

Excerpt from  
Luca Ricci  
The Autumnals

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I was at the window in my underwear, because in Rome in September it was broiling. My wife Sandra was also naked, lying on the bed, on top of the sheets, looking at me. What stopped me from lying down next to her? The chain of thought always started with an affirmation that inevitably turned into a question: “My wife is beautiful, is my wife beautiful?” My wife has always been beautiful, I told myself, trying to reflect. I remembered that she had always been beautiful, others had always considered her beautiful, and I too had always considered her beautiful. A Renaissance beauty, we said of her, pastel hues, with a mass of thick auburn hair, big smoke-green eyes (a color invented specifically to describe them), a solid but well-proportioned body, a trace of cellulite that barely defaced her (“defaced” in an avant-garde sense, my wife was like the *Mona Lisa* with a moustache). Well then? What changes could I register now? She’d aged, of course, but could aging necessarily be called deterioration? Had she put on weight? Had her ankles and feet swelled, did she have a belly (insufferable in women), did she have bulging eyes? That afternoon, as she was emptying the suitcases from our vacation at the shore, had I perhaps found her pathetic in that sports outfit: tee-shirt, tights and tennis shoes? Feeling like my back was to the wall, I gave a faint sigh, still facing out the window. I tried to divert my thoughts with anything I could think of. But what else could I think about? What else did couples ever think about from morning till night if not their partner? The obsession with love was nothing compared to the obsession with *disaffection*, except that in comparison with the first the second was pure defeat, failure, annihilation. I was tempted to share some of these thoughts with Sandra. But then, even if she didn’t tell me to go to hell, what would happen? Wasn’t loneliness more noticeable precisely when conversing, sharing, being together? I could just take her, period, without saying a word. There was nothing that prevented me from it, the band on the ring finger sanctioned it. Was the desire lacking because

the feeling had faded, or vice versa? In the end I gave up and went back to ruminating. “My wife is beautiful, is my wife beautiful?”

At that moment Sandra abruptly sat up against the headboard, and it was practically worse than if she had snorted in irritation. It was a fairly unmistakable way to remind me that on that early September afternoon – one of those afternoons when summer shyly begins to flirt with autumn –, when we had just returned from our seaside vacation, she too existed in that room. That my life was with her, for better or for worse. I immediately understood the meaning of that brusque change of position and went over to the bed. If I decided to lie down, there would be no other reason than to make love. But couples stopped making love soon enough and began licking their wounds instead. It was not a metaphorical image. Marital sex was no longer performed for the purpose of seeking pleasure, but rather to obtain *relief*. It became a palliative – even an anesthetic – for life spent together; it was never a stimulant. The grind of copulation became very unadventurous, so husband and wife soon turned to individual consolations, less liable to be misunderstood, such as stamp-collecting or gardening, browsing fashion magazines or watching TV sports. Both sought opiates to forget their *disappointment* at not being able to share the passion of sex anymore, the frenzy of sex and, at the same time, to loosen the hold of affection. That’s right, because affection was always lurking, overpowering, a kind of blackmail.

“Do you mind telling me what the hell you’re thinking about?” Sandra asked, clearly annoyed.

“Nothing, why?”

“You have a funny expression.”

I should have been pleased that after so many years of marriage my wife still looked at me closely. But basically that’s how it was for all couples. At a certain point couples stopped talking and started simply watching each other. They stopped talking at the table, they stopped talking in the car, they stopped talking in doctors’ waiting rooms, they stopped talking in bed. In the past he and she had loved each other like crazy, and had been obsessed with the idea of loving each other less. Today they’d had enough and the horizon of their obsession had changed: they checked to see how far the other’s exasperation and boredom had progressed, they wanted to know which of the two was about to run out of patience, who was closer to calling it all off.

“What’s wrong?” Sandra insisted.

“Why do you keep asking me that?”

“You frowned.”

“When?”

“Just now.”

I wanted no part of sharing those thoughts with my wife, so I remained silent, trying to find a convincing excuse. The more time that passed, the more Sandra would realize that it was a small deception.

“I’m not thinking about anything,” I said. “I’m just tired from the trip back.”

It was a half-truth. Every year we spent a month at the seashore, in Circeo. Everything decided as a couple was subjected to a kind of negotiation (living together with someone means just that, negotiating endlessly) in which, in this case, I let Sandra have her way. To put it briefly, the seaside cottage had never appealed to me. I'd spent the weeks wandering around beaches (on closer inspection, deserts) teeming with frivolous libertines. Now September was finally back, and I could leave the frivolity behind, along with the pedal boats, at seaside bathing establishments with pathetic names like *Sea View* or *Four Winds* or *Sun Paradise*. Yet every year, when I got back, I was seized by conflicting sentiments: on the one hand there was the relief of having the vacation over with; on the other, loomed the terror of returning to the daily routine. And like every year, I felt the urge to suggest to my wife that we move to a new house, for the sole purpose of breaking the monotony (including the conflicting sensation of relief and dread). It was fairly common. When couples no longer knew what else to do, they played the last card: a move.

