Brian Swann

CHRISTMAS PRESENTS

The brown streak along the side of her new Citroen caught her eye. The car was pulled up on the sidewalk outside the Cathedral railings, its back seat piled high with antiques and boxes. A quick glance was enough to show her that nothing had been tampered with. But, the brown streak. She put a cautious finger to the line that stretched from over the back wheel to the front door, and withdrew it disgustedly. She became aware that someone was watching her from just in front of the car. The head was withdrawn sharply round the corner of the barrel-organ.

"You," she called in a voice with frayed edges," Come out from behind there. I want to ask you something."

A youth of perhaps fifteen or sixteen stopped whatever he was pretending to be doing and came over. He was tall for a Sicilian, with blond Moorish features.

"Did you do this? Did you see anybody do it?" She pointed a thin finger. He put on a baffled look.

"Signora, excuse me. I don't speak Italian."

"What are you speaking now then? What do you speak? You live here don't you?"

He shrugged, and carefully began to inspect what was going on in the road. A horse-drawn cab was being driven along, the horse's feet slipping on the smooth polished blocks of black stone. It was being whipped up to a gallop to overtake another fast-moving cab, just as a bus was overtaking *it*. The bus missed by about half an inch, and the cabs missed collision by about the same margin.

"Pardon, signora?" he said, turning his eyes back to her, taking her all in as if he'd been waiting for her to appear to fit into a picture. Her

figure was almost gaunt, but her face was that of a 20's film-star. There were deep wrinkles round her eyes which seemed to be blank, all expression drained. She was out of place in the hubbub. She was still recovering from her surprise that she even cared about the brown streak.

"Listen. What language do you speak?"

"Sicilian, signora. Though I do speak a little Italian. Yours is very good."

"Did you put that stuff along my car?"

"Yes, signora."

"Why?"

He walked back to put a new record on the turntable of his barrel-organ.

"Because I wanted it off my hands."

She let the distasteful subject drop.

"It's only mud," he added.

The little organ with its two shafts and decorated sides, (two charging knights, one Saracen, moustachioed and villainous, the other in silver armor on a white charger,) began to pour out a tinkly old Sicilian melody. If she hadn't known that the mechanism was that of a record-player she would have been happier. The tunes were almost drowned out by the cars racing down the road, and, behind the Cathedral, noises of the slums preparing for the festivities. The air was fresh but not cold.

Passers-by dropped five lire into the tin cup now and then. Tourists, the few that there were, would drop more, and stand around smiling.

The record spun out its last thin threads of sound, and the youth looked up.

"You like it? It's called 'La Baronessa di Carini', and tells about a baroness condemned to death by her father because she didn't resist the advances of the lord Vernagallo while her husband was away. We like our women pure here," he announced, while his eyes roamed over her body, lingering on the diamond pendant that hung from her neck, and the rings on her hand. She dropped a hundred lire into the cup.

"Thank you signora. Are you married?"

"How much do you want for your barrel-organ?"

He was taken aback, but didn't show it. He'd learnt to show only the impressive or profitable emotions. The more secret ones he'd been

taught to control to his own advantage.

"Sell? I can't sell, signora. This is my living. If I sold what would happen to my family? We all have to work in my family, even the children." He picked his nose.

"How much will you pay?"

"For what?"

He looked hurt.

"For my organ."

The door was open and she was about to climb in. He thought he'd lost.

"Do you know a good hotel in Palermo?"

"Very near me." he replied eagerly. "Why don't you come? I can show you."

"Do you like my car?"

He laughed to show teeth like a row of marble chippings.

"You want to swop your car for my organ?"

She was rearranging the parcels at the back.

"What's your name?"

"Otello, Otello Sciruni. Do you know the story of Otello? I think he must have looked like that Paladin on my organ there."

A thought struck him.

"Do you like puppets? You can buy them also you know. I can show you the best puppets in Sicily here in the Via del Pappagallo. They're all big and shining and my father's father made the organ they play before the curtain goes up. Would you like to see them? I can show you whenever you want. I go every week."

She had started the motor and the car slowly raised its bows as if it were a hydrofoil in a powerful heave.

"Get in."

