

Murder By Suicide

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Murder By Suicide

Frascati, Italy. 11 March 2040.

Parvaneh Peykan lived and died for poetry. That love was how we kidnapped the scumbag so easily.

She had come out of a poetry reading at the Duke of York's pub in Brighton. Dead chuffed, she was, and a little worse for drink. That lot cannot hold it – they do not get the practice. This one had been reading her own verses, and they had gone down a treat among the pinkos.

We waited till she had moved away from the people she had come out of the pub with, an independent woman striding off on her own, then I came up behind her, called her name and waved a book of her poems. I asked her if she'd be kind enough to autograph it. She agreed, of course, and when all her attention was on writing the curlicues of her name, the other agents came and crowded around with feigned interest. As soon as Carlo brought up the white van, we bundled her in, before she realised what was going on. None of those arty types from the pub had cars of their own, so we were well away before anyone raised the alarm. A few days later, we were back home in Italy and she was back home in Iran, in slightly less comfortable surroundings, no doubt.

What do you mean, what had she done? She was a dissident, wasn't she?

Blimey, a Muslim fundamentalist Iran was bad enough; a secular Iran was unthinkable. Look at all the trouble Turkey has caused us. In return for the poet, we got the ayatollahs' backing for a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council. Plus the regime leant on its Shia buddies in Iraq next door, where there was a war going on, to release the Italian soldiers or journalists who fell into their hands from time to time. It was a good deal, and it seemed like a job well done. But some of our team had not been careful.

There had been a lot of waiting around before we got the green light to act, and Brighton had plenty to offer spooks with time on their hands. Myself, I paid cash for all my amusements. You see, I was too young and impulsive to be trusted with a company credit card. But talk about "intelligence": some of the older hands flashed their plastic around like magic wands, and left an electronic trail that reeked right up into the nostrils of certain British bloodhound geeks, one in particular. Ah, you know, it was all such a long time ago. That is why I remember it so clearly.

It was a rank bad period for the fatherland, really rough. Looking back, they called it the "Italian Spring", because it lasted just three months. On April 11, the day the elections came up with the wrong result, Bernardo Provenzano was taken into custody. He was the head honcho of the Sicilian Mafia, and he had been on the run for forty years. No, "run" is the wrong word. He had spent most of those years sitting in various farmhouses near his home town, running his empire with written instructions carried to their targets by human couriers. For him to be arrested suddenly like that was shocking. And it was just the start. He was followed by politicians, bankers, football officials, footballers themselves even, TV presenters,

showgirls, clairvoyants, pretenders to the throne, businessmen. It really seemed, during those months, that any of the pillars of national life could be called to account for some trivial, perfectly run-of-the-mill piece of corruption or skulduggery.

In the middle of all this, the English police were investigating the kidnapping and disappearance of a dismal Persian poet. We tried to put them off, but this time it did not work. So much for allies. They roped in this computer type, Michael Adams, name I'll never forget. He had recently uncovered a neat – no, classical – American operation which infiltrated a mobile phone company and used it to monitor British bigwigs, the Prime Minister and all. The Brits were furious with the Yanks when it came to light, and our American colleagues were furious with Mr. Adams, which came in very handy for us because his next trick was to look at unusual spending patterns at Brighton hotels around the time of the poet's kidnapping. Well, the names on the company credit cards ended up on the pages of the British press. They were not the real names, of course, but even the man on the Clapham omnibus could sense that they were sort of Italian.

A week later, I was back in Brighton, with a different team. We used a range of safe houses, with a little help from our friends, and paid for everything in cash. We kept Mr. Adams under close watch, too close in my case. It turned out he had a girlfriend, one of those willowy English types, hair rinsed platinum by the rain, cheeks whipped red by the wind – nothing special but they have an exotic allure for us, I am sure you know what I mean – and since the two of them were not united in Holy Matrimony, I decided to offer her a little Latin loving. But the crazy bitch pretended not to be interested, and that is when Michael Adams' fate became more

personal than strictly professional. Let's put it like this: I wanted him out of the way.

