



Andrei Navrozov

# Italian Carousel

Scenes of Internal | Exile

Photographs by Gusov



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## XLIV Milan

### *The Book of Italian Excuses*

A decade ago, Celeste Dell'Anna, to this day the only interior designer in Milan with a world reputation and a beautiful wife, was doing our new house in Knightsbridge. We became great friends, initially because I appreciated the tragic spectacle of this man of culture being baited, like some great white stag personifying the Italian rococo, by a pack of London builders who seemed to have been disgorged by Tolkien's subterranean regions. Some were dwarves, others impossibly gaunt; some had warts, others long hair the colour of pigsty straw; some spoke not at all, others were full of palaver; but the one thing all these barbarians had in common was the kind of sylvan, northern, autistic stupidity that is now the chief distinguishing characteristic of the socially displaced and the ethically disenfranchised.

A pupil of the legendary maximalist Renzo Mongiardino, Celeste went on to design yacht, aeroplane, and helicopter interiors for the Agustas, for the Aga Khan, and for the King of Spain. But this was his first job in England. Long used to reconciling the conflicting demands of space, personality, and skill, he valiantly tried to suppress the dawning realization that he was no longer in St. Moritz, that none of his fancy footwork now mattered, and that this time round, in the suitably rustic idiom of the Russian proverb, the scythe had hit a stone. The technical sketches he executed in brown chalk on the stripped yet evermore grimy walls of Victorian hallways and cloakrooms looked more plausible than Renaissance inventions, and each possessed the charm of a museum Watteau; but the ulotrichous workmen either ignored them, to make time for their off-track bets and their electric tea kettles, or plastered them over with copies of the *Sun*, their window on the enchanted Thule of bestially guiltless leisure where the woman's breast was always a size larger than the footballer's head.

In the evenings I drank with Celeste, who had come to accept that alcohol was less unaesthetic than anaesthetic, and while at times a symptom of barbarism, always an antidote to some of its more unsettling effects. When thus tranquillized, Celeste would invariably try to persuade me to write a book about the experiences we were living, advice I could have done worse than followed. He insisted that I should entitle it *The End of the Day*, as this was the phrase, beloved of every stratum of the proletariat in Britain, that he had come to loathe and fear most. To him, *Workers of all nations, unite!* or *Avanti, popolo, alla riscossa!* were history's dusty abstractions, but whenever he heard an unwashed plumber tell him that "A' th' end o' the die, Mr. Delfini, it won' mike much o' a diff'rins if the wa'ah mine *does* run down, 'cos iss *beige*, innit, same's the wall gonna buy," he would tremble in incomprehension and terror like a French nobleman in view of the scaffold. And when, at the end of the day, his own workmen from Bergamo finally arrived to finish the decoration, and I saw their thoughtful faces, their identical, crisply pressed blue overalls, and their tools neatly arranged in mahogany cases, I too felt ennobled and ever so slightly guillotined. They worked like



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Sisyphus, chivalrously insensible of the truth that imposing their precious superstructure on the rude base left behind by the troglodytes of the north was as inutile as raising a marble bust on a plinth of cardboard.

Years have passed. I have become godfather to Celeste's son. London is now only a gambler's memory, selective, capricious, and blind to the ruinous distinction between last week's big loss and last year's big win. The other night we drank together again, this time at his studio in Milan, and as I regaled him with my stories of apartment hunting in Venice and house restoration in Palermo, he again chided me for not having written about our London experiences. He wanted to know what sort of book I might be thinking of these days, now that I had come to live in his country. I joked that the best-seller the world really craves at the moment is *How to Live Well on \$1 Million a Year*, for the simple reason that those with the means to make themselves manifestly unhappy are so bad at mastering them. But then it occurred to me that there was, in fact, a variant of *The End of the Day* that was relevant to my present condition.

This would be called *The Book of Italian Excuses and Lies*. Neither Celeste nor I ever supposed that *The End of the Day* would become some sort of diatribe against the national character of the inhabitants of Britain, and we accepted that no treatise on hygiene, no diachronic study of climate, and no history of education could ever explain the shocking fact that British workmen wear no underwear. Similarly, in this book I would not tackle the larger generalities – such as the really shocking fact that just about every Italian, of whatever age, believes that his country has fought on the winning side in World War II – concentrating instead on the quotidian of small evasions and white lies, the fibbing, mercurial, hypochondriacal continuum of men's private lives in which the Italian character comes to the fore.