It was almost an order. Otello was caught off guard, but he adjusted quickly. He yelled across the road, and an urchin, five or six years younger, dashed across. He narrowly missed a horse-cab and a reckless Fiat 500. They talked rapidly in dialect for a few seconds, then Otello yanked open the car door as if he were about to turn the handle of the old organ in his favorite theater.

"My brother. He will play the organ. Let's go and I'll show you Palermo."

"I want to see this hotel you mentioned. I don't want one of those Jolly things. Find me something that's clean but picturesque. And with

somewhere to park my car where urchins won't scrawl crap along it.."

There was hardly any noise as the car slipped into gear and dropped without the slightest jar off the sidewalk and onto the black volcanic road. Organino music could be heard despite the thick upholstery and closed windows. Otello settled back in his seat and studied the woman driving, bringing to bear all he'd gleaned from a life whose success so far had depended upon improvisation and patient ingenuity, tempered with ideas derived from the age of chivalry.

"Straight ahead," he ventured. "Down to La Cala."

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"Give yourself to something. Use your wealth to collect something, something you know nothing about. Then learn it inside out to stop thinking about your isolation. If people thwart you; if they never give you what you want from them, try things. Antiquities, antiques."

He, with her file before him, scratching his forehead where light from a half-open window hit it: she, writing down what he said in an exercise-book. "Try to think of your loneliness as if it were wealth. Something you have which others might want. Try to think of it as a present; something you know about—like algebra or cooking or music. Something you have cultivated with a conoisseur's attention to detail."

So she collected antiques, catalogued every buy, bargained herself sick over a few coins. At times she really believed she had escaped the inwardness of her focus. Yet as soon as she would return home, or enter a hotel room, she was flooded with emptiness; a feeling so intense it transcended emotion and became a settled condition. Wherever she looked she saw nothing that had any reaction to her. Then she'd pile her collection around her, going over every detail of their appearance; every scratch she knew by heart. It often worked for months on end. But she knew the battle was doomed. Her reasons for what she was doing were wrong, all wrong. The passion was still not directed on the object, but on herself. She was collecting in order to avoid, not in order to confront. Each item, moreover, was still her. Fantasies to avoid loneliness became evidence of the effect of loneliness. Gradually, she began to buy things she considered ugly, alien to her sensibilities. But she soon saw through that trick. More and more she thought her analyst a charlatan. She was using money to buy time, but she felt time was running out. Instead of moving into the world she moved farther out.

There was no one in her life, not even herself. She was not at a crisis—that would be to over-dramatize existence. A buying trip to Sicily at midwinter had merely been a plan of the moment since no social patterns elsewhere demanded her presence.

* * *

The desk manager for the evening shift had given him a dirty look. He'd called, at Otello's insistence, and she said she'd be down in a few minutes. She'd asked Otello to watch her car when she'd booked in, so he still didn't know her name. He'd described her to a dubious desk-clerk, and he'd come up with the name 'Forestier'.

Otello was wearing his only change of clothing: a pair of faded, dead-looking Levi's, and a yellow turtle-neck sweater that made his hair look darker than it really was. With his bony fingers he kept pushing back stray wisps of hair and hitching up his pants to make his crotch even tighter and more uncomfortable. He was aware of the clerk's sharp eye, and the manager on the lookout for the first sign of chicanery. Thus they all three watched her entrance to determine their own actions. She too wore a yellow sweater, and a tweed skirt with a large silver pin at the side.

"Miss Forestier," Otello greeted her, "I will take you to the puppet theater. We can get in free because I used to work the organ. May I carry your coat?"

She handed him her camel overcoat, and left the keys at the desk. They walked in silence as he felt for her mood. She seemed more stimulated than usual. The prospect of doing something different pleased her. She usually kept herself in tight check. But Otello could not find the heart of her mood. He couldn't know that she had none; that she had survived by an effort of will—she could cut off the pain from a torn finger by imagining figures on a blackboard. In truth, she was rather confused by Otello; somewhat terrified. She was totally in command, but he seemed to obey her as he would an anonymous voice. She knew he expected to make something out of her, but that she didn't mind. It was so long since she'd been out with anyone, she was apprehensive about what she might want from him.

A youth about Otello's age came up and asked for a match. She lit his cigarette for him, and noticed the wink he gave her escort.

"Why did he do that?" she enquired.

"I suppose he thinks the wrong things," he answered with an air of cavalier indifference.