Now, there are things you have to do for your country, all well and good. But if you start to do them for yourself, then you need to think about how you are going to answer for them to your God. And that can be uncomfortable.

The operation itself was simple and clean. We found him home alone one night and relieved him of his loneliness. Took him up to the cliffs and smashed his head in. Cranial trauma, as after a long fall. No, not me personally. I wanted to be the one so much that I could not trust myself to do it properly. Just as well. Beachy Head, that was the name of the place. We had to heave the body over the cliff. We did, but I stumbled. I really thought I was going over; it did not seem so bad. Angelo grabbed my coat and held me back.

Beachy Head was a traditional spot for suicides. The sea used to wash away the fallen bodies, but recently the crumbling cliff face had built up a platform of rubble at the bottom. That is where they found Adams the next day. Our persuaders managed to get it covered as suicide by the papers, before anyone looked at it too carefully. Gambling debts, blackmail by prostitutes, depression, drugs, anything to make it believable in the public mind and unbelievable to those who knew him closely. Yeah, that is the point. That is the way we operate. Anyone tempted to emulate misdemeanours like Mr. Adams' has to know how slippery is the slope they are embarking on. We sacrifice one life to save others. We are good guys really.

Yeah, it worked, usually does, even though Michael Adams got a few glowing obituaries. Someone even called him a national hero. If that was so, he was soon a forgotten one. Back home, nobody wanted to look into it very closely. British

business, not ours. Besides, the Italian Spring was well and truly over. Are you a football man? Well, on 9 July 2006, against all the odds, we triumphed in the World Cup, and people realised the system worked after all; it was best not tampered with.

My career got a boost, for a while, though I never got another crack at the girl. And frankly, I started having qualms about how far God wanted me to do the things my country asked of me. My superiors noticed that. And even in Italy, the Church was a declining power. Although it was basically back to business as usual, that business now involved more Mammon and less Pope. But, with God's help, I have survived over the decades. Adapted and survived.

Well, thanks again for the coffee, Mr, er, Satrapi. I won't drink it just yet, if you do not mind. I will let it grow cold – prefer it that way. No, no ice thanks, that would dilute the taste. I will drink it after you leave. Thank you for calling on me. Have a safe journey.

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Now read the follow-up to *Murder By Suicide*.

SuperOldie

St. Joshua's Nursing Home, Frascati, Italy, March 2040.

Franco Tira stared into the cup of coffee his Persian visitor had set in front of him before leaving. “A thimbleful of black slime” Samantha would have called it, back in Franco’s halcyon days.

He sniffed: notes of lemon and almond tickled his nostrils. Franco could not tell whether the aroma wafted there from the cup or from trees in the garden of the nursing home. Or just his mind. He imagined poison in the bottom of the cup calling to him, offering him a quick fix for his cancer.

Samantha: another of his failures. On a personal level.

On a professional level, she had not stopped him from ‘suiciding’ the computer nerd who blew the gaff on the Service’s exemplary kidnapping of a Persian dissident on the streets of some provincial seaside resort in England. Just the opposite: his lust for Samantha had made it easier to terminate the rivalry from her boyfriend. It was just unfortunate that she had not taken up Franco’s offer of an immediate, superior replacement.

Franco wondered if she was still alive, if she still had that pale English complexion he used to go for. The Persian poetess, on the other hand, must be long dead, the

Islamic Republic having been lavish in its gifts to Italy in return for her rendition. But now that régime was no more, and its secret files must have fallen into hands eager to settle old scores. Hence, he assumed, his recent, oh so rare, visitor from the outside world. Well, maybe it was time.

Franco lifted the cup to his mouth. His hand shook. A little of the coffee splashed onto his lower lip. Franco jerked his head back: the coffee was cold. Franco set the cup down and used a sleeve to wipe the disgusting liquid from his mouth. A figure shuffled past him, picked up the cup, smiled.