A few days ago I went into a shop to ask if they had any pickled gherkins, and I want to give the owner's reply verbatim. "Pickled gherkins *as such* I do not have at the moment," he said with the dignified deliberation that one always finds so becoming in a shopkeeper, "but I do have pickled capers, which is a kind of gherkin only a little smaller and rounder." My laughter offended him: "You will not find the *other kind* in any shop, sir," he said haughtily, "but if you insist I can always ask the wholesaler if we can have that" – I was sure he had something rude like "*porcheria*" on the tip of his tongue – "specially ordered for you." For the morality of much Italian lying is predicated on the ready offence to be taken at the slightest suggestion that one is not telling the truth, an attitude that, at least to the Russian Orthodox eye of my housekeeper, makes even ordinary law-abiding Italians akin to horse-thieving Gypsies.

The attitude goes well with the ubiquitous persona that may be called the *cavaliere servente* – it is not for nothing, after all, that Italy is famous for her lovers – who first woos and swoons, then yawns and switches off his portable. Ubiquitous, I say, because the spirit of the distracted lover holds sway over the behaviour of the architect and the lawyer, the hospitable host and the polite guest, the promising politician and the enthusiastic voter. In the morning the man of the moment is full of exquisite dreams, and it seems he can think of nothing besides his new mistress, his new vocation, or his new plan; come afternoon, neither inviting this nor aware that it contravenes his earlier state of mind, he suddenly feels himself drawn to some other object of interest glistening in

the middle distance, be it a splendid racecar in a magazine advertisement or a jewelled collar round the neck of a passing poodle; come evening he feels weary of it all, and besides he has a chest cold coming on, or else the clams had disagreed with him; *lascia perdere*, he mutters ruefully, to hell with all those women, plans, and dogs, I am going to call my mother and then have myself a nice cup of camomile tea.

Hence the malingering for which the nation is famous. Walk into any Italian pharmacy and you will find yourself in the town's most fashionable salon, where everyone is a grandee though some are grander than the rest, and where the social competition turns on the issue of just whose diseases are more evanescent. The butcher's daughter feels that she has a sore on her cheek that could lead to complications, and the beauty of it is that the sore is *invisible*; five minutes of discussion. Not to be bested by a mere butcher's daughter, the chartered accountant's brother complains of a *constriction* in his lungs, one that, moreover, he experiences only at carnival time; five minutes of animated discussion, followed by the purchase of vitamin capsules. Then an unknown lady in a voluminous fur coat, holding her own against all comers, announces that she simply has not been *well*; ten minutes of highly animated discussion, with the pharmacist coming out from behind the counter to make more elbow space for philosophical expostulation. By lunchtime closing, everyone who matters in society – that is to say, everyone who is truly delicate – has been gravely ill and miraculously cured.

This, after all, is the aboriginal Catholic country, where the wind blows where it list. Here, cause and effect are not linked with that scientific rigour, or that banal literalism, which has made northern Europe what it is at the end of the day, namely, honest yet ugly, straight yet plain, educated yet stupid, rational yet credulous, efficient yet shoddy, heated yet cold, consistent yet discontented. And the funny thing is that of course you *can* be in two places at the same time, if you are an Italian lover, saint, or plumber; and if, like the sweet little *bambino* you were born, you are the apple of your mother's eye, you can easily be at once sick and well; while to any lawyer your case is both A and not-A, and *lasciamo perdere* the excluded middle; and besides, who is to say that you cannot be a talented painter one day and decide to grow *radicchio di Treviso* the next?

For the freedom to sin, which presupposes the telling of lies, and to repent, which condones the invention of excuses, is the supernatural, perennial, adamantine fabric that lines the motley and threadbare robe which is the Italian character. I am quite sure that the book I could write on the subject, *The Book of Italian Excuses and Lies*, would make that character even more of a laughing stock than it already is the world over. But the memory of Celeste's art and his workmen from Bergamo chastens the incorrigible mocker, the faint outline of the Cathedral on the far side of the cynic's wineglass makes him lose heart, and the trusting approach of barefooted Mediterranean spring makes the satyr's harp fall soundless to the ground.