"Otello, how old are you?"

They had just turned a corner with dim lights into a street that was still doing butcher's business. The open fronts were clogged with lambs and kids, newly slaughtered, each with a hole in the side of the neck, and their insides kept open by a stick to show they weren't diseased. They looked like fantastic kites. Chickens were strung up with a hook through each fat tail. There was a hectic air about the place, much bargaining by women who would sit in their stable-like doorways until a customer came along, or merely an inquisitive passer-by, and then they would jump out like spiders and shout their wares.

Otello stepped over a pile of dead leaves in which were mixed hunks of fat, bones. The black shining paving stones glistened through.

"About sixteen, I think."

He was smiling at his friends, and she was ignoring the comments she understood.

"What's that stuff giving off all the smoke?"

On the corner, coals were sizzling from the fat that rolled off skewered meat.

"That's *stigghiole*—lambs guts. It's very good. Would you like one?"

Despite the sickly smell of old fat, she felt game. She handed him her handbag. He stood undecided what to do.

"Do you have any money?"

He turned his head slightly.

"Then open the purse and take out what's needed."

With the air of a pickpocket he unsnapped the flap quietly and slipped his hand inside. His fingers roamed around as his eyes held hers, trying to see what she meant. He brought out a purse of alligator hide, and handed it over.

"Open it," she said.

She ate the *stigghiole* while he stood holding the purse. She looked up and saw him wavering still.

"Well, put the change back in the wallet and close the bag. You can have the purse," she countermanded. "We'll probably need some more things before the end of the evening. Put it in your pocket—if you can get anything else in those tight pants."

When she dropped the *stigghiole* behind her back, she realized that

she hadn't meant to. No more than she meant to assume the light imperious tone she found on her lips.

Otello bought stuff like big thistles or celery, *"cardi,"* he said, that swam around in a pool of stinking fat. Food was everywhere. A man was cutting up white slices of plasticy flesh from which a black ink exuded. People crowded round his stall. Blocks of fat two foot square stood like icebergs on counters. Even the sheets that were still strung on lines over the narrow alley-ways lookes like flaps of broiling skin. She looked around her, at sea in all the moil and stench; outwardly composed, regal even. She saw how everyone was part of what he was doing. Whole personalities were invested in cutting a piece of meat or teasing a dog.

Otello was beginning to warm to the situation, though his confusion was more obvious. He kept trying to assert his initiative, but, even when she acceded, or merely noticed, he felt she was really using her own will and denying his. He was a little humiliated as he pulled his pants higher and tighter, staining them in the process with his greasy fingers, encumbered with the alligator purse.

A three-wheeler came careering down the cobbles as Miss Forestier and Otello were approaching Piazza S. Antonio. It scattered strollers, and the children who were shouting up to their brothers and sisters clamoring to get out from behind the bellying iron grilles that stuck out from the rooms and terraces above the shop-fronts and stalls. It swerved to avoid a group of talkers, almost clipped Miss Forestier, and swerved to a stop in a blind alley to the left. Otello ran up, yelling at the driver, who came out of the cabin wielding a wine bottle. He aimed it at Otello's head. She walked closer to see better. The bottle came down in a wavering drunken line. Otello put above his head the hand that was still clutching the wallet, and the clunk of bottled hitting muffled coins was the first thing she heard. The next was laughter. Otello realized they were pointing to the wallet. In an instinctive gesture of guilt he tried to hide it behind his back. Then, almost simultaneously, he turned to hide his embarrasment up an alley. The crowd, in good spirits, laughed even more.

Miss Forestier walked on, melting into the scene, her handbag limp in her hands, her coat flapping loose about her bony figure with its sharp hips. She stopped now and then to read one or other of the black obituary notices that stuccoed the crumbling walls—"Per Mia

Suocera..." Black Christs were set into recesses, candles burning behind the glass panes. Firecrackers were exploding. The constricted space began to bother her. The gaity had ceased to penetrate. The wrinkles round her eyes began to screw up, however, so that not the slightest detail escaped. When she looked at another Christ behind a window with crossbars, for example, she counted the thirteen candles; made a conscious inventory of the hands bound in front, the black stupid face tipped to the right, the white shift and red pants. When she came upon Otello again, standing in the dark spot beside a stall of *buccellati*—rich cakes made from marzipan and candy peel—she incorporated him without drawing a line under the last sum. She moved like a tightrope walker. She smiled. He wanted to smash the wallet in her face.