“If you don’t want it, I’ll have it.”

Franco leapt to his feet. His hand flew out, slapped the cup out of the other man’s shaking hand and sent it flying into a once-white wall, where it broke into smithereens and its contents left a dark brown mark.

The man opposite Franco burst into tears.

“What did you ... did you do that for?”

“There was poison in it. It was meant for me, not you.”

“You won’t let me have your coffee, even if you don’t want it?”

“Damned right I won’t. Get your own bloody poison. Find your own enemies.”

The man’s wet eyes stared at Franco. Franco lurched over. He felt fire in his belly, but this time it was burning his intestines. He lunged towards the lavatories, but did not make it. He went down in a heap. He retched for a while, and then was still. The other man looked at Franco serenely, gave a vague smile and hobbled out of the room, leaving it empty except for the body on the floor.

Franco opened his eyes. He had been put to bed in a single room. His tongue was furry, but he felt cool. He reached a hand under the clean sheets and placed it on his abdomen. As far as he could tell, his intestines were undisturbed. He let out a long sigh.

“Thank you, Mr. Tira, actually. I do thank you.”

Franco started. Was he hearing voices now? Then he saw that there was someone in the chair next to his bed: the man who had tried to drink his coffee.

“I understand you saved my life.”

“Yeah, the Lone Ranger, that’s me. Look, just call me Franco. Who the hell are you?”

“Dunby. Hard done by, I used to say. The new English Patient. Charles, I think. Yes, Charlie. You see, I didn’t realise at first.”

“You don’t know your own name?”

“Oh, I do. It is Charlie. Sometimes I’m not sure, though. I didn’t realise you saved my life.”

“Didn’t realise? What are you, demented?”

“Yes, I am. It isn’t fun.”

“OK, Charlie. The Lone Ranger here needs to get some sleep.”

“You’ve *been* sleeping. And calling out ‘Sam! Sam!’ Is he your enemy, Mr. Franco?”

“Sam? Samantha. No, she’s not my enemy. Just one of my failures.”

“What? You have failures, too?”

“On a personal level. On a professional level, she actually helped me.”

“What do you mean? Tell me what you mean.”

“Well, once I had to serve my Country by kidnapping a Persian poet, a lady, who was living free as a bird in England, of all places, saying bad things about her government.”

“Everybody does that, Franco.”

“Yeah, well, we sent her home and they shut her up pretty damned quick. Very grateful they were, too. Italy got a lot of good business in return for that little number.”

“Good business. So that was Samantha?”

“No. Sam was pretty. One of those pale English types, willowy, ethereal, beautiful I thought. I met her when we had to deal with her boyfriend. The idiot was a computer nerd. Picked up our electronic trail and tried to blow the gaff on our operation. Naturally, once we’d hushed it up, thanks to our British friends, we had to take care of him. Lusting after his girlfriend gave me an extra incentive to do a good

job. Which I did.”

“What? You didn’t!”

“I did. I did my duty. With relish.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“After we’d got rid of him, I offered her an immediate, superior replacement.

Unfortunately, she declined.”

“Why isn’t she your enemy?”

“She’s dead. Killed herself.”

“All your enemies are dead.”

“No, they’re not. The new Persia has a long memory. I think they want vengeance for their national poet. That’s what the new regime calls her. They’ll feel cheated if God does His work before they can. Not that I care, much.”

“You saved my life.”

“That’ll spare me a few Hail Marys. Now eff off and let me sleep.”

Franco turned on his side, away from Charlie’s stare, closed his eyes and tried to calm his thoughts.