When Sandra said "Come over here," it was clear that her peremptory summons would be her last attempt: there was a daily limit to the humiliation of taking the initiative in my stead.

At that point there was no way I could avoid lying down, though I did so as if I'd fallen into a trap. I drummed my fingers on Sandra's jutting hip bones. They were beautiful, those jutting bones, intact, unblemished, spared from time's strain and stress. They felt firm under my fingertips, sharp. But it wasn't enough.

"This could be the right time," I told her. "Should we move?"

Sandra struggled to convert her disappointment into something constructive. "You know I adore our imaginary moves."

We smiled at each other listlessly: the most we could still get from our relationship.

Occasionally I enjoyed wandering around Rome with my colleague Alberto Gittani. I was firmly convinced that writers hit it off (and could become friends) only if they shared the same publishing fate: the unfortunates with the unfortunates, the fortunates with the fortunates. And neither Gittani nor I had written anything for several years now.

"Writing prefaces to other people's books really destroys me," Gittani began, sticking a cigarette in his mouth (his way of declaring that he was up for some conversation).

"My main activity has become finding good excuses not to write," I said.

"And do you find them?"

"Constantly, always new and always extremely valid."

Gittani's eyes twinkled. "Because you're a true writer, of course!"

We headed towards the basilica of Santa Cecilia. Trastevere had never appealed to me. Its picture-postcard phoniness – the restaurants with their checkered tablecloths, promising unforgettable spaghetti all'amatriciana, the waiters on the threshold inviting you in, in their broken English – had always grated on me.

“Did it ever occur to you that Trastevere is a cardboard amusement park?” I asked him.

Gittani coughed up phlegm and spat. “The only authentic thing that can happen to you in Trastevere is to wrench your ankle in one of these damn holes.”

We passed the gaping pothole Gittani had alluded to, and continued along the bumpy cobblestoned street.

“What did you do in August?” I asked him.

“What do you think I did? Nothing. It’s been years since I’ve gone anywhere.”

“I envy you!”

“I’m done with places to visit. Where the fuck would I go? An overpriced spa resort? The same old European capitals? An atoll fifteen hours away by plane so I can long for Sabaudia?”

I clapped him on the shoulder.

“And you?” Gittani asked me. “How did it go at the shore?”

“The usual things, the usual bitter thoughts. Now I have a desire to move.”

“In need of the refresh button?”

“Exactly.”

Gittani coughed again and chuckled. “Sometimes a new washing machine or a set of new pots works just as well.”

[...]

To inaugurate autumn, I came up with the weird idea of taking a stroll through the flea market in piazza dei Quiriti. Prati, apart from the law offices and the embassies, was a district populated by old people, who at that time were trickling back from their vacations (just like Sandra and I had recently done). The atmosphere was fairly quiet and a little bemused. Antique prints, vintage showcases, costume jewelry, knick-knacks, children’s toys, handicrafts: I had always suspected that those street markets – where you walked around with a distracted look and a weight on your chest that you have at empty moments – could hide tremendous dangers. I was drawn to a stall of books. I couldn’t call myself a bibliophile, nor a collector, but books left *orphaned* by readers who had never read them or who had stopped reading them halfway though, filled me with anguish. These were used or second hand tomes – with some obvious anomalies (glaring typographical or editorial errors) – and you could always come upon some delicious or disturbing surprise in them: a dedication that someone had wanted to undo, a lock of hair used as a bookmark, an underlined thought that maybe you were thinking at that moment (or would have loved to have thought of).

I found an old book about Modigliani, whose life and work I knew well enough but whom I had never elevated to my personal pantheon of talents. I leafed through the volume with the usual distraction and weighty chest that marked the early days of September, a time still devoid of possibilities and therefore of developments. Essentially it was a book of photographs, a gallery of images (accompanied by brief captions) that followed Modigliani’s life as it had

unfolded, between Livorno and Paris. What had I felt right at that moment? Nothing, barely a shiver. I flipped through the pages again, however: I had glimpsed the photo of Jeanne Hébuterne, Modigliani's companion: milky-white skin and fearsome eyes. I bought the volume for next to nothing and walked away elated, full of the senseless joy that seizes you after a lightning bolt. At a table in a café, they brought me a latte macchiato that I let cool, then an orange juice which a couple of flies buzzed around for some time. The photo was even more beautiful than when I'd seen it at the flea market, a few moments earlier. The black and white brought out her alabaster skin, and the hair clasped by a type of veil or band burst out on either side like a couple of riotous torrents. And then those eyes staring fixedly before her – looking fixedly at *me* –, the fierce, powerful, unshakable tenacity.