"Take your wallet."

She took it from him, opened it, and picked out ten 50-lire pieces, a 500 piece, and a 1000-lire note. Then she put the wallet in her bag and handed him the money.

"We'll need this, I suppose. It won't take up much room in your pocket. Here, take it."

Her authority was too great. He sensed something that made him uneasy, as if they were accomplices. He found himself stretching out his hand to take the money. They strode on in silence.

"Are you sure you're going the right way? We seem to be leaving all the crowds, and why do we keep having to step over these chains across the road? This is no better than a dirt-track."

With some show of impatience he told her they were taking a short-cut to the theater. This, however, did not prevent her from stopping a priest who was skulking along the opposite black wall and asking him where the puppet-theater was. He looked shocked that such profanities should be performed at the holy season, and peremptorily said he hadn't a clue.

"I'd have expected more courtesy and politeness from a member of Holy Church," she said to him acidly.

"And I'd have expected sharper eyes from someone who's so sharp with the tongue," the gentleman replied, and marched off.

"What did he mean?" she asked Otello who had done little to allay his sense of frustration since the time they had left the hotel save hitch up his pants to an even more choking pitch.

"If you look at the corner of this street," he remarked in a tone of

martyrdom, "you'll see a sign that says 'Teatro dei Puppi Armati,' and that's where I was taking you."

The entrance was like a Christmas crib representation of the cave and manger. Lights hung round two huge swung-back doors, and the building must once have been a stable. A feeling of intimacy hung over the place and softened the ten rows of hard wooden benches. Otello looked to the woman to see if she felt it too, but he could read nothing on her face. He tried to cheer up and make her more at ease. His difficulty was that he didn't know whether she was so much at ease that she had taken control of the whole situation, or whether all the uneasiness was in himself. He began to feel odd, cold, lonely.

There were ten or twelve people inside, families. Pushing away clouds, Otello leapt through the doorway, grappled with a boy who was selling tickets.

"Flavio, this is a special day! We don't have to pay, right? I've brought a friend all the way from, from, the north, and..." He was interrupted by Miss Forestier.

"Otello, I'd rather pay. I gave you the money."

Grimacing to his friend, Otello pretended to pull out the money, rattling the coins for effect. But he paid nothing as she walked in ahead of him. He came and sat by her on the bench with its single wooden plank for a backrest that passed beneath the shoulders. She craned back her long neck to look at the whitewashed beams. Then she took in the pictures of paladins all around the walls, the hanging armor and puppets. Otello was suddenly aware that his companion was always looking at things.

"Well, it's beautiful," she said, making an effort, turning to look at Otello. His head was slightly lower than hers, and he at once became excited that she should like what he'd grown up with, the scenes of rough chivalry that still delighted him. She was almost saying that she liked him. Gallantly, he responded.

"Not as beautiful as you, Miss Forestier."

The show was about to start. The organ-boy wound it vigorously, and the music filled the barn. Tonight it was the story of Orlando, and two foot-thumps from the puppeteer backstage silencedthe barrel-organ. The boy went outside as if he'd seen it all before. The curtains parted.

A series of ferocious, noisy, realistic battles in which metal swords actually clashed, turbaned Saracens fell in heaps, twitched, some with

their heads stricken off. Other decaptiated Turks ran around like chickens. The cross-eyed Orlando had begun his career.

Miss Forestier had taken out a notebook and had begun covering its pages with a minute scrawl. Otello was watching every move onstage with the air of someone who is prepared to commit murder if the script varies one jot from all the previous performances. Performance and atmosphere were ritualistic, ceremonious amid all the hubbub of violence. As the story celebrated the solid folk-qualities of Orlando, his lack of respect for names and his amoral ingenuity, with help from Otello for the dialect parts, Miss Forestier noted it all down. The peasant aristocrat, Orlando was nobody's fool.

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With the barrel-organ playing the tune it had begun with, the audience shuffled out as if it had been to church. Otello asked Miss Forestier if she would like to go backstage. So they climbed up some narrow wooden steps with grimmacing cannibals and Moors on either side, she first, Otello staring at her taut muscular calves as they went on ahead at eye-level.