Franco slept, and woke refreshed. He got up, washed and dressed. He felt as well as he ever did these days. Dying could wait. He phoned his former employers to report the attempt on his life. They were not sympathetic. Someone with a Persian surname had paid him a visit; they had left him a cup of coffee, which he had not drunk; neither cup nor contents were available for analysis. The government wanted to build good relations with the new Persia. The Service had full confidence in Franco’s ability to look after himself: once a spook, always a spook.

Franco monitored his intestines for burning sensations, but all he could feel were stirrings of hunger. He realised that he had not eaten since the previous day, and that he wanted to. He avoided the canteen, where the massed presence of his fellow terminal patients oppressed him. Instead, he went to the vending machine in the corridor outside it. He found Charlie staring blankly at it.

“What’s up, Charlie, don’t you know how it works? Do you want me to show

you?”

“I want strawberries.”

“The machine doesn’t sell strawberries.”

“Strawberries.”

“Only in the market.”

“Can’t go there.”

“Well, I can, and I’ll take you.”

“They won’t let me. I would have to be accompanied by one of them. For reasons of – something.”

“Do you want strawberries?”

“Yes.”

“So do I. Now, go and sit on the garden bench nearest the gate. I’ll join you there in ten minutes. Do you think you can manage that?”

“Of course I can. I’m demented, not stupid.”

Ten minutes later, Charlie was sitting on a bench in the nursing home garden, staring into the distance. Franco winked as he walked past him to the gate, but Charlie did not respond. Franco keyed in the code he had hacked, and the gate clicked open. Charlie was at his shoulder, and shuffled through. Franco checked that they were unobserved, then followed him. He kept close to the older man as they ambled down the leafy lane towards the centre of the small town.

“Good to be out, eh, Charlie?”

“I’ve been here before.”

The market was winding down for the day, but there was no lack of stalls selling strawberries. Franco chose one of the few Italian traders, and asked for a kilo. Charlie scrabbled in his pocket.

“Put your money away, Charlie. These are on me.”

Franco handed over a twenty-neuro note and got some coins back. He handed the open bag of fruit to Charlie as they walked away.

“Dig in, Charlie. You be the guinea pig.”

Charlie was gazing at Franco's hand that held the coins.

"He cheated you, Franco. The bugger short-changed you."

A yelp from behind them made them both start. They turned to see the man who had sold them the fruit holding one hand in the other and blowing on it, cursing and whimpering. Other traders and customers crowded round him. The trader pushed his way through the crowd, ran to the nearest fountain and plunged his hand under the stream of cool water, while his face reddened and his words became bluer.

Franco thought it wise to move Charlie as fast as practicable in the opposite direction. Once they were out of sight of the market, Franco pulled Charlie off the street into a small park and sat him on one of its wooden benches.

"Here, Charlie, did you do that?"

"I don't know."

For the next twenty minutes, the nannies, office workers and healthy pensioners strolling in the park were treated to the sight of two rather decrepit old men trying not to choke as they laughed themselves silly while stuffing their faces with strawberries. The laughter proved infectious.

Franco and Charlie waited outside the gate to the nursing home garden until the coast was clear.

"Can't you open this Charlie? Just with will-power or something."

"I can have a go. Let me concentrate."

Charlie closed his eyes and lowered his head.

"Has that done it?"

"No. The damned thing's still locked."

Franco keyed in the code. The gate opened and they crept in.

"That was a lark, Franco. Thank you."

"Any time, my friend. Just let me know what I can do for you."

Franco's mind was already buzzing with ideas about what Charlie might do for him. Protection from a Persian vendetta was top of his list.

Franco and Charlie were sitting together in the day room over a slow game of noughts and crosses when a carer came to tell Franco he had a visitor. As he gave Franco the news, he squeezed Charlie's shoulder affectionately.

“Santa Madonna! What's his name?”

“Orsini. The Honourable Doctor Solipso Orsini. He insisted on the Doctor. I think I've seen him on the telly. Shall I bring him in?”

“Oh, yes, thanks. Just check his identity first, would you?”

