

Excerpt from LA FINALE (The Finals) by Leonardo Gori (Hobby & Work, 2003)

La finale © 2003 by Leonardo Gori

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*LA FINALE*, Gori's 2003 novel, has as its main character Captain (later Colonel) Bruno Arcieri of the Carabinieri, the investigator featured in Gori's more recent novel *L'ANGELO DEL FANGO* (Rizzoli, 2005). In *LA FINALE*, the author transports his protagonist from Florence to Paris during the World Soccer Championships of 1938 (hence the title: the finals of the world championships) where he is involved in an "unauthorized" investigation of Italian anti-Fascists living in France as exiles. The excerpt finds Arcieri at a Paris jazz club, where he has gone to seek the help of a certain Amedeo Martini. Listening to world-famous guitarist Django Reinhardt swap solos with the equally famous violinist Grappelli as they improvise on old standards such as "Them There Eyes", Arcieri has an enigmatic conversation with an unknown man (perhaps a pre-arranged meeting) and is subsequently beaten up by nameless assailants in the alley behind the club.

In an attempt to pass unobserved, Arcieri returned at last to his hotel and changed his clothes, though with great reluctance actually. All he had was a well-tailored sports jacket, but he put on a pair of more ordinary light wool slacks and left his tie in the room. He checked the time on his Tavannes: it was very late and he hadn't eaten yet, but he couldn't spare the time. He thought of taking a taxi, then changed his mind and stuck to the rule of using only the subway, the best way to avoid any possible tails. He went out into the street with his hat lowered, a cigarette in his mouth and hands in his pocket.

He got to the club a little after ten. He heard the music even before entering the Chez Florence's narrow street: it soared above the distant sounds of the city, the faint hum of the nearby haunts, and the shuffling footsteps of the passers-by. Cars passed infrequently along Rue Blanche, but a number of vehicles were already parked at the nearest corner. A bunch of people, for the most part penniless artists and fans, lingered at the entrance to the alley, backs leaning against the walls. Arcieri walked past the seedy, down-at-the-heels crowd with a shudder or two, as if those hordes were there to ambush him.

The crowd was so tightly packed in front of the Florence's entrance that he had to practically elbow his way in to get through. Everything was strangely different in the darkness of the hot night: the hundreds of flashing lamps around the doorway, that now appeared immense, seemed like an invitation to Paradise despite the pungent odors of spices that mingled with those of alcohol and coffee. The customers came and went through that modern portal of sorts, seemingly out of *A Thousand and One Nights*, that cast surrealistic, constantly changing shadows on their faces as well as on the men's dark attire and the highly colorful outfits of the young women.

Even before being able to see them, in the crush inside the club, he heard two guitars. One carried the rhythm, slow and inexorable, the other circled around it, maintaining the reassuring persistence of a mournful melody with delicate variations. Then the second musician peremptorily changed the tempo, launching into dizzying feats of equilibrium, to the nearly epileptic excitement of those in the audience, some of whom, Arcieri noticed with amazement, were rolling their eyes as if possessed. It was extremely hot, and hard to breathe because of the smoke and fumes. Miraculously the Captain found an empty table, and distractedly asked the waiter for a Perrier. He wasn't able to recognize the tune the group was playing there on the low dais, where they were almost touching the public. At that moment, a tall musician with an almost elegant look, like the young scion of a bourgeois family, interrupted the dialogue between the guitars with a violin improvisation that drew an ahhh! of approval from the leader of the group, the musician with the black moustache and round, bulging eyes. Arcieri looked at him more closely: it was the gypsy whose hand was deformed by an old rifle shot, the only European jazz player admired by the Americans, who vied with one another in order to play with him. He was the true star of the evening: Django Reinhardt, the greatest guitarist in the world.

At the end of the piece Arcieri found himself applauding enthusiastically, he too almost on the edge of his chair, completely indifferent to the glass the waiter had served him a few minutes ago. The group immediately resumed playing, and this time he recognized the tune. It was Them There Eyes: he had bought the record in Florence, in a spirit of adventure. Now the lion's role fell completely to the violinist, Grappelli, about whom he knew very little, only that he was a purebred Parisian, not a gypsy. But Reinhardt, after watching his companion with a mock air of reproach, launched into a series of guitar improvisations that distorted the piece's melody line, with continuous re-creations, one after the other, effortlessly, without even any mental engagement it seemed; an uninterrupted sequence of spontaneous, all new melodies. The violinist rose to his feet, as if he had been challenged to a duel, and almost angrily took off in turn for unheard-of heights, soaring as high as the sky above Paris, while the rhythmic manuche guitar tirelessly sustained the sonorous foundation. Arcieri was no longer a Carabinieri Captain in a foreign country, he was no longer in a Montmartre jazz club or even in Paris: he was in Jazz Paradise, along with a hundred other happy souls.

