me to Dead Hero Airport. But I'm going to see a man about an even better one of those on the way, so I may be a bit late. If they ring, you can tell them where I've gone. Just ask them to wait for me."

The taxi driver handles the luggage, then opens and shuts the heavy passenger door for him.

"Bergamo International Airport."

"I can't go there."

Sean pulls his brown envelope from his money belt, counts out all the remaining notes, re-counts them, puts them back in the envelope, holds the envelope in front of the driver's face.

"I can't ..." He takes the envelope.

"Fast. The roads are free."

At Bergamo airport, Sean buys a ticket, with his own money, for the first plane leaving Padania. It takes him to Stansted. In London, he gives every media contact he has an embellished eye-witness account of the attack on the church and the people inside it. They are grateful for uncensored news out of Padania; some promise to use it.

He lets his sports contacts know that FIFA is going to take a tough stand against Padania on the issue of racism. Then he phones Zurich to

let Splatta know that the PFA officials had disclosed that even trivial decisions were made for them by the government.

That evening, Sean goes to Kentish Town. He checks out some of the pubs he knows, meets some of his former drinking buddies, and gets thoroughly drunk.

That night, he dreams of redheads and churches.

The next morning, Sean stares into the mirror and decides to look for a real girlfriend, of his own.

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About the author:

Bryan Murphy travelled extensively as a teacher of English as a foreign language before settling in Turin, Italy, where he worked as a translator. He now concentrates on acting for cinema and theatre, and on writing his own words. His poetry has appeared in places ranging from the Venice Biennale to the Brighton Evening Argus, and his stories reach an international audience. His short play, *Bar Londra*, is in the repertory of the Turin Theatre Company.

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Now read this extract from Bryan Murphy's novella of ideas,
Goodbye, Padania

Chapter 1

Esculent Pursuit

Turin, Republic of Padania, June 2032.

Daria hated working on an empty stomach. Unless her own flesh was well and recently nourished, the sound of her knife tearing someone else's flesh thoroughly nauseated her.

Right now, with a job to start, she needed to go and look for food. The tables in the dark, empty hotel restaurant were adorned only with dead flies, which meant she would have to venture into the grey, decaying city. She should locate the casino her target would be using. She might even find her target. In any case, she strapped the knife inside her cassock, its moulded plastic warming to her thigh. A gun, fitted with a silencer, would have been better, but guns and silencers were old technology, jaded memories of wealthier times. Knives were silent, though you could never count on their victims not to scream.

Daria did not expect the evening sunlight that dazzled her as she stepped out of the hotel lobby. When her eyes adjusted, they focused on evening commuters edging out of the railway station opposite. There were not many of them. They clustered around the tram stops between the station and the hotel, those in the green uniforms sauntering to their rightful place at the head.

Pale-faced beggars gave them a wide berth as they worked the queue.

“If I can get together a bit of capital,” Daria mused, “and a touch of enterprise, I could move sideways into people-smuggling.”

Now that emigration, as well as immigration, was banned, it was starting to be an enticing prospect, better than killing people you felt no hatred for. And this job would give her some capital, if she brought it off.

Daria snapped out of her reverie. There might be food at the station, but railway food was rarely nutritious at the best of times, and these were the worst of times.

She headed south, opposite the post office depot attached to the station. It still had a few battered vans loading and unloading. No shops or eating places on that side. On her side of the street, Daria passed a couple of open establishments, one selling bolts of fabric, the other doing good business in folk remedies. Then she caught a whiff of bread and turned off the main street to track it. On the corner of the side street and a small, harmonious square lined with abandoned cars was a baker's. The door examined her irises and let her in. Daria had not seen so much bread in one place since she had left Italy. A porcelain dog on the counter solicited donations to the PSPCA. Daria slid a handful of euros into its whining mouth. She was allocated half a dozen rolls. After the door let her out, she crossed into the heart of the small square and sat on a concrete bench to eat and plan.

The Paris-like elegance of the square's buildings was tarnished by the charred ruins of the church opposite her. What was it? San Salvario? No, there was a plaque: St. Peter and St. Paul, she read. That rang a bell. She ran her memory files. Yes, San Salvario was the name of the area, the former immigrants' ghetto. This was Largo Saluzzo, and the church was where, five years earlier, some of the last remaining immigrants in the city had taken refuge from the Greenshirts' pogrom. Although it had got rid of one of its “turbulent priests” in the blaze, the Roman Catholic

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