A robust man with cold eyes and a salt-and-pepper beard strode beaming towards Franco. He was about to grab Charlie's seat when Franco pointed to an empty chair next to it.

“Our mutual friends –” The newcomer dropped his voice. “No-one can hear us, right?” He looked around at the room filled with patients and carers. “Our mutual friends asked me to come and see how you were doing.”

Franco snorted.

“They thought you might be getting paranoid. It often happens to our retirees. They are not all as level-headed as you are. Anyway, since I'm on the House Committee – are you playing noughts and crosses with yourself? You know you are like a brother to me, Franco, when they asked me to do a quick check, I carried out an in-depth investigation.”

“And?”

“And it turns out there are indeed some Persians with dubious pasts currently abusing the hospitality of our country.”

Orsini reached into a pocket of his waistcoat and pulled out a Padipad. He wiped his thumb on his jacket and turned it on. Nothing happened. Charlie flicked his eyes over it and the surface sprang to life.

“It's a bit slow today. Here we are. Have a look at these.”

Images of shapely women in unlikely postures appeared on the screen.

“Er, not those.”

Orsini jabbed frantically at the screen. Eventually he was satisfied.

“Here, these. Anybody you recognise?”

He passed the Padipad to Franco. Franco flicked through five mugshots. Only the fourth one was familiar. He flicked back to it and laid it in front of Charlie.

“That’s the man who came to see me last week.”

Orsini snatched the pad from the table and brought it close to his eyes.

“I think he wanted to interfere with God’s plans for me, such as they are.”

“Yes, well, he’s not alone. There is a team of five, but don’t worry. I’m going to have them all expelled. Or incapacitated.”

“If you can find them.”

“Don’t fret, we will. Just relax, my dear fellow.”

“I’d like you to move me somewhere safer, Solipso. A country villa would suit me.”

“Too expensive, dear chap. But don’t fret. God will protect you. As will I, your brother-in-arms. Now, let me hug you before I go.”

Orsini and Franco both rose. Orsini moved to Franco. His thick legs banged Charlie’s thin knees as he brushed past. Charlie winced. Franco opened his mouth to admonish Orsini, but the man’s frame disappeared before his eyes. Nonetheless, Franco found himself gripped in a crushing embrace.

“My dear friend, everything will be all right. Why that shocked face? I will see you again soon!”

“It’s more that –”

Orsini had released him and turned away. He waved a thick arm to summon a carer to escort him out. Orsini gestured to every carer he could distinguish from a patient. None acknowledged him. Red in the face, he began to shout.

“Hey! One of you lazy good-for-nothings come and escort me to my car, or do I have to find my own way out of this dump?”

Nobody moved in his direction. Orsini felt sweat rise on his brow and trickle down his face. Franco came to his rescue.

“I’ll accompany you. I know all the codes.” He moved towards the door but banged into a wall of trembling flesh.

“Here, stand next to me and take my arm. I’ll see you out. It’s OK, Solipso, just

hold on to me.”

Franco led Orsini to his car. His bulky figure became clear in the sunlight. His face was white and there were damp patches on his suit. The chauffeur tried to look nonchalant as he opened the door for his boss and helped him into the car.

“What did you think of Charlie?”

Orsini wound down the window and stared at Franco. His eyes flickered to the wing mirror.

“The man who was sitting next to me.”

“Who? What? Don’t play mind games with me, Tira! I’ve had enough paranoid shit for one day.”

“A mansion in the country would be nice.”

The car drove off, spitting gravel against Franco’s trousers.

Franco kept an eye on Charlie. He made sure that none of the patients took advantage of the foreigner, and he alerted carers to Charlie’s needs when he had trouble articulating them for himself. Franco looked on it as an investment.

Because Charlie had so enjoyed their market escapade, Franco got permission first to accompany Charlie into the town and back, and then for Charlie to come with him when Franco went into Rome for some tests at the Polyclinic. The two of them sat together in the back of the nursing home’s vehicle, each staring out of a window.