A man more or less Arcieri's age, maybe a little older, sat down at the table without saying a word. Like everyone else, he too seemed hypnotized by the sonorous flights of Reinhardt and Grappelli, and tapped a foot on the floor in time to the beat. Suddenly, without moving his head, he spoke in a voice loud enough to be heard over the music, but not so loud as to attract the attention of those seated at the adjacent tables:

— How did you hear of Amedeo Martini?

Arcieri played along. He too continued watching the brilliant guitarist, who kept turning toward Grappelli as though to synchronize their respective parts, tacitly signaling the shift of solos.

— I have a letter for him.

— How come it wasn't mailed to him?

— It concerns me. I need help.

Django smiled at Grappelli as the violinist again stood up, abruptly changing the rhythm. The second guitar paused an instant, then adapted quickly to the almost feverish tempo of the violin. The crowd, seated at the tables, could not restrain its applause. Even the unknown man sitting beside Arcieri was clapping his hands.

— Do you know anything about Martini's health?

— Why do you ask?

— It seems he isn't doing too well. But if you're a friend of his, we can help you.

Grappelli seemed like he never wanted to end his improvisation. Arcieri felt as though his breathing, like that of all the other listeners, was racing at the same frenzied pace as the violin.

— What do I need to do?

— As soon as this number ends, leave the club and turn right at the corner, to the little square.

The man left without adding anything further and disappeared in the throng of people who were standing and waiting, pressed elbow to elbow. Django Reinhardt glanced again at his sideman, and ended the piece amid a roar of applause and suppressed shouts. Arcieri placed a franc note under his glass and reluctantly got up from the table: his place was immediately taken by a couple shiny with sweat. It had begun to rain, and as he left the oppressive heat of the club, the evening chill seemed to freeze the clothes on his back. He pulled his hat down tight, turned up the collar of his jacket and started walking, avoiding the puddles. There was nobody waiting outside now, only a couple of beggars and a vagrant lying in the narrow entrance of a doorway. A few yards further on he saw the corner with the little square. He turned right, as the rain increased in intensity. The open area of the square had no outlet: aside from an iron grating facing onto an alley that had been closed off for who knows how long, there was only the service entrance of the Chez Florence. From an open window came the frenetic but muffled notes of the guitars and violin: through the pounding rain they sounded like the swish of a record being played on an old phonograph. Now Django and his accompanists had started on Jeepers Creepers, an overused standard, that in their hands appeared brand new.

The service door opened and a young man carrying a metal can filled with garbage came out. Arcieri noticed that the two beggars had moved closer, and were now just a few yards behind him. The Captain was prepared to confront a pair of ill-intentioned characters, but he was caught off guard by the young busboy, who suddenly let go of the trash can and ran toward him with his head lowered, hitting him in the stomach and making him slam his back against the brick wall. As the trash can rolled noisily in the street, spilling its contents, Arcieri tried to turn toward the two fake beggars, but the boy was slippery as an eel: he dropped to

the ground and gripped Arcieri's legs with one arm, making him lose his balance. The two beggars were on top of him and shoved his shoulders down on the drenched pavement, forcibly immobilizing him. They were dressed in rags, but Arcieri noticed that they wore new felt hats, dripping with rain. They addressed him abruptly in Italian, with a strange accent that Arcieri could not identify.

— Who are you?

— My name is Lucky. They gave me this address in Turin.

— Don't talk bullshit.

The punch to the stomach was expected, but it was so powerful it knocked the breath out of him just the same. Pinned firmly to the ground by the two bruisers, Arcieri's legs jackknifed. He had come looking for it, but the thing was taking on an ugly twist.

— We don't like traitors. Or their friends.

A kick to his right knee, still suffering from an old handgun wound, caused him such pain that for a moment he actually lost his sight.

The music continued on as before, but now the guitars seemed to him to be only plectrums scraping on metal strings, a senseless sound without any feeling. Arcieri tried to bear up all the same, seeking refuge in the jazz. What were they playing now? A slow tune: he thought it might be Nuages. He didn't remember the words, but maybe they had never been written. Other punches came, he felt the taste of blood in his mouth, and he began to be a little afraid. There was nobody in the street. Maybe he would not live to tell it, this time. What was he doing there, in Paris? Had he left Elena in order to wind up killed in an alley, hundreds of miles from home? In order to hang on, to not give in, he forced his mind to follow Grappelli's violin that was now elaborating on Django's chords. But once again the magic evaporated, and he was only able to hear the strings squeaking beneath the bow. The pounding went on for about ten minutes; the two men roughing him up were strong and determined. Reinhardt's music seemed to dissolve altogether, blending with shoes scraping on the wet pavement, muttered curses and the distant sounds of Paris, until the Captain slipped into the void, finally unconscious.

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