"Mind your head at the top!"

There was a crunch and she staggered onto the platform rubbing her temple.

"Nothing," she said to the puppeteer who had come over to see what was happening. She gazed around while Otello talked to the man. She wandered along the rows of puppets in their dazzling armor, each one hooked like a cadaver to the arm-high beams by the metal rods attached to their limbs. There was a crowd, and not much room to move. Each figure was about four feet high, their faces carved and painted either with ferocious realism or mystic abandon. She lifted one slightly, and its knees swung.

"Yes," said the perspiring owner, a heavy man of about fifty, with deep-set eyes and the air of a man to whom an entire world is responsible to him only.

"Some of these are eighty years old, some one hundred, and all are hand-made. I made that one myself, the one you're holding. Here, let me unhook it for you."

It was heavy, almost like a limp body.

"How do you do it?" she asked. "Like this?"

She lifted the bright puppet, one of Charlemagne's court, so that his toe-caps slurred in the dust. After initial difficulty in coordination, she made him walk across the boards, in a good imitation of what she'd seen from the front. In his hand he still had his wide tin sword. She made him belabor a helpless Moor whose exaggerated negroid features made him all the more grotesque, more grotesque than fiercesome. He was taking it all, hanging on the far wall, all his limbs dangling.

"Excellent!" said the puppeteer. "You do it naturally! It took me two months to train my son to make him walk that puppet as naturally as you do it. If you ever want a job, signorina, just come to me, and you can name your price!"

He laughed. Somewhat jealous, Otello asked him about prices. Miss Forestier walked other puppets.

"That knight you have there, signorina, he's called Rinaldo, and costs 9000 lire. He's eighty years old and my father made him—you might almost say we're brothers!"

There was a flush on her pale face, as if the exertion of lifting the puppets had got the blood flowing again. She smiled.

"I hear they have puppets in Taormina as well."

"Ah, Taormina! Yes, they make puppets there, but it's a tourist place now, is Taormina. The life's going out of it. Besides," he lowered his voice, "I don't like the Taormina puppets. Their knees don't bend."

"How much do you want for this puppet?" she asked, taking up another. The man had no hesitiation in replying.

"That one is not for sale I'm afraid. But I have another Orlando, if you want to have a look. It cost 8000."

Among the puppets on the back row hung one whose cross-eyes made him immediately recognizable as Orlando, looking as Furioso as ever, despite lack of use. As the puppeteer went to lift it down, Miss Forestier was there before him. Its weight proved too much for her, leaning across as she was and it crashed to the floor. Otello picked it up and wiped off the dust. Without trying it out, she said she'd take it. She was leaving the next day—Otello looked up—and would like it delivered to her hotel. Or else Otello would fetch it. Suddenly she turned to Otello, a smile on her face that looked as though it could envelop him entirely, and let him out again still sweet-smelling.

"Yes," he said, "I can fetch it."

As they walked into the night, still loud and bright, she asked him

why he was sulking. As if unwilling to be caught out, put at a disadvantage in the game, he hitched his pants and laughed loudly.

"Me, signorina, sulking! Not me! I was just thinking how those poor people can find so much to enjoy in so little." He elaborated grandly. "They live in one room maybe, and get delight out of eating that *stigghiole* you dropped behind your back. Look down there."

A door on a street corner was open, and light spilled out. They bent down to look into the tiny room. Behind them were the cardboard or shanty houses of the deepest slums. They looked down into a room full of laughing people. On a table was a large crib, and some adults were putting some figures in the manger. On a shelf were baskets of tangerines and some oranges. The floor was bare, but the wall was covered with ikons, pastoral prints, photographs, paintings. It all emanated simplicity and warmth. Geegaws and trinkets stood on any available space, while children with dolls and unexploded firecrackers ran in and out. Miss Forestier felt a longing creeping over her, so she closed her eyes.

The two of them were spotted, and immediately an old woman, round and flabby, sent out a child with a dish of biscuits of golden burnt sugar and white pastry on top, stamped with the figure of the Virgin.

"May you have a good Christmas!" she called up.

They took one each, and Otello thanked the old woman in Sicilian, Miss Forestier in Italian.

"My people," said Otello with some pride as they walked along, she with her coat over her shoulders.

"They know a thing or two."

