

Ravello Tales Award 2018

# WHEN GIUSEPPE MET JACKIE

Lesley Synge



Consorzio Promozione Turistica Ravello-Scala  
Centro Universitario Europeo per i Beni Culturali



Ravello Tales  
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Submissions are open for the Ravello Tales Award 2019. Anyone can compete sending - by the 15th of November 2019 - a short narrative in English inspired by Ravello (12.000 words as an indication) together with his/her bio-note (150 words).

The award will consist of the publication of the winning short narrative, plus a 1-week stay in Ravello (for two persons), in one of the hotels of the Consorzio Ravello Scala.

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## 1. The three figures

On their second evening in Ravello, the Piccolos – Giovanna, Casimiro and Lucio – are sipping after-dinner vermouths in a far corner bar in the piazza while observing the town's mayor build to a crescendo of welcome. '*Allora*, Jacqueline Kennedy, first lady of the United States of America, I present you with the beach buggies you can see across the square. Compliments of Signor Agnelli.'

Jackie Kennedy gives a dazzling smile but her *Grazie mille* is barely audible above the hub-bub.

'What a strange purr she has!' Giovanna observes discreetly to her brothers.

'Like a Persian cat,' agrees Lucio.

Casimiro wiggles his eyebrows. They look like two twigs above his stick of a nose, his expression as obtuse as a portrait by Modigliani.

The American celebrity has arrived in the peaceful clifftop village for three weeks' holiday on what happens to be a particularly hot August night. The three noble Sicilians are also feeling the heat but the noise is worse. Three recluses, they are flummoxed to find themselves caught up in their first encounter with celebrity worship.

‘You’ll need the buggies Mrs Kennedy!’ says the mayor, clearly bedazzled by the American in her shimmery dress. ‘They’ll get you down to the port where your speedboat will be waiting and you’ll be water skiing in Conca dei Marini in no time.’

Jackie smooths her glossy dark hair and smiles another thankyou.

She is radiant, Giovanna thinks, suddenly aware of her own sombre apparel and the wispy grey of her once sumptuously dark hair. She’s in her prime – her early thirties, I would guess – and I am seventy-one. She leans towards Casimiro. ‘Shall we return to the hotel for your camera?’

Her brother shudders. ‘Sometimes a camera is, is,’ he stutters, ‘an impediment. An obstacle.’ His voice drops to a whisper. ‘Giuseppe sees everything. Everywhere. He is urging me – refrain from capture, commit all to memory. Look first, create later, he tells me. It’s the same technique he used when writing *Il Gattopardo*.’ He taps the crown of his head with a long index finger.

‘Is that how it is this evening?’ Lucio inquires quietly of their older brother. He catches the eye of a busy waiter. ‘Camomile tea for Baron Piccolo di Calanovella,’ he orders.

‘For the signore?’ asks the young man, rattled by the pallor and tremors of the older male at the table.

‘For three,’ clarifies Lucio. ‘Setting for five. As you did yesterday.’

At their home in the seaside town of Capo d'Orlando in northern Sicily, the staff always set places for their absent mother, Princess Theresa Mastrogiovanni, and for their absent cousin, Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa. Lucio insists on continuing their custom here, regardless of how bizarre the waiters of Campagna find it.

He rests a gentle hand on his brother's shoulder. 'Casimiro, can you forgive me,' he pleads. 'Ravello seemed to be the perfect place to mark the five years since our cousin left us, and the eight since Dear Puss. I had no idea we'd encounter –' he pauses to indicate the crush inside the bar and the even greater crush outside in Piazza Duomo '– this.'

But the hub-bub, in the bar at least, is ebbing because the mayor is indicating to Mrs Jacqueline Kennedy and her entourage that it's time to exit. The nostrils of the Piccolos flare a little as they register the French perfumes that Jackie and her sister Lee leave in their wake.

The piazza is decorated in red, green, blue and white lights and homemade signs of WELCOME JACKIE. Apart from locals and tourists there are some eighty photographers training their cameras on the doors of the bar and shouting 'Smile, Jackie, smile!' Beyond them, a brass band is waiting in formation in the centre of the square facing where the Bishop of Ravello stands majestic in the doorway of his cathedral. At exactly seven the Duomo bells chime the hour; tonight doubling as

the signal for the band to strike up. As violent as an overture by Verdi, a huge wave of sound crashes around the piazza.

Feigning calm, Lucio lights a cigarette for Casimiro then one for himself. The brothers smoke until the tea arrives. As their waiter places each of the five teacups and saucers on their table, he can barely contain his excitement. He indicates a woman through the window holding onto the hands of two small children dressed in tarantella costumes. 'The wife of the mayor,' he says. 'With the *bambini Americani*. The children of the president of the USA.'

The four-year-old is indeed Caroline, the president's daughter, but it is not John Kennedy Junior they see, but a cousin. Jackie is having a holiday away from all the cares of Washington, including her toddler son who has remained in the White House with his English nanny; her sister Lee has similarly left her younger child behind in London, bringing only the older boy. (Unlike Jackie, she has also brought her husband.)

Caroline spies her mother and rushes forward. The trio smiles to see Jackie smooth her daughter's hair and admire her tambourine. The mayor and his wife then guide the celebrity deeper into the crowded piazza.

'It's not fair that Giuseppe speaks only to you, Casimiro,' Lucio states in mock jealousy, in between sips of tea. 'He never deigns to give me guidance now. I can't rely on him to remember

anything for *me*. I have to use pencil and paper.’ He pats at the pocket of his vest with an increasingly despairing air while his fluffy white dog Puck gives a series of sharp yaps.

Wordlessly, Giovanna extracts the notebook that she purchased a bare hour ago. In her room in Palazzo d’Afflitto are the two sketchbooks that she brought with her to record the gardens of Ravello but the local product, with its marbled endpapers and creamy handmade leaves, proved too beautiful to resist. Selflessly, she hands her purchase to her younger brother. He thanks her by inclining his head.

‘*Va bene*,’ says Lucio as he pushes the tea things back. ‘Help me Casimiro,’ and he points to the first lady through the glass. *Long neck*, he jots down on the top of the first page.

Casimiro immediately adds to it, ‘White as a swan’s.’

Lucio records the simile and continues. ‘Exquisite collar bones.’

‘Stroke-me bones, covered with ivory skin.’

‘Black hair.’

‘Bouffant style.’

‘Thick eyelashes.’

‘As flirtatious as a camel’s.’

‘Arched eyebrows.’

‘All the better to *hook* you with.’

Casimiro’s tone suggests that he’s quoting from an unrevealed source; Lucio and Giovanna each suspect he’s ‘hearing’ their dead cousin. Giuseppe

was a married man (and an experienced man), one who could comment on women with authority, whereas Casimiro is strictly an observer.

‘White teeth,’ continues Lucio.

‘Those teeth!’ admires Casimiro, enjoying the game. He clacks and bares his own; they are somewhat yellowed because he is, after all, sixty-eight. ‘I can’t help but think of the way our last puppy Toot smiled at Dear Puss every morning at breakfast.’ All the much-loved pets of the family Piccolo lie under individual tombstones in the pet cemetery to the east of the villa, near the olive grove; their names are easy to recall because they are visited often and conversed with.

‘I protest your constant comparisons with one animal after another,’ Lucio scolds.

‘To be precise – teeth like an ocelot,’ confirms Casimiro. ‘All the better to *eat* you with, Giuseppe says. Anyway, I like animals. They are more sensitive than humans.’

‘Big brown eyes,’ Lucio resumes.

‘The colour of espresso,’ Casimiro concedes.

‘Bravo. A poem evolves.’

They continue to play with words while their sister seems to be lost in thought.

*Gianni Agnelli.* Giovanna lets her lips curl soundlessly around the name. She doesn’t yet know that he and his wife attend dinner parties with the Kennedys in New York but, like all Italians, she is familiar with the industrialist family who saved the Italian post-war economy with the popularity

of their Fiat motorcars. *Gianni Agnelli, Fiat's glamorous son*. A lover, not only of cars, but of art and women. Especially women. Despite marriage and children, Gianni Agnelli continues to be the playboy. Forty, broad-shouldered, strong of limb, blessed with an impressive noble head – perhaps more like that of a victorious centurion than that of an aristocrat – Gianni Agnelli is a favourite of the press. When he bought a French villa from the King of Belgium they couldn't get enough of the wild parties of his youth; now he's settled down in Turin to run the company, he's still their darling.

Lucio, tiring of his list, closes the notebook and observes, 'Thankfully we're hidden away here.' As if seeking greater camouflage than their corner table and dark attire already provide, the sixty-year-old turns his back on the crowd at the front of the bar and gazes through the glass behind him, across the valley. Dusk is falling on the terraced hillsides where the locals cultivate their lemon trees, vegetable plots and olive groves. He catches sight of their young man, Pietro, the third son of Villa Piccolo's gardener. He is standing on the low wall that runs around the piazza, absorbed in the spectacle.

'Packed to the gills. No room at all,' complains a voice.

Lucio twists around to see two English-speaking foreigners in their late thirties dressed in sports jackets and light-coloured trousers.

They are running their eyes enviously over the bar's seated patrons.

