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THE OTHER WOMAN AND ME

Bologna, belly of it all
you drive me to sob and belch
Feeling remorse for what you gave me,
now almost a memory, a whiff of the past...
—Francesco Guccini, “Bologna”

I knew that getting together for a beer and a chat before going to the club was a terrible idea. The terrible idea was summed up in those three simple words: “and a chat.” Our relationship, just barely limping along, if switched onto the tracks of dialogue was sure to go off the rails. And that’s the best-case scenario. Luckily, she picks a pub where the music’s so loud that our conversation consists of our yelling back and forth: “What did you say?” A question only intelligible by reading each other’s lips.

But then, the inevitable happened: we went outside. Actually, she dragged me out of the pub, grabbing me by the wrist and pulling me behind her. My fingers were wrapped around my glass as I tried not to spill a single drop of beer. Sitting together on the curb, our backs to the buildings and cars streaming by in front of us, she asked me: “Is there something wrong?” I began to sweat, and not just because it was unseasonably hot—86 degrees—for an evening at the end of May. Suddenly my ex-husband, who was the same age as me, came to mind. I had left him after he asked me: “But why can’t the two of us just spend an evening eating ice cream while strolling hand in hand, looking at the shop windows along Corso Buenos Aires?” For sure, that was not the only problem we had. Anyway, in retrospect, this last question of his doesn’t seem so bad now. At least, not as bad as the question that Kya just asked me.

“The trouble is, we are completely different,” I explain.

This sentence comes bursting out of my mouth as if I wanted to spit out something that’s going down the wrong way and, what’s more, making me choke,

“Come again?”

“Well, for instance I color my hair and you don’t.”

She stares at me in disbelief.

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“What about getting another one?” she asks me, as she takes a gulp of her beer. I check our glasses. They both seem half full. Or half empty. It always depends on whose point of view. The problem is that at this stage in our relationship, I even have trouble seeing the glass.

“We’ve still got some beer left,” I say.

“We could finish it quickly.”

“Just like our relationship.”

“Come on, you’re blowing it completely out of proportion.”

“Maybe.”

“Not that absurd age-difference rant again?”

“I’d leave out both the adverb and the adjective.”

“Valeria and Riccardo are also 14 years apart.”

“Who?”

“C’mon, you know who I mean.”

“I don’t know anyone by those names.”

“You know very well who they are.”

“Are you talking about the actors Valeria Golino and Riccardo Scamarcio?”

“Yeah.”

The fact that she loves reading the gossip columns has always made me feel a bit sad. Not only does she pry into other people’s lives, but—just because they are celebrities—she relates to these total strangers as if she knew them personally. And she also uses them for comparison. “So you’re Scamarcio and I’m Golino?” I ask her. Instead of answering, she starts laughing. Who knows why.

Meanwhile, I lose myself in contemplation of her every detail. She has perfect teeth: white, straight, with no gaps in between. And she is beautiful and young. These days being aware of all this bothers me: the reasons that originally attracted me to her are the ones now driving me away. This happens, I’m afraid, when admiration turns to envy. It becomes a competition: a struggle involving only me. And one that I lose, time after time.

“There are rumors of a break-up,” I remark.

“Between Valeria and Riccardo?”

“Yup!”

“Crushing illusions is your specialty.”

“I am a professional at it.”

She kisses me. I kiss her back. Our best interaction so far tonight, I think. But then she pulls back. Too bad.

She asks me “Are you seeing someone else? Is the problem an-

other ...”

“Another addiction?” I interrupt her.

She laughs again although I wasn't trying to be funny, not even this time.

“Well, then you could at least say something nice to me,” she continues.

“What does that have to do with it?”

“I was just trying to change the subject.”

“Ah, ok: you breathe well.”

I just cannot bring myself to make her happy anymore.

She gets up. Maybe she's leaving: if she dumps me here, alone, with my evasive answers, I wouldn't blame her.

“I'm going inside to get two more beers,” she says.

“I don't want another one.”

“But I do.”

“You knock them back like a sailor.”

“Not exactly the best compliment to my femininity.”

“Come on! I didn't say you belch like a trucker.”

In the end, I had another beer, too. And then a third, a fourth, a fifth, then I lost count. I only remember that we went to the club, that we got back home around four in the morning, and we fell asleep listening to the chirping of the birds: one of the rare moments in which I felt in perfect sync with my father, who is an avid hunter.