"Should I have offered her money?"

"Of course not! It would have been an insult."

As they came to the place where Otello had been humiliated with the purse, the urchin came up whom Otello, early that first day, had left to guard the organino. He told his brother to come to dinner, and to invite the lady they'd seen him with. But it would be a simple meal, and she might have other friends to be with. No, she'd like to come. She had no other friends.

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The family was already gathered when they arrived. The mother feeding a small child on her lap; the father, with an open waistcoat, was

talking to a youth three or four years older than Otello; and there was the youngest brother who had gone ahead. An old woman sat in the corner on a broken-back chair. The room was clean, and the mother put the baby down as her son and his guest entered. There was a warm welcome from the father. Otello and his father withdrew to a back room, and the mother and grandmother hustled about, the latter grumbling and breaking wind.

Miss Forestier was placed at one end of the table that stretched the whole length of the room, with Otello on one side and the young brother on the other. The talk was of general things, over the spaghetti and thin slivers of veal. Miss Forestier sent the youngest boy out to get some wine when they discovered there wouldn't be enough. He came back with a pink half-hearted liquid.

"Bastard wine!" said the father, and they all laughed.

"It's perfectly alright," she said.

"Excellent!" said the father.

When they'd finished, he retired and brought out a bottle of something that looked like the same wine put through the distilling process and laced with linctus.

"Fuoco di Russia!" he announced, and poured a tumblerful. They drank healths. It caught her breath and she shuddered.

"Good, huh?"

He poured her more.

"My son tells me you're a writer."

She started to deny it, but felt her head spinning.

"Will we be in your next book?"

They were the first words the silent youth at the other end of the table had uttered.

"Of course," said Otello.

"Do we have to pay?" asked the youngest brother.

The conversation turned to Sicilian poverty. Miss Forestier tried to refuse another glass of Russian Fire, but felt she was in the grips of something more potent than alcohol. The people in the room were taking her in intently, without even appearing to look at her. She was enjoying the unaccustomed feeling of passivity that was stealing up on her, so that when the father pressed the bottle on her with, "It's a Christmas present for being kind to Otello," she accepted, though she didn't know if the reason for the gift was quite adequate. The father

leaned over her, and became intimate in his conversation. She could see the individual hairs in his fine moustache quite clearly, and the coarser ones in his nostrils. She dug her heels in.

"I've been to Germany once," he confided. "Lots of money there. I worked in a shoe factory but my wife didn't like it. She wanted to be with her mother. But you can't earn a living in Sicily."

"Hard, very hard," agreed an agreeable Miss Forestier.

"But I'm not from Germany. I'm not German."

"Not German!"

He called out to his wife to distribute the burden of mistaken nationality.

"I'd have sworn you were German. Where would you be from then, England?"

"I'm part Italian. But I have lived in many countries, including Germany. '

"And your parents live in Germany?" the father persisted.

"I have no parents."

Silence.

"But you're going back?"

"Perhaps."

She poured a small glass of Fire and tossed it back like a soldier, her Adam's Apple surprisingly large, bobbing with each swallow. The father leaned into his chair. The youngest brother was sitting on the door-still taunting his friends from the safe vantage of home. The father put his arms on the table and motioned backwards with his head to the sturdy young man with the weak face at the other end of the table.

"My son," he confided, as if she was just being introduced to him. "He's been to Germany too, but they sent him back."

She was about to ask why but thought better of it. She felt a nerve jump in her temple and the beginnings of a headache.

"And I have two more sons, a little younger than Otello, twins. They're marble-polishers." He paused. "I thought that if you could take Otello with you, and find him a job, or if your friends could find him a job, when he got settled he could send for the others. There's no help for them here."

It all sounded reasonable. To her surprise, she found herself interested, wanting to help. But her headache distracted her. She felt

mean. Anyway, she didn't trust herself to help anybody. She felt eyes on her—those of the women in the kitchen behind her back, accusing, hostile; Otello's curious; the eldest brother's scornful, as if he'd seen it all before. He soon got up and went out.

"Yes," she said finally, "it needs thinking about, but, maybe. I don't think he'd find his barrel-organ much use if he comes to Germany though."