'Do please take our table,' he offers swiftly, in English.

Instantly, and in accord, Giovanna and Casimiro rise to their feet while Lucio slaps down some lira notes for the bill. He reaches back to rap on the glass to raise their young man waiting outside, and scoops Puck up.

Pietro jumps down from his vantage point to assist as he is employed to do.

'The hotel,' says Lucio, at the doorway. 'After seeing us safely home, you may return,' he adds, knowing that his siblings would approve. What has their boy seen of the world except for the annual La Madonna di Capo d'Orlando festival?

The three figures weave through the throng of tarantella dancers to Via San Giovanni, Lucio arm-in-arm with Giovanna, Casimiro assisted by Pietro. The old man is trembling; he's in the state the family calls *delicato*.

The sounds of the piazza's manic joy follow them up the steps on the breeze. They reach the refuge of their rooms as night falls.



## 2. Lost message

Lucio's publisher has commissioned him to translate a short story by E. M. Forster – the one that the English novelist wrote some sixty years ago on the Grand Tour he took with his mother. Before finalising it, Lucio decided to see Ravello for himself. He therefore proposed what he called a 'Piccolo summer retreat' to his brother and sister.

'Ravello is the holy grail for every Italian, for every European with a soul,' Lucio enthused. 'We are happy with our own lives, but why not experience firsthand *exactly why* the rich medieval town in the old kingdom of Napoli managed to inspire so many geniuses? Why is it the landscape of magnificent dreams?'

Giovanna warmed to the plan but, being cautious, she wrote to the owner of Palazzo d'Afflitto, the pivotal figure in preserving the famed gardens of Ravello. Are the gardens open to the public? In ornate handwriting he replied:

*Thank you dear Signora, for your kind words about my commitment to the gardens here. Our gardens do, as you say, manifest the sacred.*

*Speaking now as a modern man, they also function as drawcards for tourists who power the economy and bring work to the townspeople. Yes of course I would be delighted to facilitate your visit here, as would our mayor and fellow advocate. As you are the most knowledgeable horticulturalist and botanist in Sicily, the first to grow Andean Puya (Puya berteroniana) on European soil, we would both consider it an honour to assist you. If your brother Lucio, the esteemed poet, has not yet booked a place to stay, let me advise that I keep rooms here at for guests and would welcome your visit.*

Giovanna read the letter aloud at the lunch table and declared she was in accord with 'the retreat proposal'. Casimiro fetched his Leica and put it on the table to show where he stood. Their Lancia Lambda (1930 vintage) would never cope with going such a distance so, despite 1962 being the year of train disasters, they booked first class seats to Salerno and a driver to take them up the sinuous road to Ravello.

It was the same precipitous and spectacular route that the first lady and her entourage would take, the day after the Piccolos did. She, of course, did so with a sizeable escort of *polizia di stato* and *carabinieri* as well as her American Secret Service minders; the trio from Sicily had only Lucio's fluffy dog and seventeen-year-old Pietro.

As their taxi climbed the ribbon of road to the small plain on which Ravello is situated far

above sea level, each was moved by breathtaking views of the sheer dark cliffs that drop into the sparkling blue of the Gulf of Salerno. The Amalfi Coast's legendary beauty looked set to enchant them, as it enchanted all visitors. They had, each of them, been so moved as to weep. The driver merely flung the car nonchalantly around another hairpin bend and intoned, *Normale*.

But once Jackie Kennedy arrived the shy trio is swept from peaceful appreciation of the sights into a boisterous carnival. Ravello is choked with people. Everyone in Italy wants to see her. Hotel rooms book out fast – in any case, after rooms are procured for the armed services of the United States of America and the Republic of Italy, *and* for the army of photographers, there aren't many left. Italo-Americans, especially those who originate from the Amalfi Coast, are flocking back to see family or friends and add to the crush. As well, there is an influx of wealthy Italians, all of whom seem to have hopes of forging better business links with America. Little wonder that community leaders such as the mayor and their hotelier are run off their feet.

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After enduring the WELCOME JACKIE party, the trio of advancing years closet themselves in Palazzo d'Afflitto. 'There is no disadvantage in doing so,' says Lucio, and the others agree. The

food, for a start, is excellent. They particularly like the grilled octopus which, they are told, is caught off Amalfi and sent up the mountain by donkey at first light. ('If it was good enough for Richard Wagner to arrive here by donkey, it is good enough for my sea food!' jokes the hotelier.) The old palace garden with its trailing wisteria and roses is delightful, and the dramatic view of the Tyrrhenian Sea is endlessly attractive. Of course they see *Mar Tirreno* from the hill on which Villa Piccolo is situated but here there's no coastal plain to soothe their long view to the water – instead there's a dramatic drop of over 300 metres – which makes the vista intensely novel. They especially like nightfall when the lights come on in Amalfi, Minori, Maiori and the other small villages that lie below along the Campanian coastline.

'Like a tangle of glittering necklaces,' observes Giovanna each night.

'A serpent scooting south,' Casimiro contradicts.

Lucio admires the fishermen's boats that glow on the dark sea. 'Those brave fishermen,' he always says. So immersed is he, in his translation of 'The Story of a Panic', that he sometimes quite unknowingly speaks in English.

As for Pietro, he is making the most of the days off. He befriends the hotel gardener and Bartolo, the boy of sixteen who helps with weeding and watering; these friendships embed him in the heart of Ravello. He discovers, for example, that

the boss is far more closely connected to Jackie Kennedy than the Piccolos realise. He has been told that the American celebrity likes roses so he sends the boys over to Villa Episcopio with a bunch of beauties, every morning. ('Pick them early, with morning dew on their petals,' he instructs them.) Pietro is making pocket money doing this, and also in delivering bunches of flowers to various guesthouses, as well as assisting tourists who are struggling with their luggage up Ravello's steep lanes. Every evening, he tallies his tips then joins Bartolo and other young men – they always seem to gravitate to watching the moon rise over the sea. Sometimes Salvatore, the fisherman's son who brings the seafood up on his donkey, is able to join them. They share cigarettes and talk about their dreams and the peculiarities of their bosses. They sing the songs with which they plan to serenade their future girlfriends. Bartolo and Salvatore assert that, based on the strength and tenderness of his voice, the Sicilian will be the first to marry.



Lucio looks up from the small garden table on which he is executing his translation and exclaims, 'I've never seen anything like it – we're afloat. No – we're flying. This unity of sea and sky is crazy! We're untethered! What would Giuseppe make of it?'

‘He liked horizons with definition,’ Giovanna posits, loyal to Capo d’Orlando. ‘That’s why he escaped from Palermo to us as often as he could, to sit and gaze across to the Aeolian Islands. He loved strong lines: horizon dividing sea and sky; the twin humps of the island of Salina. Nothing would overtake *that* love.’

‘Without our seascape would he have created the character of Prince Salina for *Il Gattopardo*?’ Lucio muses. ‘But I don’t agree with you Giovanna – I believe that Giuseppe was quite ambivalent about Sicily’s violent landscape and its cruel, hot climate. He was not at all in love with it. Ravello is – heavenly. What he *would* make of it?’

‘He prefers neither one nor the other,’ Casimiro announces. ‘Look! He is writing to us!’ Casimiro indicates an elaborate and evolving cuneiform pattern far below them. The boats of tourist operators and fishermen seem to him to be tracing arcane messages in their white wakes on the blue expanse of the Gulf of Salerno.

‘What’s he saying?’ asks Giovanna indulgently.

‘I’m unable, as yet, to decipher it. Something about trees.’

Lucio is about to parry something playful. He and cousin Giuseppe had discussed Casimiro’s singular personality from boyhood. They agreed there was something askew in the dearly loved man’s psychological make-up: a man with a nervous alertness, one made ecstatic by novelty yet prone to plummeting into an abyss of anxiety, if not

disorientation, without warning. Giuseppe always said: it's useless to tell Casimiro that the voices he hears are from the lairs of his unconscious; *to him* they are real. But before Lucio can tease out more about 'trees' from his brother, their joint attention is caught by a magnificent yacht with two masts gliding into the Bay of Salerno from the north. She is sleek and classy and her sails are deep red.

'That,' says their hotelier joining them on the belvedere, 'is the *Agneta*. Gianni Agnelli's yacht.'

### 3. Guide for climbing a mountain

Their host is supervising coffee in the dining room. 'Your plans for today?' he inquires.

'I'm hiking up to the spring in the chestnut woods that you told me about,' says Lucio, waving his hand in the westerly direction of Monte Brusara. 'My fellow Pietro and I are setting off almost immediately.'

'Enjoy your day, sir,' he says, 'and you too Master Puck. And you Signora?' he asks. 'I've organised a staff member to guide you to Villa Cimbrone. He's ready when you are – if that is still your wish?'

Giovanna and Casimiro exchange glances, revealing the consensus that the two older siblings have reached – that the pair will remain at the hotel until Lucio returns. However, Lucio, chief judge of whether Casimiro is resilient enough for an outing, nods his approval for a change of plan.

'How very kind,' Giovanna replies. 'Your garden here is so charming and your gardener so knowledgeable that I've been too content to venture out.'