I set the alarm for eight AM. It takes me about an hour and a half to wake up. I need at least two cups of coffee and a random number of cigarettes to feel ready to interact with the rest of the world. And, by extension, also to be able to leave the house. What's more, Silvia and Paolo have warned me over and over again: “Just try to be on time.” Words that sounded to me like a threat.

The day and the time were always the same: Saturday, at ten. But 10 o'clock in the morning now, not at night, as it used to be.

The sky is clear, but up there the sun is shining instead of the moon and the stars. And you can't look at the sun without protecting your eyes. If the light's too strong, it hurts and it also shows up what I would prefer to keep hidden, like my roots that are growing out and my wrinkles that I never used to have. Only the bags under my eyes seem to have always been there.

We meet just in front of my house, in the street; not on the platform of the main train station in Milano, as we used to do. So, we're going by car, not by train. But, since today we're not planning to get drunk, there

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will be no need for a designated driver. Anyway, at this point I wouldn't be of any help: I am still hungover.

As usual, the car ride will take a little over two hours. There will be just the three of us, slightly more than a couple. Certainly, not as many as we used to be before we disbanded. Out of a large group, we are the only three left: Silvia, Paolo and I: the remnants. Or rather, those who managed to escape the usual family ties. My ex-husband is also absent. He has a new life, with his new wife and a son. His path never crosses ours, not even by chance. I miss him—every now and then.

Back then, we were in our thirties. Now we are almost fifty. Certain numbers make a difference. If Kya had at least come with us, she would have lowered the average age. Too bad she doesn't want to go out with my friends, to her they are "senior citizens." Sometimes she refers to them as the old fogies. They are my age, more or less.

"So, are you going on a day trip with the old fogies?" she asked me, yesterday.

"Coming?"

"No, thank you!" Her thank you had a sarcastic aftertaste. Especially because it was accompanied by a mocking smile. Our destination, without going into details, is always the same: a former industrial park, on Via Stalingrado, on the outskirts of Bologna.

These abandoned places must have a perennial attraction: run-down, falling apart, deserted for years, and slated for demolition. Then they're taken over by people and their causes, just for a while. They never have a clear geographical identity, they're neither inside nor outside the city limits. They hover on the edges, suspended, precarious. Much as I perceived myself then, and often still do now. And this feeling persists.

Yet, there are details that point to the differences: only the location and the name of the street are the same. Not the place itself. "Everything changes" is a sentence that has always sounded like an obituary to me, and against which I have fought like Don Quixote and the windmills. Indefatigably, but unsuccessfully.

The place we are going to today is a free open-air museum, located behind R.U.S.Co, a wholesale supermarket that used to house a metal factory, Zincaturificio Bolognese.

The place we used to go almost twenty years ago was a social center that was occupied and self-managed. It was on the other side of a bridge and was called Livello 57, a series of former train sheds extending beyond the tracks. In 2006 it was cleared out, and seized by the authorities. Three years later, the bulldozers tore it down, canceling it out as you would

a pencil drawing with an eraser. What remains, now, is left to memory. In any case, mine always deceives me. It is nourished by imagination rather than truth. Imagination, considering how much I use it, must really exist. Truth is another matter. It's in the dictionary, but so far that seems to be the only place where I can find it.

Now, however, we are going to see some murals. Not to a rave.

There were murals at Level 57 too, but they were a part of the whole, not the whole thing itself. Even if they covered every surface. Among them, the one painted by Simonetta stood out: a Fourth State, cyborg version. Filled with human-looking aliens: us maybe, when we danced all night long, in the darkness pierced by flashing lights, under the speakers. Swept away by the repetitive, hypnotic rhythms of techno music. It sucked us in, dragging us into a dimension where only the here and now existed, the immanence of the present, the exact moment we were living. Past and future seemed to dissolve, to lose substance. And with them, our minds, our thoughts. We became pure movement, anaesthetizing ourselves: it was less tiring than jogging, and healthier than drugs. In other words, something very close to happiness. In the morning, we would go back home. This is what life in Bologna meant to me—until now. It was an experience rather than a city.

Lorenzo de' Medici was right: "What beauty lies in youth, yet ever so fleeting!" Returning home at dawn when one is forty-seven years old has its side effects. I am experiencing them all, from headache to nausea. Once upon a time, four hours' sleep was all I needed. Not now. And the bathroom mirror bears witness to this: "You're wiped out," it keeps telling me, over and over again, in a bitter, nagging way. My ex-mother-in-law's remarks are less biting and annoying. Absolutely no birthday greetings for her today: she is turning 78, and she can't stand being reminded of it. Definitely no celebrations whatsoever. I had always regarded her quirky behavior as silly and childish, but I'm beginning to understand her now.