"Oh, that!" exclaimed the father, lighting a cigarette he'd just rolled from the tobacco of a store of butt-ends, and taking a deep sigh. "All he thinks about is old tunes and puppets! But he's a good boy and can read. Otello, go and get *Giuseppe Lo Dico*—it's where all the puppet stories come from," he explained.

Before he could move, Miss Forestier laid her long hand on Otello's shoulder to restrain him. Her headache was drilling into all her limbs.

"Let me have an evening to think it over. Maybe I'll be able to do something."

They all looked at each other. The child had been following the general trend of the conversation and now came in.

"If Otello's going away, can I have his barrel-organ?"

"Miss Forestier said she wanted to buy it," said Otello.

"Buy it!" boomed the father, standing up. "Buy it! Why, we'd give it to her!"

She asked for Otello to take her back to her hotel, and, walking not too straight, took his arm as they passed through the backstreets of old Palermo. At the hotel she said she wanted to show him maps of Germany, France, England. She needed somebody to sit with her among her piles of antiques meant to ward off the blackness. The elderly night-clerk pretended not to notice.

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She'd planned to stay only a few days. Instead she stayed a month, excusing her behavior to herself by arguing that she'd never found such a wealth of antiques. She was a frequent visitor to Otello's family. Wherever she went Otello went too. It was understood they would leave together.

In this alien community her loneliness had become a fine hard thing. It was a cold cave where she could retreat from the people who were gathering round her, people whom she still hadn't decided whether she

liked or not. The main thing was, they had accepted her. She remained on her guard. They had accepted her, she reasoned, because they wanted something from her...Still, the daily terror of the cave engulfing her became less and less. She could pull it on like an old sock when she felt she needed it. But it wasn't the same cave. She knew she was tricking herself, but she gave in to the trick. Maybe it wasn't a trick.

* * *

She had become fond of Otello. In fact, he seemed indispensable. She became possessive, and Otello's friends began to laugh behind their hands. She would scold him in public like a mother, or sulk like a neglected wife when he went out to play soccer. And now the day of departure had arrived. The Citroen was outside the hotel, urchins playing around it, the back piled higher than ever. But the front passengers' seat was cleared, and on the roofrack, strapped down with many lengths of cord and wrapped in blankets so that it looked like a fly in a spider's cold storage, was the organino. A disconsolate youngest brother was sitting on the curb as Otello walked up in his workaday clothes. Under his arm he held the wrapped puppet. The boy got up and went to his brother.

"Father didn't give it to her, did he?"

Otello looked paler than usual, and made little effort to hide his unhappiness.

"No, he sold it to her."

The boy started to cry. Otello comforted him.

"Don't worry. We'll save and get another one. I've already got some money. I promise you."

The child dragged his bare feet, and gave one of the tires a hearty kick before walking off round the corner.

Otello waited inside the small lobby until she came down. He was relieved that the night and day clerks had changed shifts already.

She was dressed all in white. A porter followed with a small case. She came down slowly and smiled surely at Otello. He felt weak and antagonistic. He saw the smile and suspected it. To his eyes it hung disembodied. It was his initiation into obscurity; the final proof of her irony.

She gave the keys to the porter and he put her bag in the car.

"How are you feeling? Are you going in those dirty clothes? Didn't

you buy any new ones with the money I gave you? Where's your luggage?"

She went to touch him, as if she were waking someone from a trance, but he moved away.

"I'm not coming," he said. "And I'm giving Julio the money. He doesn't even have a pair of shoes. I'm not coming with you." He didn't know why, but he was certain of his reasons. He felt older but not angry. He still liked her but would like her better a thousand miles away.

She stood, unsurprised. "As you wish. Help me get the organ off the roof."

He breathed hard, as if he'd been running.

"I don't want the organ back. I don't want to see it again. If you want to give it to Julio you'll have to do it yourself."

He was near to tears. For one of the few times in her life she wanted to comfort somebody, but he broke away, hands to face, and was around the corner before she could stop him.

Her face gave absolutely nothing away as she walked toward the loaded car. Festivities were over and the street was its usual rather drab bustle.

It caught her eye almost at once. In the crowd of fleeing urchins she thought she recognized Julio. Horse manure was still dripping down the windscreen and down the car's snout. She didn't bother to clean it off, but got in and started the motor. The Citroen slipped into gear and dropped without the slightest jar off the sidewalk and into the dark cave of the street.