Casimiro, although he had intended to spend the morning making drawings of Jackie Kennedy



whose vivacious face appears to him whether awake or in his sleep, declares protectively, 'I'll go with my sister, of course.'

'You have your camera? Then I'll fetch a sketchbook and we can go.'

'I'll have the kitchen pack picnic lunches,' the hotelier volunteers.

'No need,' says Lucio. 'We'll all be here at two. Setting for –'

'Five,' the wise man concurs with a smile.

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Pietro guides Lucio and Puck through the clifftop town and into the countryside. After an hour's tramping, passing no-one except a surly goatherd, they arrive in a valley. 'A valley shaped like a cup,' Lucio exclaims, 'just as Forster describes it. Well done Pietro!'

There's a shrine to Our Lady near an old chestnut and Pietro strides over to pay his respects. When seeing him off, his parents instructed him, 'Practise your faith! Hold to it, whether the Piccolos do, or do not.'

Lucio ambles after him, and they surprise two well-dressed men sitting on a log near that magnificent chestnut. They are passing a flask between them.

Lucio murmurs what he hopes is a discreet *buongiorno* before he recognises the same foreigners encountered in the bar on their second evening in Ravello. 'Good morning, I mean.'

The men recognise him too and stand to introduce themselves.

‘Gore Vidal, writer,’ says one, extending a hand. ‘And my friend Howard Austen, stage manager. Both from New York.’

‘Lucio Piccolo, poet from Sicily,’ says Lucio, not to be outdone. Having learned English (as well as Spanish and French) but mostly from books, he continues with, ‘You belong to the party of the first lady?’

‘Not Secret Service if that’s what you mean,’ Vidal responds. ‘Not part of “the party” at all, actually. Although I did recommend that Jackie come to the Amalfi Coast, I think during a cocktail party. Weirdly, we *are* related. Through divorce and remarriage – a typical-enough American story. A poet, are you? You’re not here on a pilgrimage to – ’

‘The great E. M. Forster? Yes, I am.’

‘Did you know that Jackie and Lee are renting the place where Forster once stayed? Villa Episcopio, an old palace, I believe. Say, you’re not there too are you? Oh, of course you wouldn’t be – ’

Lucio chuckles, amused by the self-correction. Like his brother, he dresses formally – in suits and immaculately-knotted silk ties – such conservative apparel would automatically bar him, he imagines, from Jackie’s “jet-set”. ‘I’m staying at another old palace,’ he says. ‘There are rather a lot of them in Italy, as you have probably realised.’

Pietro by this time is on the opposite side of the small valley, encouraging Puck to drink from a spring. The three educated men – united now by their interest in the provenance of stories – relax, with Lucio taking up the offer of a seat on the upturned bole of the particularly ancient, and fallen, chestnut. Pietro signals from across the way that he'd like to gather blackberries from the bushes along the path, and Lucio waves his approval.

'I first came to Ravello in 1948 in a jeep,' Gore Vidal recalls as if he's been asked about his association with Italy. 'Part of the American liberation forces.'

Lucio discerns the tone of cynicism that the American indulges in; his trademark, perhaps. Too polite to refer to the Allied bombing that caused the destruction of Palazzo Lampedusa, his cousin's ancestral home in Palermo in 1943, Lucio lets him continue uninterrupted.

'Thought it the most heavenly place on earth,' says Vidal. 'Still think so. We've moved here actually. We intend buying. The place we have in mind is a renovated chapel. And you?'

'We live in northeast Sicily on – what would you call it? – an estate. I refer to my sister and brother. My sister studies botany and manages the property; my brother is an artist and photographer. We like each other's company and rarely leave home.'

An involuntary shudder ripples through his body as Lucio recalls the visit north he once made

with his cousin Giuseppe. When was it, eight years ago? Their mission was to interest one or another of the publishing houses in San Pellegrino Terme in his cousin's novel. Rejected. The writers returned to Sicily, both stung. Lucio because his recommendation was treated as if irrelevant, and Giuseppe because his years of hard work were spurned. As they travelled south from Milan on the overnight train, Giuseppe fell into a monstrous silence. And the sight of his cousin's face when they reached Capo d'Orlando! Humiliation etched deep lines in his cheeks and forehead, aging him twenty years overnight – a transformation similar to the one caused by the wartime bombing of his home. The depth of his cousin's misery on each occasion still haunts him. *Il Gattopardo* went on to be accepted by Feltrinelli and soon earned the status of a highly awarded best-seller – but all that came *after* his cousin's death.

The more recent memory of Casimiro's misery because of the piazza crowds comes vividly to mind. He looks up to register the Americans offering him a sip from their flask. He declines then blurts out, 'Guilt is a useless emotion. But it is at the moment suffocating me because I pressured my siblings into coming here for a retreat, only to find out that Jackie Kennedy is in town. We're used to peace you see.'

'It's about to get worse,' Vidal predicts. 'Have you seen the papers? Four days before she flew out, Marilyn Monroe was found dead.'

Lucio gasps.

‘How is the president’s wife, who pretends to the public that All is Well, dealing with this news? This question is drawing the press here. They already feel compelled to photograph her wherever she goes. And now,’ and he engages Howard with a meaningful look, ‘Gianni Agnelli has arrived. Let’s see what transpires with Jack Kennedy out of the way.’

Lucio loves to study American culture. The Piccolo family was one of the first in Italy to buy a television set. They’ve seen the blond film star, Marilyn Monroe, oozing sexual allure several times. Of course Lucio prefers Sophia Loren, especially in *Pane, amore e*, that sexy comedy filmed in nearby Sorrento in which she plays a fish vendor. The last time he’d seen Marilyn on television was on the occasion of John F. Kennedy’s birthday. What was it – a variety show in Madison Square Gardens, or some such? The American movie star had poured her creamy body into a flesh-coloured dress that was alight with rhinestones to sing Happy Birthday Mister President to a *huge* crowd. Breathy. Brazen. Reckless. He remembers President Kennedy responding with something like *how sweet and wholesome* but no-one could have possibly mistaken the star’s performance for family entertainment. Lucio would have liked to talk films with the Americans, to drop into the conversation that the stunning Claudia Cardinale would star in *The Leopard*, the film of

Giuseppe's novel that Visconti would direct, but the temptation to hear more about the death of Marilyn Monroe is more urgent.

'What happened to her?' he asks.

'The housekeeper found her,' Austen says. 'Naked under a sheet. Probably pills,' he speculates.

'Jackie wouldn't be human if she doesn't feel a thrill about the demise of her rival!' Vidal says. 'Perhaps she'll confess the sin to the Bishop of Ravello. I mean, she knows that Jack has to have his lollipops, his trophies, as well as his regular mistress, but to have a screen star flaunt a tryst on national television while you're out of town at a *horse* show! Well. When an aide reported the film star's role at the fundraiser for the Democratic Party, Jackie was not happy. She confided in me, that's how I know *all* about it. Marilyn is – *was* – nothing but trouble and this time Jackie saw red. When she caught up with Jack next, in Washington, she socked it to him. Why should *I* care about the next election when you don't? Why should *I* stand by your side making speeches in Spanish on your behalf when you are fantasising about Marilyn? She demanded a divorce. Yes, she *did*! But Jack opted for demonstrating that the movie star meant nothing to him. Whenever Marilyn rang the White House he no longer took her calls. That was in May.' Vidal counts on his fingers. 'June, July ... two months. Jackie is still *hopping* mad.'

‘Pills,’ Austen repeats to get the conversation back on track, ‘and too much booze. She was found in the early morning, fifth of August. And Jackie flew out on the eighth.’

‘A teeny bit of vengeful pleasure might still be in her head, don’t you think?’ Vidal insists.

There’s a little more conversation, then Vidal announces, ‘Howard. Darling. I’m famished. Let’s make for home.’

The Americans rise to their feet and each man shakes Lucio’s hand a second time. ‘We’ll leave you to your forest reveries. There might be a poem in it,’ predicts the writer.

As Lucio watches them head back along the path he feels a sense of relief, as if a director has just called an end to shooting for the day. When their path intersects with that of Pietro’s, he sees them accept blackberries from the lad’s strong cupped hands.

Vidal calls over to Lucio. ‘Do you get the feeling that Pan is here?’ he snickers, making a reference to the mysterious presence E. M. Forster conjures up in ‘The Story of a Panic’.

Lucio says nothing. He is already immersing himself in the serenity of the valley. It is shaped – to his mind – like a bird’s nest rather than a cup, and all he wants to do is hear the breeze stir the chestnut leaves above him, and watch the sunlight dance, and smell the earth.

‘Pan is in our heads,’ Vidal laughs back in answer to his own question.



Meanwhile, Giovanna and Casimiro are exploring the gardens of Villa Cimbrone. Initially Casimiro dislikes what he quietly decries as the ‘fake medievalism’ of the villa’s neo-Gothic tower, and Giovanna wonders aloud if the property’s benefactor, Lord Grimthorpe, hasn’t forced a too English sensibility upon it. When the head gardener indicates the Avenue of Immensity they change their minds. As they promenade along the central spine of the property, it opens their hearts. Giovanna notes showy hortensias (*Hydrangea macrophylla*), garden beds of lavender enlivened by red hot poker, magnificent bronze statues of Greek warriors, and lovely wisteria blooms supported on overhead trellises. Like countless visitors before them, when they reach the Terrace of Infinity with its vista of a perfect-blue sky melting into the blue waters of the bay, the beauty of it overwhelms them.