I brush my teeth, spit what I can into the sink, and rinse my mouth. I look at the tube from which I have just squeezed the paste on the toothbrush: "Fuck!" I scream.

"Everything ok?" Kya asks me.

Her voice is low and hoarse, and is coming from my bedroom.

"No," I answer.

"What happened?"

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"I used arthritis cream instead of toothpaste."

"Again?"

"Yeah."

"You should hire a caregiver: after forty, it's nothing to be ashamed of."

I go to her. Speaking from one room to another is something that bothers me, especially because my hearing is not as good as it used to be. She is stretched out naked between the white sheets: short black hair, dark velvety skin, sculpted, muscular physique. I feel as if a billboard has landed in my bed. Or a picture from Helmut Newton's Big Nudes series. Her eyes are shut. Mine are wide open, I'm staring at her. I lower my eyelids, as if to protect myself. Lately, I try to avoid looking at her too much: she scares and bothers me, because she crushes me, deepening my feelings of insecurity and inadequacy. She is what I would have liked to be, and that I never have been. "Time's up for me," I think. Moreover, Kya is African: she comes from a land that feels magical to me. In fact, I feel I'm under her spell. I doubt I will be the one to break it. I go closer,

"Could you try not to be like that?" I whisper to her.

She waves her hand over her ear, as if the sound of my words was the buzz of a mosquito. Just as annoying, I guess.

"Like that: how?"

"Perfect, sort of."

"Inside and out?"

"Only the second one."

"Do you mind if I go back to sleep?"

"Are you really sure you don't want to come with us?"

"Yup, we'll talk later, ok?"

"That's fine."

"I love you."

"Did you ever see Moretti's movie, *Red Wood Pigeon*?"

"What does that have to do with it?"

"Absolutely nothing."

But, as Moretti says: words are important. Anyway, we've already said too much. Doing so, early in the morning, should be considered an immoral act. Just like ordering a small beer at the pub.

I walk along the corridor, go into the kitchen and look at the wall clock: it's already 9:45. I run the risk of being late. I must hurry. But it's in situations like these that wasting time seems like the only option. So, I give into temptation and make myself another cup of coffee.

While I put the espresso maker on the stove, I hear a young man's voice coming from the courtyard. "Mom, drinking Jack Daniel's at 10 AM? Not a good idea, come on: it's really too early." When I come back, I absolutely must remember to get to know this woman. There are people I underestimate. Meanwhile, trying not to make any noise, I close the shades and the windows to let Kya sleep better. But soon after, in my haste, I bang everything: especially doors and pots and pans. Finally, the ashtray falls on the floor: a heavy thud, and I cannot restrain my foul language. I take broom and dustpan, to clean up the pieces scattered across the floor. When I throw them into the trash, I feel a deep sadness, nostalgia for things that break, that cannot be fixed, that end. Things from which we must part. I'd like to call a friend of mine, and tell her: "Do you remember that time, about ten years ago, when, after a piece of cheese fell out of your sandwich you burst into tears, and I burst into laughter? Well, I apologize."

Remorse and good intentions interrupted by the buzz of the intercom.

"I'll be there in five minutes," I say.

I am still in my underwear. I return to my bedroom. I open the closet and rummage through drawers and shelves: tank top and miniskirt, stockings and Doc Martens. I've got everything. I'm about to get dressed.

"You're well preserved," Kya remarks, looking at me.

Suddenly I feel like a piece of frozen food.

"Are you still awake?"

"Impossible to sleep, with all this racket you're making."

"I am about to leave."

And I am also about to tear up: first though, I would like to check if there is a tattoo with the expiration date on some part of my body.

I go downstairs, open the door and see them: Silvia and Paolo leaning against the side of the car. With hands folded on their chests, they are both staring at me.

"We've been waiting for you for twenty minutes, and it's hot," Silvia tells me.

"I hope there is some extra room in the car for my outsized sense of guilt."

"You can both sit in the back, you'll feel more comfortable," Paolo suggests.

"Who's driving?"

"Me," he says.

"Ok."

I look at the landscape speeding past the car windows, while I

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listen to the music and to their conversation without taking part in it.

“Well, today Viola is more talkative than usual,” remarks Silvia when we have almost reached our destination.

“That’s because I don’t have anything to say.”

“So what the heck is new?”

Perhaps it’s time to change my friends.

“It’s also because I only slept four hours,” I add.

“Did you come back home at dawn?” Paolo asks me.

“Mmh, yes.”

“What did you do?”