“Blimey, London’s changed!” said Charlie.

On the way back, as they pulled off the main road on the edge of Frascati into the approach road to the nursing home, the driver slowed down as he passed and noticed the fine legs on a woman with her head under the bonnet of a car. He pulled over and got out.

“Anything I can help you with, Signorina?”

“Yes.” The woman closed the bonnet and turned to face the driver. She had a revolver in her hand. “I’ll have your car keys.”

Franco saw this through the back window.

“Make me invisible!” he hissed at Charlie. Charlie nodded and closed his eyes.

“Right away, Signora.” The driver walked back to the car, wiped his forehead, reached in, took the key from the ignition and handed it over to the woman.

“Thank you. Now get in.”

The driver complied. The woman looked behind him.

“I’ll have you out, Mr Tira.” She opened the rear door for him. Franco clambered out. Before he could make a move to disarm her, she hit him on the temple with the gun. Franco smelt the familiar odour of warm blood as it oozed down his face. Dizziness made his legs buckle, and he went down on all fours.

“Good. This is how scum like you should die: on their knees.”

The woman brought the revolver to Franco’s other, clean temple.

“Can I just say a prayer before – ?”

“Be my guest.”

Franco started muttering in Church Latin. His mind took him back to his days as an altar boy and put words he had learned then into his mouth.

I still don’t know what most of this stuff means, he thought, but the more I manage to regurgitate now, the longer I might keep living.

The words he churned out did not interfere with his thoughts.

I’ve done many bad things in my life, things that only the Almighty could forgive, and even He might prefer not to. But my idea of penance is not getting my brains blown out beside a country road, especially not by a woman seeking revenge for what I did in the line of duty. No, I’m not ready to meet my Maker.

The words kept flowing. The part of Franco’s brain that was supposed to flash his life before him was stuck in the Church vestry, on an image of shame and pain. Franco hesitated, sent the torrent of ritual Latin flowing again, inventing where memory failed him.

If the woman really is Persian, she won’t spot the difference.

Franco’s knees ached. The gun stayed in the same position against his temple. It seemed that no-one and nothing moved. Franco commended his soul to God and inadvertently bowed his head. The gun did not follow its movement. From the corner of his eye, still babbling in Church Latin, Franco looked at his executioner. The

woman had an ecstatic expression on her face, but it, like the rest of her, was entirely static. Franco threw all his weight against her legs and the woman keeled over. The gun flew from her hand. Franco pushed himself off her rigid legs and went for her throat, but realised that she was inert, as though her body were frozen. He got to his feet, brushed himself down, ascertained that the would-be assassin was still breathing and, keeping her in his sight, retrieved the gun. He trained it on the woman as he moved to the car and spoke to the driver.

“Call the police.”

“I already have.”

“You got a tow rope?”

“No.”

“Anything else we can tie her up with?”

“I’m afraid not.”

Franco walked back to the woman. A bullet in the leg would keep her from running away, if her paralysis wore off. His aim was disturbed by the sound of garbled Latin, words like those he had been reciting minutes before. He turned and located the source. Charlie had wound down the passenger window of the car and was leaning out, echoing Franco’s earlier words and gesturing “No!” with a shaking hand. Franco walked over to him.

“I’m sorry, Franco. I’m sorry I couldn’t make you invisible.”

“It’s all right Charlie. You did the next best thing.”

“You aren’t going to, are you? You aren’t?”

“You keep her like that until the police arrive, and I won’t shoot her, I promise. Do you think you can?”

“I can, Franco. I can try. I can.”

“It’s all right, Charlie. You just try.”

The woman’s muscles gradually relaxed and her body took up a more natural position on the ground. Franco asked himself whether she was conscious enough to warrant a bullet, in breach of his promise to Charlie. The sound of sirens stayed his trigger finger. Two police squad cars came into view. Before they screeched to a halt

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