Two pretty *signorinas* are sighing rapturously as they, too, gaze into the mystic blue. They strike up a conversation with Giovanna about how the view south to the Cilento Mountains and the ancient plains of Paestum is strangely humbling.

Casimiro withdraws to sit on a nearby bench. A sudden sadness frightens him. Young women! He addresses them inwardly. You don’t know how like flowers you are. So exquisite, yet the world will soon trample you underfoot. He glances at



his sister, three years his senior. She was once the 'Beauty of Capo d'Orlando'. What has endured except the habit of bundling her hair at the nape of her neck? Once as black as a crow's, her mane is now as grey as a dove's feathers.

Giovanna breaks away from the melt, and links her arm to Casimiro's. They wander the grounds amiably. Casimiro sometimes pauses to take a photograph for his sister, and she sometimes calls a halt while she executes a quick sketch.

Each second of each hour she spends in Villa Cimbrone becomes – for Giovanna – not a quantity of time, but an elixir. Her eyes glaze with happiness and her heart throbs with a deep pleasure. At the Moorish Tea Pavilion near the exit, they pass a pair of young lovers.

'I'd rather love *nature*,' Giovanna declares.

'What is more natural than love?' is Casimiro's rejoinder.

As they walk back carefully along the cobblestone lanes, Casimiro asks, 'Villa Rufolo tomorrow?'

'Not until I understand this garden,' Giovanna decides. 'I don't want to risk getting them muddled up.'

'And what do you like best about Lord Grimthorpe's garden?'

'Everything,' breathes Giovanna passionately, declining to correct his assumption that the banker was solely responsible for its grandeur – unlike her brother, she didn't miss the head gardener's

acknowledgement of the wife and daughter. ‘The butterflies,’ she says diplomatically. ‘They’re so different from the ones in my garden. I felt like a butterfly myself in there, flitting here, flitting there.’

‘Did, did you hear the crickets chirping as we left?’ Casimiro asks, suddenly troubled. ‘They’re not happy.’

‘What could they be unhappy about?’ she asks, trying to placate him.

‘I don’t know exactly. But I know this – it was Giuseppe trying to talk to me through them. He tried and tried, but I didn’t understand.’ He fell into silence, as if waiting for the voice of Giuseppe to return.



The siblings swap accounts of their adventures during their lunch of Neapolitan *braciole* followed by lemon tart, eaten al fresco. Lucio sits back and takes a sip of local wine then summarises the conversation he had in the chestnut woods with the Americans who know Jackie Kennedy.

‘There’s more,’ he says. ‘Pietro told me something astonishing as we walked home. Firstly, admit that for the last few days you’ve rarely given a thought to Pietro.’

Perplexed, Giovanna and Casimiro affirm their sin of omission.

‘Pietro sleeps in a downstairs room that the hotel keeps for staff. Apparently it’s so crowded

and pokey that he rises early and helps weed the garden with a boy called Bartolo. He and Bartolo cut rose stems to take to Jackie Kennedy. Yesterday morning, before the Secret Service agents began duty and before the photographers roused themselves, Pietro was making the delivery when he saw Gianni Agnelli and the first lady come out of Villa Episcopio. He took me past it on our way here. It's a typical run-down medieval palazzo – worn stone step, wooden door, briar roses – but as we approached, Pietro became very excitable. “This is where Signor Agnelli pressed the car keys of a blue Fiat 600 convertible into her hand and then he opened the door for her and then the wife of the president slid into the driver's seat. The way she smiled at him! I guarantee Gianni Agnelli stayed the night with her under the same roof.” ’

Lucio drains his glass. ‘What do you think of that?’

‘Pietro is young – what can he possibly know of love-adventures?’ Giovanna objects.

‘Do you think that Eros resides only in Sicily?’ Lucio retorts. ‘Why shouldn't Eros be here, firing up the imaginations of the young and drawing the inhabitants of this beautiful town into the usual risky games?’

‘The wife of the president of the United States would never take such a risk. Pietro must be mistaken.’

Oh what a hypocrite I am! Giovanna thinks after her outburst. I know more about risky games

than I care to admit. When that Neapolitan prince visited us before the Great War, I learnt more about the heart's outrageous fortunes in a day than I'd dreamt in all the nights of the twenty years of my life.

'I don't believe it either,' Casimiro declares angrily. 'Pietro is behaving like Paparazzo in *La Dolce Vita*. Do you remember – how annoying he was, like a mosquito? Pietro is no better.'

'Pietro Paparazzo!' exclaims Lucio. 'Thank Maria he doesn't have a camera! *You're* the one in danger of joining the *paparazzi* yourself, Casimiro,' he jokes.

Lucio notes his siblings are not in great humour. Too much sun when visiting Villa Cimbrone, he guesses. He calls siesta time. As she closes the door to her room, Giovanna states her intention to return to Villa Cimbrone in the morning and quips that her brothers may not see her until then. In fact that is exactly what happens – she sleeps right through the evening until dawn, as does Casimiro.

## 4. Inconstant world

After morning coffee, Lucio says he and Casimiro will remain in the hotel for the day. Pietro will accompany Giovanna. She summons him. She wishes to select a gift of cake to present to Villa Cimbrone's head gardener and he will accompany her to the shops near Piazza Duomo and for the rest of the day.

As they make their way down the uneven steps, she notices that their employee has barely slept, and asks him why.

'Signora,' he answers, somewhat slowly, 'I was in the piazza last night very late. The band got into a competition with a folk group, and they played all night, vying for the attention of Jackie Kennedy. You heard nothing?'

'Not a note. What did they play?'

'Italian songs and Frank Sinatra tunes. Then some of the mothers of the band members came and pulled their ears and made them pack up their saxophones and trumpets. Signor Agnelli and Jackie Kennedy stayed in the bar drinking Negroni cocktails until late and I saw him escort

her home. With my own eyes!' He is wide awake now.

Giovanna is about to admonish the young man for putting on airs and speculating on matters which are none of his business when her attention is caught by the sight of Jackie Kennedy walking to her blue convertible with none other than Gianni Agnelli. Although it is early, they are followed by a folk group, friends and family, photographers and Secret Service men. Jackie is dressed in slacks, an open-necked shirt, and sandals. The white frames of her large sunglasses match her teeth. Gianni is also dressed in a casual style.

What a patriot you are, Gianni Agnelli, thinks Giovanna, putting yourself and a fragment of your vast assets so gallantly at the disposal of the American president's wife.

'She drives that convertible down to Amalfi every day,' Pietro says. 'See how the rest of her party will follow in the beach buggies? They park at the port and go by boat to a private beach. Everything is arranged by Signor Agnelli.'

Giovanna observes the warmth with which the sleek and handsome Gianni opens the door for the American. She momentarily closes her eyes, sees them swimming in impossibly clear water, Jackie's dark head bobbing and her white ocelot teeth flashing and Gianni splashing the children playfully – imaginary pictures verified as real when paparazzi photographs are printed later that week. She rubs a hand over her forehead and

massages her temples lightly. 'Let's buy that cake, Pietro.'



Says Lucio the next day at coffee, 'Pietro will again go to Villa Cimbrone with you. Casimiro and I will stay here.'

Giovanna smiles gratefully at him. Their brother is too unsettled to go out, so she will have another morning to herself.

Pietro is soon shadowing the head gardener as he did the previous morning while Giovanna allows herself to flit from one glorious bower to another. Her lungs inhale the perfume of morning jasmine; her mind registers the mesmerising song of crickets.

She realises that the garden is designed around two opposing principles – classical harmony and a devilish sense of surprise. She notes the observation in her sketchbook, and relaxes into the experience.

Later, in a bower with a view of a hillside of flowering lilies, Giovanna finds herself revisiting her glory days when princes yearned for her favours. Why did I opt for the isolation of Villa Piccolo, however safe and sweet? Dear Puss for company, but none of my own kittens? My friends all these years – the lizards on the paths, the tiger lilies bending their heads. Aloud she says, 'I let life overtake me and speed by.'

That evening, the siblings decide to take a stroll in the quiet part of town, first releasing Pietro to enjoy some freedom. When they pause to rest near the church of San Giovanni, Lucio reports that his translation of Forster's short story is almost complete. Casimiro confesses that he is seeing faces of the rich traders who once lived in Ravello and the exotic people who accompanied them – Turkish dancers, Egyptians, Ethiopians, turbaned Arabs, and Indians smoking hashish. He is drawing their faces, *and* the Americans who are currently visiting.

'And you, sister?' the brothers ask in unison.

Neither envious of Lucio, nor spooked by Casimiro, Giovanna answers, 'Today I learnt that plants are more entitled to the earth than we humans are. To garden is to engage in an act of devotion to Earth itself. I have devoted myself to the family all my life, but my gardening is devotional, too. That's where I make my offerings to this beloved Earth.'