“Well, I went out dancing.”

“Saturday Night Fever, at your age, is considered a disease, a serious one.”

“Yesterday, anyway, was Friday.”

Yes, I must definitely change friends. With these old fogies, as Kya calls them, any meaningful conversation is a thing of the past.

“Did you go out with Kya?” Silvia asks me.

“Yes, that’s right.”

“So, you two are still an item?”

“As far as I know.”

“You keep saying that you want to leave her, but then you don’t.”

“I’m scared”.

“Of what?”

“Of loneliness, maybe. And of regretting it.”

“I have never understood what you see in her.”

“She’s very beautiful, and she’s young.”

“What about me? So, I’m not?”

“Well, a little less.”

“So you don’t like me?”

“Yes, I like you. But in a different way.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Kya is the only woman I have ever desired physically.”

“Anyway, I was speaking of feelings.”

“Love is a projection of the mind.”

“When you grow up, you’ll write corny love messages to wrap around Perugina Baci chocolates.”

“When the dream meets reality, usually someone bites the dust.”

“Amen.”

“Shall I go all the way to Borgo Panigale?” Paolo asks.

“Yes, then go towards the airport, and take exit 7 towards the city

center,” answers Silvia who is giving him directions using an app she downloaded onto her phone.

“What are you doing?” Paolo asks, looking at me through the rear-view mirror.

“I’m lighting a cigarette.”

“Inside the car?”

“Yes, but I am opening the windows all the way.”

“And I’ll curse you all the way there!”

“As soon as you can, make a U-turn,” Silvia says.

We are on Via Stalingrado: more than a street it’s a big avenue with two lanes, divided by a median strip and lined with abandoned barracks and factories, interspersed with anonymous middle-class buildings. Basically, it’s a connector between the beltway and the city, suspended between past and present, something that is neither here nor there. Something that didn’t turn out well, that you could find anywhere. A run-of-the-mill nonplace. “Stalingrad in every city,” sang the Italian rock band Stormy Six to celebrate the battle that marked the end of the Nazis’ advance in the Soviet Union. You see, in Bologna a Stalingrad does exist. But it’s only a street: asphalt pounded by wheels. It’s used mostly for traffic and commerce: for cars, merchandise and their trappings. So, it’s a tribute to needs and addictions, rather than a celebration of liberation and freedom.

“In your opinion, am I like a piece of frozen food?” I say.

“What?” they ask me in unison.

“Nothing,” I reply.

“Take the first right and park in front of Cash & Carry,” says Silvia. We get out of the car.

The Zincaturificio Bolognese is almost hidden behind trees and shrubs, shielded by a fence with dangling “No entry” signs. People go inside at their own risk, something that we already knew. We also thought that to go inside we would need to climb over the fence. But that isn’t necessary, it’s easy to slip through a hole in the wire meshing. I quickly reassess my Riot-grrrl aspirations.

We walk through rubble, trash and dead birds to look at the drawings and the graffiti on the remains of these former factory walls: almost 170,000 square feet of surface area, inside and out, decorated with murals by foreign and Italian artists. They have transformed an urban void – that is to say a no-man’s-land, a possible breeding-ground for social malaise – into an interesting environment: alive, lively and vital. The song *Via del Campo* by Fabrizio De Andrè comes to mind: “Nothing is born of diamonds, while flowers blossom from manure.”

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Silvia, Paolo and I get lost: each one of us stops in front of the works we like best. For the last few minutes, I have been reading and re-reading a sentence painted on a column, as if it were a piece of poetry:

“I saw her,
and she was
so beautiful
that spring,
that year, as if offended, arrived
a month late.”

I swallow, several times.

Kya’s image hits me like a slap in the face, rousing me from a sentimentality that I once would have considered corny. But now, here I was, ready to take a picture of this poem.

I look for my friends: I find them.

“Do you have some water?” I ask.

Paolo hands me the bottle: I drink it all.

“Thank you,” I say.

“Anything else?” he asks me.

“The car keys.”

“What for?”

“I’d like to lie down a little.”

“Do you feel sick?”

“Yeah.”

“Here they are.”

“I’ll be waiting for you there.”

“Ok.”

I lower the seat, I lie down and fall asleep. I dream of my ex analyst.

“Good morning, doctor,” I tell her.

“Welcome back.”

“What’s with these empty chairs set in a circle?”

“They are for you, for your different personalities.”

“Perfect!”

“But there are not many, there are only three: it could have been worse.”

“What do you mean?”

“One is for you as a child, the other as a teen-ager and the last one

is for you as an adult.”