[...]

I kept wandering around, and that perpetual motion was an exact photograph of my restlessness. There was a whole theory about Chinese massage

parlors in the city (by now they constituted its toponymic shadow): they were the brothels of one time, converted today, very hypocritically, into ambiguous aesthetic centers, where the boundary line between a request for a treatment and a blowjob became very labile. I'd been told it was all a matter of price. The masseuses were outright prostitutes who might perhaps have learned some rudiments of Thai or Ayurveda. I went as far as the threshold of three or four centers: generally a large golden Buddha eyed visitors from the doorway. In addition, a typical scent of vaguely Oriental incense came from within, a spicy aroma that was already a promise of oiled hands and dripping humors. In the end I realized hopelessly that my desire could not be quenched with an hour of paid sex. That sex had nothing to do with it. That I envied all the men who felt intimately and deeply satisfied with an hour of sex, men for whom emptying the scrotum was like emptying the bladder. At the last parlor I tried to approach, I stood across the street watching them enter. There were men of all ages. I imagined them at it with the Chinese women. The young guys already horny, with the notion of turning their massage into a porn film punctuated by opportune positions; the old ones with their members ultrascrubbed to make up for the ineffectiveness of their virility, ready to convert ablution into something vaguely sexual. I felt pure disgust, a genuine sadness. I still felt within me the desire for a tremendous new love (though Gittani would have called it a new chance to fall in love) and I thought about the photo of Jeanne Hébuterne. Could she really be the solution? And in what way?

[...]

Sandra's cousin's name was Gemma and, contrary to what we'd expected, she arrived by herself, without her partner.

"He's a little strange," she apologized, even before we sat down at the table. "You know how artists are, right?"

I nodded in the somewhat pompous way a first-rate writer does when forced to contend with someone lesser known than him.

"And which art is he into?" I asked.

"He *paints*."

I didn't immediately realize it, or maybe I did. This time Jeanne had truly appeared, not just an imagined body part, but all of her, in flesh and blood, as common sense would have it, as even Gittani had hoped. The physical resemblance between the two women was striking: the thick, black hair, the deep, bluish eyes, the creamy white complexion. But there was more. This woman Gemma had the same expression as Jeanne, the same fierce, plaintive gaze, the same spirit of struggle and sacrifice. I noticed it right away – a few words during a predictable dinner among relatives were all it took.

"So you were Sandra's playmate at the shore," I said.

"More like her companion in boredom. We always tend to extol the past, but I remember those summers."

Sandra agreed, and smiled at her understandingly; she was happy to go back to playing the role of little mother with her cousin (there was a clear age

difference between the two of them). The two women got sentimental as they began an impromptu cataloging of some memories from the '80s, the magical period of their time together – a whirl of telephone tokens, espadrilles, jackets with shoulder pads, Spandau Ballet, VHS cassettes and telenovelas. The atmosphere in the house warmed up, the dinner that had seemed tedious, at least in its initial remarks, unexpectedly turned into a party. Jeanne was at dinner in the living room of my house; the fact left me dazed and shook me up.

Before dessert I had to go to the bathroom to rinse my face. I could hardly believe that sensational turn of events. I had tried to summon Jeanne every way I could, for a whole month, and now it was she who had knocked at my door, asking for only a hot meal in return. I gripped her purse in my hands. Yes, I had taken it like a thief (it hadn't been difficult, she'd left it in the entry hall before coming in). I unzipped it and began to rifle through it. What was I looking for? I didn't know exactly. All I needed was a single object that would let me know, that would sound like a liberating message: "I came, here I am." My hands pulled out a wallet full of loyalty cards and loose change, a couple of face cream samples (the kind they hand out in cosmetic stores or that you find stuck to the pages of magazines as advertisements), a make-up kit, a packet of Kleenex (unopened) and a package of crumbled crackers. Was that all? Could it be? I set the purse down on the corner of the sink so I could plunge both hands inside. The inspection was thorough, but frantic, I rummaged about like a man possessed. I pulled out a tiny rubber band for the hair and a nearly empty pack of chewing gum. I wasn't satisfied, I couldn't accept it. "Tell me it's you, Jeanne, find a way to communicate it to me, here, now, with no chance of misunderstanding," I thought as my hands kept squirming around inside the purse.