Another day passes, one spiced with a little excitement (of the subtle kind, as favoured by the Piccolos): Casimiro's new camera arrives. A traditional black-and-white man, on arrival in Ravello he decided he must try colour slide film. His Pentax has come from London; the projector he's also ordered is being shipped direct to Capo d'Orlando, ready for him on his return.



Casimiro initially limits his scope to the garden of Palazzo d'Afflito but by evening he is in such good humour, so happy and sweet, that his siblings propose a stroll to Piazza Duomo.

There is a crowd, however. The word has spread: Jackie Kennedy spent the day aboard the *Agneta* and the "jet-set" is on its way.

'There she is!' exclaims Casimiro on spotting a neat figure in a casual white shirt, slacks, and sunglasses with big black frames. Jackie is holding little Caroline by the hand. Gianni is beside them.

Giovanna notices Gianni's casual yet elegant attire: tailored trousers and belt, a white shirt with its top buttons undone. They stride along, smiling and happy, past the boxes of pink laurel that embellish the Duomo steps.

'An American pressman has broken the story that they are in love,' Lucio reports neutrally. 'Something taboo is happening in Villa Episcopio. Mind you,' Lucio qualifies, 'I did mention, didn't I, that the Americans I met in the chestnut woods told me that the Agnellis and the Kennedys move in the same circles. Perhaps Gianni Agnelli is just extending some of our famous Italian hospitality.'

'*Quizas, Quizas, Quizas,*' sings Casimiro, mimicking Nat King Cole's Spanish. He waves his cigarette in time with the beat.

Lucio laughs; he likes it when his brother's mood hits an expansive zone. Lucio joins in, harmonising in English: Perhaps, Perhaps, Perhaps.

Giovanna is not at all surprised to hear that the press believes the American and the Italian are in love. She keeps her gaze on Jackie and Gianni as they cross the piazza to the bar. Every day the American and Italian look more and more alike. If one wears a white open-necked shirt, so does the other. And they both grin without restraint.

## 5. The warning

‘Villa Rufolo is very very close to my heart!’ the hotelier says at coffee. ‘My father was the original head gardener to Neville Reid and the one in charge now is a close relation. I’m delighted to hear that all three of you will go there today.’

‘Reid is held in the highest esteem by the town, isn’t he?’ asks Giovanna.

‘Indeed. If the rich Scot, with his love for botany and art, *hadn’t* purchased it, where would we be now? Villa Rufolo was at a low ebb. Abandoned. Practically derelict. He saved it and, in my opinion, Reid saved Ravello.’

‘And how did the suspended stage on the edge of the cliff in the gardens come about?’ Lucio asks. ‘Built in the 1960s, wasn’t it?’

‘It came about like this,’ the hotelier says taking a seat on the chair that his poet guest indicates. ‘With *musings*. That’s what we’re famous for here – soaking up the sun and *dolce far niente*. So I was *musings*: Napoli has Mozart, Milano has Verdi, Genoa has Paganini ...’

‘Venice has Vivaldi,’ posits Casimiro, then, as the others continue their banter, he finds his mind conjuring up a scene for a future painting – a

party of musical spirits sailing in a green gondola. But oh! I am falling into the water! he suddenly shudders.

‘Catania has Bellini,’ Lucio adds.

‘And who does Ravello have?’ their host resumes.

‘Richard Wagner?’

‘Exactly!’

Lucio claps his hands to play along, a gesture that Puck interprets as a signal to jump up onto his lap.

‘Wagner visited the property in 1850 and found in it the perfect setting for *Parsifal* – and while I was musing on that fact, the implications hit me. Ravello must build a stage to commemorate the centennial of Wagner’s visit! Not an ordinary concert stage but an open air one, suspended between sky and sea. One to attract tourists and build prosperity!’

‘Right you were, my friend,’ Lucio congratulates.

‘And a concert’s been held to honour Wagner every year since.’

‘And they’ll continue long after us,’ predicts Lucio.

‘Indeed, my friend, indeed,’ the hotelier responds. He smiles at his learned guest. ‘Our stage attracts music lovers from far and wide. And everybody wants to perform on it. Not only symphony orchestras. Singers, dancers, actors. Everybody. Ravello loves music! This visit by

the wife of the president of the United States will put us on the international map for decades to come.'

'Your foresight and contribution has already gone down in history. Bravo!'

The hotelier bows, pleased. 'Ah look!' he says after he stands. He points out to sea. 'Red sails. The *Agneta* is heading south. Signor Agnelli is taking Mrs Kennedy to see the ancient ruins of Paestum today. On the return voyage,' he continues *sotto voce*, 'they will sail on to Capri and give the paparazzi the slip. We won't see much of them for a couple of days.'

'Do you think as he sails to Capri that Signor Agnelli will strap himself to the mast like Odysseus to avoid responding to the song of the sirens?' Lucio asks.

Their host ignores the innuendo. 'Now when you're ready - '



The head gardener of Villa Rufolo is waiting at the gates. He welcomes the elderly trio who are attended by Pietro, and takes the group on an orientation tour, starting with the spectacular stage suspended above the Gulf of Salerno. Next are the lower terrace gardens followed by the upper terrace and the ancient well which inspired Wagner. They are then led to the tower built by the wealthy Rufolo family in the thirteenth century

and, lastly, to an elegant Moorish courtyard, a masterpiece of Sicilian-Arab design. The gardener indicates the route to Piazza Duomo and asks to be excused – there are pressing questions from his son about the pruning of the umbrella pines to attend to.

‘Certainly,’ the Piccolos chorus.

‘I entirely approve of handing gardening traditions down to the next generation,’ Giovanna adds. ‘Gardens outlive us; they need new generations to embrace them.’

The gardener bows and heads off, Pietro on his heels.

‘Let’s go our own ways today,’ Giovanna suggests to her siblings. ‘Meet here at midday and walk back to the hotel together?’

‘Suits me,’ agrees Lucio. ‘Puck and I will head back to the stage.’ An occasional composer himself, Lucio has an enviable collection of classical music LPs but suffers from a sense of isolation. He can’t imagine a more pleasant way to spend a morning than to listen to a live rehearsal of Wagner overtures which he has learnt is about to start.

Casimiro holds up his carry-all which contains his Leica and his Pentax. ‘I’d rather, yes, I’d rather meet back in the dining room,’ he says. They cloister me too much, he feels. Today I’ll break free.

His siblings assent but warn in unison, ‘Remember that the gates are locked at midday for siesta.’

The morning passes with the Piccolos immersed in their solitary ecstasies: Giovanna with a sketchbook – she's onto the second of them now – Lucio with the orchestra from Budapest, and Casimiro glued to the lens of his trusty Leica.

The rising heat makes Giovanna rest near the well that long ago so enchanted Richard Wagner. Beds of marigolds and begonias splash her mind bright orange and pink. An extraordinary rush of feeling warms her – it's the divine love she feels for the world, for the beauty and truth in it. Although she allows a sense of natural chaos in her garden, she finds something mysteriously exquisite in the formal lines here. *Formality can sharpen the mind!* she writes.

Lucio is experiencing a similar sense of transcendence, and this time he is prepared – as he listens to the Hungarians, he draws out the notebook his sister gave him.

Casimiro is lost, as usual, in a world of his own – in the company of his camera and the voices of fairies, crickets, and his cousin Giuseppe. Despite hinting that he might be late for lunch, he surprises the others by being the first to arrive at the gate, famished.

An appetiser of local produce – goat cheeses and wild boar ham – is ready at the table set for five. The sunny morning has sharpened their appetites and each eats with gusto. Lucio soon gives the order to bring *pezzogna*, the fish of the day. After that, they vanish. It's siesta.



On their evening stroll, Giovanna initiates a conversation about succession. She states that Pietro's father is reaching the point where his life of incessant work is catching up with him. He has three capable sons, any of whom who could assume the role of head gardener. 'It's my hunch that Pietro is most suited to the task,' she suggests.

She reminds Lucio how he praised the lad's *joie de vivre* to their host at lunch. 'The boy's an excellent swimmer – unusual in a gardener,' Lucio had said. 'When his day's work is done, he runs a mile down to the sea to swim with his friends.' Their host had replied that he understood Pietro to be adopting the same habits here with his new friend Salvatore, the fisherman's son who brought up the catch of the day. When free, Pietro helped Salvatore cut and load firewood onto his donkey for the return journey and walked down the steep path with him. They swam for hours before the wiry Sicilian ran up the two thousand stair footpath home to his digs. Lucio had laughed heartily. 'I bet the lads go swimming to Conca dei Marini to goggle at Jackie Kennedy in a bathing suit.'

Puck panting in their wake, Giovanna drives her view home. 'For all the leisure-time we're granting him, Pietro is learning a lot here. He should be the one.'



## 6. Hide and seek

In the hills to the south, forest fires break out. Clouds of grey smoke curl up the valleys. Despite the August heat, all three find the energy to return to Villa Rufolo. They again choose to go their separate ways, to be pummelled by new ideas and creative visions.

Shortly after midday, Giovanna and Lucio arrive at the hotel dining room. Casimiro's tardiness doesn't worry them and they start on the onion tarte appetiser.