“There’s a problem.”

“Only one?”

“Are you trying to be funny?”

“Maybe, but tell me.”

“Forget it. There is a chair too many.”

“Which one?”

“Well, what do you think?”

Silvia and Paolo wake me up when they open the doors.

“I’ve made up my mind: when I get home, I’m breaking up with her.”

“Pay no attention to her,” Silvia remarks, turning to Paolo.

“With Kya?” he asks me.

“Yes.”

“Are you sure?”

“Certainties should be considered psychotropic substances: illegal, moreover.”

“Sure. But now let’s go downtown, and look for a place for lunch, ok?”

“All right.”

Inside its walls, Bologna looks like an ancient town of red brick flanked by alleys and porticos dotted with pubs and restaurants, creating a bohemian atmosphere that seems to welcome, embrace and protect me. Inviting me to enjoy life’s pleasures like being with other people, not just sharing drink and food with them. And yet I wouldn’t want anyone to touch my salad and my beer. My two friends are talking, I am silent. I eat some, then drink some, nothing more.

“What’s that scent?” Silvia asks, sniffing the air.

“It’s the scent of the flowering linden trees,” Paolo says.

We are sitting at a table outdoors at Fantoni’s. Silvia and Paolo wanted to come here because, in some guidebooks, it’s defined as “a traditional Bolognese restaurant.” They, of course, have ordered traditional dishes: soup with tortellini, and fresh noodles with meat sauce. While they sip Pignoletto wine, they ask me if I want a taste.

“No, thank you,” I answer, staring at the white and red checkered tablecloth, and shifting a bread crumb from a white square to a red one, as if I were playing chess by myself.

Then, I look at the street where we are: Via Pratello. There are some posters on the walls. I get up and move closer. Many of them are ad-

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vertising reggae performances. Like the one I went to last night. It's no use trying to talk Silvia or Paolo into going. For them, going out in the evening means sitting around a table, eating, drinking and chatting, just what they are doing now. I usually find it boring. That's not my idea of having fun. I even told them.

"The point is that we're grown up now," they replied.

With that "we," hinting at the fact that I, instead, am not.

"You two are old," I would have liked to rebut. "Old fogies." For sure, my birth certificate says I'm old too. Maybe that's the reason why I am not able to break up with Kya, she represents my last link to youth. But maybe that's the same reason why I would like to leave her: Staying with her makes me feel older than I am. It's the comparison that does me in.

I rejoin Silvia and Paolo. Seated at the table next to ours, there is a couple that I hadn't noticed before. A woman and a man: they are good-looking, and they must be close to my age. They talk, laugh, and kiss. Just like two teenagers. Then, she strokes his face while he ruffles her hair.

"It seems like nothing has changed from twenty years ago," he tells her.

"Maybe, now it's even better."

"Shall we go and have a digestivo, as we used to?"

"At De Marchi's in Piazza San Francesco?"

They smile at each other, stand up and leave. Taking with them all their unbearable complicity, their joy.

I take my cellphone out of my bag, I open Facebook and go to my ex analyst's page. I should really go back to her. The first thing I read is a post of hers, about dogs and cats: she writes that dogs symbolize the male gender, and cats the female. That's it, I've changed my mind: I'm not going back to her.

"Shall we go?" I say.

"Where to?" Paolo asks.

"Home."

"Already?"

"What else would you like to do?"

"Go for a walk."

"Just to help your digestion?"

"That too."

"I would prefer to finish with a Montenegro digestive which has more or less the same effect."

"And then, do you intend to sleep all the way back?"

"I hope so."

"You really are good company today."

"Come on, let's take her back to Milano," Silvia says.

While we are in the car, on our way back, my phone starts ringing.

"What time are you coming home?" Kya asks me.

"In time for a pre-dinner drink."

"I'll wait for you, then."

"All right."

"See you later."

"Ok."

"Hey!"

"What?"

"Do you love me?"

"How much time do I have to answer?"

She hangs up.

I open the door, and I almost trip over her. She is sitting cross-legged on the hallway floor. She has a joint in her hand and a suitcase by her side.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm leaving."

"For how long?"

"Forever."

"I can understand why."

"Can't you say anything else?"

"No."

"Here: take this pencil as a gift."

"Thank you."

"When you are done using it, at the end you'll find some seeds."

"Of what?"

"Flowers."

"Which kind?"

"Forget-me-not."

"Ah."

"Maybe it would be better if I gave you a different pencil."

I will plant cherry tomatoes and wait for them to reach maturity.