'Where the devil is he?' Lucio asks suddenly when the tuna steaks and grilled vegetables arrive. 'I expected we'd bump into each other in one or another part of the garden and come here together. And where is Pietro?'

'You didn't see Casi after we parted either?' Giovanna double-checks.

'No. I saw no reason to dissuade him from exploring on his own – but that's exactly what I should have done. I should have anticipated that this heat might make him lose track of time.'

'I hope he's not having one of his ... turns,' Giovanna says, growing more agitated.

‘Signor!’ Lucio beckons to their host as he wends his way around the tables. ‘Our brother appears to be delayed in the grounds of Villa Rufolo. Can you send someone? Our fellow Pietro isn’t here either or I’d send him.’

‘It is useless to send anyone Signor Piccolo.’ He leans close. ‘Villa Rufolo is now off-limits until tomorrow morning. Jackie Kennedy. A private tour. Of necessity – it’s a never-ending game of trickery between her minders and the paparazzi.’

‘Oh so that’s it!’ Lucio responds irritably. ‘I wondered why there was such a crowd of Americans in dark glasses at the gate when I left.’

‘But where is our brother?’ Giovanna persists. ‘The first lady’s minders must have secured the gardens long ago and discovered him.’

‘My sister’s right. With his two cameras he’d look like paparazzi. They wouldn’t take him away to rough him up, would they?’

‘Don’t worry,’ their host scolds. ‘No-one would mistake Baron Piccolo for paparazzi! What I mean is, they are all young and pushy whereas he carries himself like the gentleman he is. He probably liked snapping away so much that when he reached Piazza Duomo he couldn’t stop. *Si si si*, he’ll be in a bar, eating *cannoli Siciliana*, looking through his lens at everyone and thoroughly enjoying himself.’



The Ravello hotelier is partly correct; Casimiro is locked to a lens but not in the piazza. As

Giovanna and Lucio feared, Casimiro's mind has not stayed steady. He firstly becomes rather too passionate about photographing exotics for his sister. He takes shot after shot, simultaneously envisaging the thrill of developing the prints in his darkroom at home. He registers that his mind is spinning into a heightened awareness – always a sign he should go as quickly as possible to a quiet place, such as his bedroom – but instead he decides he *must* change over to his new Pentax to capture the exotics in colour. He puts his Leica into the carry-all and caresses his new treasure into the sunlight.

Multi-coloured begonias. The dark green mops of umbrella pines. Purple bougainvillea cascading over white-washed walls. She'll love this!

Casimiro's world becomes increasingly vivid. Blue flowering creepers make sadistic love to stone walls. Trellis shadows fight each other. In the ponds, waterlily stems hunt and choke goldfish. So absorbed is he that midday marches into mid-afternoon, a time when shadows and sunlight cross swords all the more.

He is on the lower terrace. There is access from the villa's ground level to La Sala da Pranzo – for centuries the perfect place to dine on hot days such as this, a place that escapes the heat, a place where miraculously cool breezes pool. Casimiro is under a palm, photographing a clump of wild white ginger, when a number of men arrive: *polizia di stato* and foreigners in dark glasses. As

they come into sight he realises that he hasn't encountered ordinary visitors like himself for hours. Instinctively, he hides in the ginger clump, his dark suit blending into the dark leaves and the shadows cast by the spiky palm fronds overhead.

He knows how to keep still. How else could I photograph bumblebees and butterflies? How else could I win the trust of the fairies and elves that inhabit a garden? The men pass without seeing him.

He closes his eyes; doesn't move.

For a long time.

'Open your eyes now,' Giuseppe orders. 'There's someone I want you to see.'

So he does.

In La Sala da Pranzo is a woman, giggling. And a photographer. The woman is framed by a stone arch supported by decorative columns and is dressed up as Marilyn Monroe: ivory cocktail dress, high heels, bright red lipstick. But it isn't Marilyn Monroe. Her bones are too delicate. Her eyes too brown. And she is wearing a wig of ridiculously blond hair.

Casimiro knows she is an imposter trying to look like the famous actress because the news of Marilyn's sudden death has brought all her films to mind. The wigged woman is actually trying to duplicate the subway scene from *The Seven Year Itch* where Marilyn is positioned over a vent above a New York City subway and letting her dress swirl around her beautiful pale thighs. The

impostor is likewise letting the breezes of La Sala blow her dress around *her* thighs; in her case, these are lithe and tanned.

And rather nicer, Casimiro decides.

The woman suppresses her giggles and poses in earnest. Mouth open. Shoulders forward. Chin tilted upwards. Her dress is tossed about by the convergence of the breezes that play around the villa's lower level, breezes that dance in from several directions at once, like naughty children in a playground. The ground level, after all, is designed to be cool and pleasant while the sun does its summer duty of scorching the Italian earth.

As the impostor leans forward, she tosses kisses in the direction of the photographer. He dashes around his subject, at times dropping down to the dirt and angling his camera up to her.

The woman's breasts are small yet shapely and framed by the most exquisite collarbones Casimiro has ever –

Oh yes. It's Jacqueline Kennedy.

Casimiro swallows and brings the Pentax up to eye level. Click. Click.

I'd know those collar bones anywhere, he thinks. And the photographer must be Benno Graziani.

A few days ago, one of the press corps, imagining him to be a brother-competitor, vented. Was it fair that celebrity photographer Benno Graziani, being one of the "jet-set", has unlimited access to Jackie? No! he fumed, not while the rest of us

are persecuted and corralled by both Italian and American police. Not that Casimiro remembers this conversation in detail now; he simply deduces it's Graziani.

Click click – he shoots instinctively at both the subject *and* her photographer. Click, as Benno rises to a kneeling position. Click, as he stands and leans forward. Click, as he darts around his subject, like Puck discovering a snake.

Jackie Kennedy's giggling rises up until she is wobbling so much that she drops the pose. Her dress continues to float up around her. 'Oh my, Benno!' she calls as she tries to tame the ivory garment with both arms. 'That was *fun*. You are a devil bringing me this replica from Paris and planting such a crazy idea into my mind.'

'Therapeutic, no?' he responds, his English words laced with the French accent that he's picked up.

'Mmmm. But promise again you won't breathe a word to Jack.'

'*Mais non!* For your private use only, I said already.'

'*Ne personne*, Benno,' she continues in the breathy voice Giovanna thought so peculiar. 'Bring the prints and the negs next time you come to New York. You will come soon, won't you?'

'*Mais oui!* This Christmas. But 'oo can predict if Jack will interpret our game as a joke? If you think he'll – how you say? – hit the roof, don't show him.'

She gives him a mock salute of obedience; again the ivory dress billows up. A pleated gardenia, thinks Casimiro. A second Italian voice, this one speaking impeccable English, comes from La Sala da Pranzo. 'Time to set up in the tower now, Benno. The public will go nuts about Mrs Kennedy in *Tour Maggiore*. Norman architecture in Italy – Americans love stuff like that. I'll help Jackie change. We'll be right along.'

'You are za best scout in za business,' Benno says, then laughs and disappears with his camera.

The wife of the president of the United States fixes her espresso eyes on the speaker who joins her with easy, swinging strides, a carry-all in his right hand. His eyes, in turn, are fixed on hers. 'Let me help you change,' he says in a voice gruff with desire and pulls her body in the ivory cocktail dress to him. She gives a little cry as his lips bear down on hers.

Gianni Agnelli does not hurry. He gives his little cat stroking, and more stroking. He notices what she likes and plays with her pleasure, her desire, making it elastic. Like a cheesemaker who knows how far to stretch his mozzarella cheese, and when to turn it inside out, observes Casimiro.

When Gianni, at last, leads the American away – she has by now changed and looks pert in an A-line dress from Capri with every hair on her head in place, ready for the photo opportunity in Rufolo tower – Casimiro collapses. His knees fold downwards like a camel's at sunset. He

struggles briefly against the darkness that is overwhelming his mind but fails, and curls up against the specimen of ginger that Neville Reid brought back from the East on one of his many botanical expeditions abroad.



When he comes to, he feels spent. Utterly spent. The villa gardens are still, no-one hears him cry out as he wanders about in the darkening day. There are only the sounds of birds, rustling lizards, and the shuffle of his feet in the dust. The gardeners have been dismissed, the gates – he realises dimly at length – won't open until morning. He is lonely, disoriented, thirsty, unable to locate the exit path. The scent of jasmine makes him gag. Pathetically, and still clutching his camera bag, he returns to La Sala da Pranzo and slides down against a marble table.

That is where he is when he hears Pietro crying in a broken voice, 'Baron, by the Madonna of Capo d'Orlando, please answer me.'



## 7. The moon brings the month

Jackie spends the last week of her holiday in Villa Episcopio. Her Secret Service agents take turns as usual in keeping watch outside; when off-duty they fill in the time lounging in one or another establishment around Piazza Duomo. (Gianni Agnelli introduced them to Negronis on board the *Agneta* and they've adopted it as 'their' drink.) The folk group continue to serenade the president's wife, mute as ever about who is paying them to do so.

One night Jackie and her friends slip down to Positano to dance the night away in a nightclub; on another they sail to Capri to do the same there. Benno Graziani snaps the carefree first lady dressed in black silk 'palazzo pyjamas'.

She attends the civic ceremony organised by the mayor that makes her an honorary citizen of Ravello, and is again treated to music and dancing as vigorous as the occasion the Piccolos witnessed on the day of her arrival. Dressed in a cream dress, white pumps and a lace veil made locally, she takes Caroline to church to hear the *Te Deum* and to genuflect to the altar.

Meanwhile, Pietro smokes with Bartolo and Salvatore under the waning moon. He firms up the plan that he developed in Sicily with his father: to abandon the Piccolos and to abscond north to Naples.

## 8. Night

Jackie Kennedy's last night is also the end of the summer retreat of the three gentle Piccolos. Behind her villa's shabby green door, Jackie throws a dinner party; in Palazzo d'Afflitto the three siblings dine under their host's hospitable eye with the addition of the mayor for company – he's come with the gift of a bottle of his wife's *limoncello* to apologise for being too busy to spend the time with them that he'd hoped to.

Nothing is said about the night that Casimiro was found in the gardens of Villa Rufolo and brought back (by Pietro) – his suit dusty, his face tear-stained, and his voice raised plaintively to ward off pink lizards, yellow swans and an ocelot that only he can see. The night that the staff had to vacate their tiny room downstairs to house the miserable noble who could not be contained in any normal guestroom, so great was his agitation and so unsafe was every ancient vase, every item of value in the hotel's furnishings. Lucio and Giovanna understood very well why their host had to lock him in down there. Crestfallen,

they had sat on either side of the servants' door, talking of Dear Puss and reciting poetry in French – which he always liked – and, whenever they paused for breath, the voice of Pietro rose up from the far side of the small room where he sat in the vegetable garden on an upturned bucket beneath the window, singing in dialect of labouring and fishing. Eventually Casimiro had quietened.

The Ravello community leaders are all discretion about *that* night.

'The same driver from Salerno will collect you,' their host confirms as they finish the fruit salad. 'Right after morning coffee.'

'Very well,' Lucio replies. 'We'll be ready.' The siblings are catching one another's eyes – an apologetic tone buried in their host's words suggests an emerging problem, and it's puzzling them.

'Pietro,' their host begins then stops. 'I don't know how to break the news to you – I know you've been anxious about his whereabouts today – Pietro will not be going with you. This will explain – this letter.'

Lucio takes the sheet of paper that their host extends. The embarrassed man gushes on. 'During siesta today he and Salvatore left for Sorrento on board Salvatore's father's fishing boat. My gardener has only now brought this apology to me.'

The gist of it is that Pietro begged to be excused from employment; assured them that his brothers

would not dessert Villa Piccolo; vowed to return to Capo d'Orlando on All Saints Day five years hence.

As he scans the boy's words, Lucio can't help but conclude that the note betrays the ten years and no more of the teenager's education. For the benefit of Giovanna and Casimiro, he reads the concluding paragraph aloud without inserting the punctuation he'd prefer was there:

*I'm promised work by the uncle of my friend Salvatore in the gardens of a university by a river in Australia and I will be building rock walls and steps and fountains He says that only a Sicilian knows how to build properly and only we can work in the heat of the sun I'll be twenty-one in five years and I'll return on All Saints Day with enough money to buy some land of my own and I'll bring botanical specimens for Signora Piccolo back with me she always says she'd like a bunya bunya tree and a red flame tree and there's nothing more to say except you're born alone and you die alone as my father says and as my mother says youth is precious and I see freedom and happiness and prosperity before me and I've learnt a little English from the American polizia which makes me optimistic about life and to be honest before we left Sicily I planned to leave your service and sign up as a sailor in Napoli because I love the sea and know a man can make a better living sailing than gardening but after meeting Salvatore's uncle and seeing the gardens*

*of Ravello I know my fate lies with the earth and  
I thank you for bringing me to Ravello with you.*

Their host places what must be a pile of coins knotted in a handkerchief onto the table with a clunk. 'He insists on reimbursing you for his train fare.'

There's an awkward silence.

'Allora, you've got off lightly in my opinion,' says the mayor rather too cheerfully. 'The whole town is like a swarm of bees without a hive. Men are running off with other men's wives, teenagers are announcing they *must* get married – I'll warrant there'll be a bumper crop of babies next year, as there was when the American Army left Napoli at the end of the war. In any case, we're a town of rebels. To do the unexpected is *normale*. Tonight, on my way here, I heard that the pastry chef from the bar in the piazza has handed in his notice because Jackie Kennedy's sister offered him a position in London! If it's any consolation, Salvatore and his uncle in Australia are fine fellows. Your Sicilian could do worse than to travel to the other side of the world with them.'

The Piccolos have no choice but to accept the situation. 'The boy has verve,' Lucio observes graciously. 'As our cousin Giuseppe di Tomasi observed in *Il Gattopardo*: a Sicilian must leave young. If he waits until he's twenty it's too late. Now please excuse us, it's time to take Puck on one last stroll to the exquisite church of Annunziata to see the moon rise.'

Despite the blow to their pride that Pietro's desertion represented, the three noble Sicilians walk with their usual slow-paced dignity to the ancient bell tower. There they pause, leaning against each other, and watch as dusk turns to night. The fires in the mountains are still burning while above is the understated presence of a sickle moon shining over the Bay of Salerno. The slender promise of better times, thinks Lucio.

'Those fires,' Casimiro says. 'Like the scratch marks of a feral cat bringing forth wounds.'

'Red as the blood of Ravello's patron saint, the martyr Saint Pantaleone,' says Lucio, cradling Puck. 'The drops preserved in the cathedral chapel are, of course, miraculously liquefied every feast day.' He pauses, then says in anguish, 'In my selfishness I've forced this exhausting journey on you both.'

Casimiro won't hear of it. 'You don't understand – I love it here,' he claims. 'I have feared it but I have *loved* it.'

Giovanna smiles and leans closer to let her index finger receive a lick or two from their pet. '*Va bene*,' she says simply.

Lucio says, 'So? Once again we spurn the flesh and go on with our quiet lives, united as one?' He quotes Dante. '*Fatti non foste a viver come bruti, ma per seguir virtute e conoscenza*. We are not made to live as animals, but to follow virtue and knowledge.'

Giovanna adds softly, as if offering a consolation prize to someone, perhaps herself, 'When Greta

Garbo holidayed in Villa Cimbrone with Leopold Stokowski, the conductor, he proposed but she turned him down. It's 1938, Garbo said. The world is spinning into another war. While I am blessed with life, I'll devote myself to my films. My films are my life. And my garden is *my life*,' she says with a shrug of acceptance.

The men light cigarettes and they all contemplate the ever-darkening sea.

Two huge umbrella pines that grow in the adjacent garden of Villa Rufolo are growing above them. 'What lovely beings they are,' Giovanna murmurs, pointing up at their pale twisted limbs that radiate out like the spokes of an umbrella.

'Dear Puss –' the three find themselves saying in the same breath. They break off with a laugh. Casimiro is granted the right to finish the sentence. 'Dear Puss loved umbrella pines best of all,' he says.

After a while Lucio murmurs. 'Night falls. Sooty foliage in a pitch black sky, except for the waning moon.'

'A fine poem in no time,' encourages Giovanna.

The shapes of the earth darken. The villages light up, like glittering snail trails.

'Has Giuseppe spoken to you recently, Casi?' Lucio asks.

'Yes. He's told me: The instant that the statue of Madonna della Lettera comes into view, throw your Pentax overboard into the Strait of Messina. You are an artist – not paparazzi.'



Giovanna and Lucio exchange a quick glance of relief.

‘Why not let the American keep her memory of exquisite love?’ continues Casimiro. ‘What right have I to desecrate the bliss she’s found here?’

They watch as the lights of the fishermen’s boats scrawl faint, glowing lines upon the black sea.

Casimiro sparks up again. ‘Giuseppe says that we mustn’t change the garden. He likes it as it is. But we should plant three eucalypts facing south, for Pietro. The scent of them will guide him home.’

‘So that’s what the boats down there are trying to tell us,’ Giovanna murmurs.

### Author's Note

*This is a work of fiction. None of the events portrayed in it are real.*

*I began writing this story in Ravello after seeing a portrait of Jackie Kennedy in a gallery. A month before I had the good fortune to visit Villa Piccolo in Sicily where I learnt about the talented Lucio, Casimiro and Giovanna Piccolo di Calanovella. The famously reclusive siblings (who died in 1969, 1970 and 1974 respectively) are not known to have travelled to Ravello. But what if they had around the time of the first lady's vacation, and what if they had stayed in Palazzo d'Afflitto while there?*

*My home is the river city of Brisbane, Australia, a world away. My only intention is to tell a story that is both entertaining and illustrative of Ravello's extraordinarily magical effect on visitors from far and wide. I hope the celebrities of the 1960s, whose lives I've taken such liberties with, won't mind too much. Non-celebrity characters are entirely fictional and I assure you – they are only too happy to have their day in ravishing Ravello.*

*The titles of the small chapters within this story are titles of poems by Lucio Piccolo – my small way of honouring the actual poet and his work.*

## A Poet in Campania

*This suite of travel notes and impressions describes my holiday before the Ravello Literary Summer School 2017 and is added in honour of Lucio Piccolo. My poetic companion was On Love and Barley: Haiku of Basho, translated by Lucien Stryck, London: Penguin Classic, 1985 – Basho verses are derived from this edition. They are added in honour of Lucio Piccolo. For the whole Italian diary, please find Signora Bella's Grand Tour on Amazon Kindle.*

The sedate train from Palermo  
rumbles through *Tempest* country  
towards Vesuvius

the papers carry stories of drought  
parched land, crop failure –  
global warming's come to *Bella Italia*

three thin African immigrants jump the train –  
when made to leave  
the guard points, somewhat helpfully, to a church

in Napoli i'm met by friends –  
no way will we go straight to Elena Ferrente's *quartiere*  
feverish foreigners are not welcome, they tell me

but the harbour  
the magnificent harbour  
that's what we see, and oh –

at their local pizzeria  
the owner turns on the hospitality –  
over wine we plan the must-dos

## highlights of Napoli

in the cobblestoned backstreets  
i sense histories of vendettas  
and spilled blood

in regal Palazzo Zevallos Stigliano  
everyone is flocking to see  
the Caravaggio on loan from America

love at first sight!  
i'm transported to teenage madness  
by Francesco Paolo Michetti's *Self-portrait*

so pleased to meetcha  
Artemisia  
Gentileschi

daytrip to Pompeii 79AD –  
after twenty centuries of ash  
the dawn of mega-tourism

Sorrento – the cloister for Franciscan nuns  
has turned into a gallery  
perhaps there's a tad more *Scandal in Sorrento?*

## to Amalfi

i'm on a suburban train  
going south to *La Dolce Vita*  
(poet-tourists can *never* splurge on taxis)

a gypsy family's on board so it's a delight –  
a small shy boy  
works the carriage after the songs

the bus driver in Positano signals a problem –  
 the mountains are on fire  
 the ferry route to Amalfi will be best

from the boat we see helicopters  
 water-bombing inferno forests  
 what would Odysseus say? (duh, too busy with the Sirens)

## **Ravello**

despite the challenges of the zig-zag way  
 i make it to the medieval town on its giddy cliff  
 oh – my, my-my –

a band's playing in Piazza Duomo  
 perfumed flowers bloom –  
 the festival of San Pantaleone's in full swing

what is Italy if not devout?  
 even the cats turn out  
 for the procession of the saint

DH Lawrence came here too, with naughty Frieda  
 and before him, young EM Forster  
 with his faithful mother

i climb the steps of Via San Francesco to my B&B –  
 Frank Sinatra croons *got you under my skin*  
 a waiter brings limoncello 'on the house'

## **the conference on The Pastoral**

Monday: the scholars gather for the week  
 in a space provided by Franco Fortunato  
 his bold paintings on every wall

theory first: nature and longing ...  
 loss and pain ...  
 impossible happiness

when my turn comes, i talk up Basho and recite:  
*mad with poetry*  
*i stride ... into the wind*

Tuesday: we troop to Villa Rufolo –  
 two students faint in the garden  
 above the azure sea

we linger until the stars appear  
 and the villages below along the coast  
 are necklaces of golden sapphires

Wednesday: Villa Cimbrone  
 where cicadas near bronze and marble gods  
 announce heaven

after an aperitif i start dreaming  
 of that holiday Jackie Kennedy had here  
 without the president

Thursday: we stalk Forster's ghost into the chestnut woods  
 the Italians with handbags  
 the French in high heels

an Australian like me lacks style, i admit  
 but see how effortlessly i scale  
 fences?

Friday: a sumptuous lunch  
 songs, poetry, thankyou's  
 and how to make mozzarella

(i still like my humble B&B –  
 whenever i walk in, the chef shouts out  
 Signora *Bella*)

everyone says ‘we must return’  
 but Basho is pragmatic  
*friends part forever – wild geese lost in cloud*

Saturday: life’s a cycle of repose and action  
 the fires on the hillsides are out –  
 i write all day

Bob Marley owned nothing but *songs of freedom*  
 all i have are the letters of the alphabet  
 all i have ...

## **Australia**

wearing the tee-shirt printed *Libera*  
 i hand out bottles of limoncello, unpack my  
 mind



Lesley Synge loves travelling and inquiring into the human condition. She has an MA from The University of Queensland, Australia. Early short stories won a number of awards as did *Cry Ma Ma to the Moon*, a novel about poets in a love triangle. She is also a poet. *Organic Sister* is a collection of notes on a woman's life (2005) and *Mountains Belong to the People Who Love Them* (2011) is a loving record of two journeys of wonder, one in Eastern Australia and one in South Korea. The Australian composer Stephen Leek based his choral work *Jirisan Sunrise* on one of the poems in this collection. To share the joys of meditating in Australian forests she created a poet's film *Slow Days on Old Pathways* (YouTube). Her next collection of poetry, *Signora Bella's Grand Tour*, will be published in 2019. Lesley is also an editor, essayist, occasional historian, memoirist, reviewer and teacher.

*Cry Ma Ma to the Moon* features works by Australian artist Kathryn Brimblecombe-Fox and is available on Amazon Kindle. Her biography of an Australian working man, *Wharfie* is also available on Amazon Kindle.



HOTEL PARSIFAL

*Ravello*

ANTICO CONVENTO DEL 1288

Lesley Synge came back to Ravello as a welcome guest of Hotel Parsifal ([www.hotelparsifal.com](http://www.hotelparsifal.com)) to again enjoy those places which inspired her story.



LITERARY COMPETITION  
 “RAVELLO TALES”  
 3rd edition 2019

Art. 1

The “Centro Universitario Europeo per i Beni Culturali” and the “Consorzio di promozione turistica Ravello Sense” announce the third edition of the literary competition “Ravello Tales” for unpublished short narratives inspired by the history, events, characters or places of Ravello.

Art. 2

Participation in this competition is free of charge and open to professional or non-professional writers over 18 years old.

Art. 3

Closing date for entries is 15th November 2019.

Each participant will submit via email to [univeur@univeur.org](mailto:univeur@univeur.org):

1. A short narrative in English inspired by Ravello (12.000 words as an indication)
2. Author's bio note (150 words) in English
3. Written and signed acceptance of these regulations as it is published in this book

Art. 4

The jury is composed by members appointed by the Centro Universitario Europeo per i Beni Culturali, the Consorzio Ravello Sense and the Associazione Ravello Nostra. The decision of the jury is irrevocable and unquestionable.

Art. 5

The award will consist of the publication in print and/or in digital format of the winning short narrative by the Consorzio, plus 1 week stay in Ravello (for two persons), in one of the hotels of the Consorzio Ravello Sense.

Together with the winning short narrative the Consorzio reserves the right to print any other participating narratives.

#### Art. 6

The participants remains under any event the owner of the copyrights and other intellectual property rights, but they herewith grant, with any compensation, to the Competition organisers an irrevocable, perpetual, world-wide non-exclusive license to reproduce, distribute, display, publish, and create derivative works of the submitted works (along with a name credit) in connection with the competition and promotion of the competition, in any media now and hereafter known, including but not limited to: publish online and offline the works, publication on the website of the project and social media, etc. Furthermore, each participant declares that his/her work does not infringe on any third party rights and that he/she is free to participate to competition. The participants indemnify the Organisers against any third party-claim such as a claim that the submitted work would infringe on any third-party (intellectual property) rights.

#### Art. 7

The announcement of the winning tale will take place in Ravello on the 9<sup>th</sup> of December 2019.

#### Art. 8

The participation in the competition implies the knowledge and the complete acceptance of these regulations.

#### Art. 9

Each participant gives the organisers the authorization to the treatment of personal data according to the Italian Law 675/96 about privacy, the Legislative Decree 196/2003 and its following changes. Participants agree that personal data may be processed, shared, and otherwise used for the purpose and within the contest and any other purposes outlined in these official rules. Participants have the right to access, review, rectify, or cancel any personal data held by the organisers by writing to the Centro (univeur@univeur.org) which is the data controller. Personal data will be used by competition organisers and its affiliated exclusively for the purpose stated herein.



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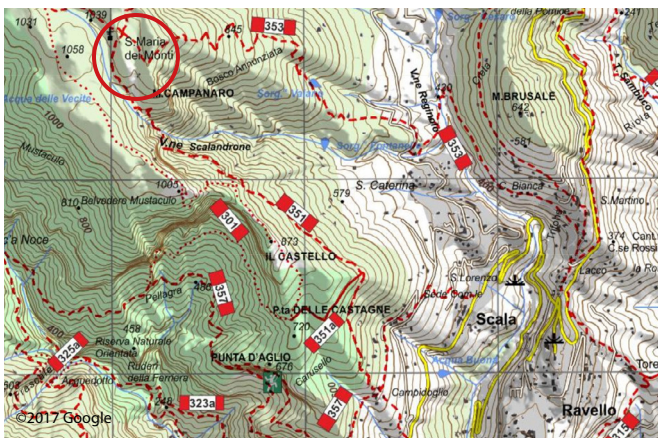
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