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ROMAN POLICIER

by William Wainwright

Like most Americans on a first quick jaunt around Europe, my friend Harold Fox met few people who were not in the business of making money from tourists, and he came home livid with rage that Europeans could think America a mercenary nation. He was particularly incensed—at bottom, I think, rather hurt—by the fact that Europeans made money from love. As a resident of New York, Harold was used to being able to find love—or something that passed for love for an hour or so—on almost every street corner free for the asking, and to be expected to pay for what he regarded as his natural right outraged him to the bottom of his soul.

«It isn't as if I were old and ugly,» he said, and he was right. He was a little past his first youth but by no means unattractive; the type of American, well educated, good mannered, with a taste for the arts and a penchant for abstract thought, that makes certain Europeans exclaim, «But you aren't like an American at all!» But the moment they saw him the other sort of European, the sort he mostly met, knew by his height, by his air of plump prosperity, by his well cut, ready-made clothes and by the innocently trusting expression of his eyes that he was American, and they were down on him in droves, offering to show him the sights or sell him antiques or take him to bars where he could meet pretty girls or whatever else he might like.

In Italy it was the worst because there they knew as soon as they laid eyes on him that it was not girls he liked, and from the moment he landed at Ciampini he could scarcely beat off the besieging army of tailor's assistants, bus boys and shop clerks who wanted to take him to their room or to a little hotel they knew where the landlady was understanding. On the Spanish Steps, on the Via Veneto—they could spot him a block away, with his flapping American trousers, his camera and guidebook and his vaguely benevolent, vaguely harassed look, and they clustered around him like flies.

«I resolved that I would not pay, not even in Italy, for what I could get for nothing at home,» Harold said afterwards. «And of course I didn't have to, because I had George.»

George had been his lover for several years. He was a few years younger than Harold but not so goodlooking, not so spoiled by success, and they shared an apartment on the East Side of New York where Harold did most of the cooking but very little else around the house. They had reached the point where they did little things on the side, but neither one admitted it to the other, and so far on their European trip they had been models of fidelity—mostly, it must be admitted, because they were so seldom out of each other's sight. George, however, was not so scandalized by the economic aspects of life in Europe. He had always been the realist of the two, and he soon came to see that for quite a modest outlay he could spend a pleasant hour or so with beauties that would never look at him at home. In Rome he restrained himself out of respect for his and Harold's unspoken pact, but in Florence the strain became too great, and one day after lunch, as they were drinking coffee at Doney's, he said to himself, «What the hell!» and without so much as by your leave, with nothing more than a hurried, «I'll see you at the hotel for dinner,» he went off after a barber's assistant who had been eyeing him from halfway across the square.

Harold was quite upset by this turn of events, and for a moment he thought of giving George tit for tat right then and there. But he rejected this idea as unworthy and also as unworkable, since George was no longer present to see him do it. He decided to spend the afternoon as planned, looking at pictures in the Uffizi, and after paying his and George's bill he started on his way, threading through the noisy, crowded streets and looking neither to the left nor right. And it was as he was crossing the Piazza Signoria, thinking of Savonarola at the stake, that he saw the ferret-faced boy who haunts the alleyway by the Loggia dei Lanzi.

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I had seen him there several times before (Harold said when he told me the story), sidling crablike out of his alleyhole, skittering up and down in front of the Loggia and waving his sticklike eyes every which way. But of course I had always been with George before. There must have been thirty people in the Piazza besides myself, and I scarcely looked at him, certainly did not try to catch his eye, and only deflected from my course the least little bit in order to fetch up on the steps of the Palazzo Vecchio—but that was enough for him. He scuttled nervously across the square, his eyes alert for policemen, and by the time I had reached the palace steps and was pretending to study the copy of David there, he was skittering nervously around behind me. Ignoring him, I moved to the left a few steps to admire the bronze of Judith and Holofernes, and he followed me, his very footsteps imploring and beseeching. I still ignored him and concentrated on the sculpture, which is really quite handsome: a compact green mass from which emerges, with a spiky, elegant grace and a truly horrifying clarity of detail, the woman's brooding, almost maternal face, the man's sleeping body resting against her legs, and her sword raised high overhead, ready to chop off his head. «How this subject fascinated the Renaissance,» I said to myself; «an era, like our own, of women's rights;» and just as I said it the boy spoke to me in a weak, nervous voice: «*E bella, quella.*»

I told him I didn't speak Italian.

«*Parlez-vous français?*» he asked.

A little.

«*C'est belle, ça,*» he said more confidently, nodding toward the statue and smiling his would-be ingratiating, ferrety smile. That smile really put me off. You know what a ferret is—a kind of weasel that hunts out rabbits and rats—and I really didn't want to get involved with him. I didn't even want to talk to him. But I was so upset by George's betrayal of me that any distraction was welcome, and there was something somehow flattering about the boy's insistence. He did not speak French very well and you know how bad mine is, but what with the utter simplicity of our situation we made ourselves understood.

«There are many beautiful things in Florence,» he said. — «Um. Yes.» — «You like Florence?» — «Yes, of course.»

He shrugged his shoulders. «It is very beautiful, but dead. *Una città morta.* You are here for long?»

«A few days.»

«And you are alone, or perhaps with a friend?»

«Alone.» I said what I thought he wanted to hear.

«Ah, it is sad to be alone,» he said. I studied the sculpture in silence. Then, after a moment's hesitation, he said, «You like to go with me to my house?»

I turned and looked at him now. He was rather smartly dressed, as even the poorest young Florentines somehow contrive to be, and not at all bad looking except for that ferrety sharpness about his face, but I still did not want to get involved with him. I did not want to get involved in general and I particularly did not want to get involved because—well, you know Italians—they always want money.

«What for?» I said, as rudely as I could. He smiled and shrugged his shoulders. «I'm sorry, I can't afford it,» I said. — «Pardon?» — «I haven't the money.»

«Oh, but I don't want money,» he protested quite anxiously. «It is only for the pleasure of your company!»

He seemed quite distressed and started to skitter again, edging around me and popping his eyes about. I stared at him hard. I really did not believe him. After all, I was older than he and a foreigner, and whatever he may have thought, I was not rich. But then I thought, «He may be all right. Some people like older men and I don't look my age. There must be *some* Europeans who aren't out for money. And if George is going to be going off with somebody else, how nice it would be to have had a young Florentine.» So I said I would go with him.

As if to assure me that I would not regret it, he took me by the arm, and I promptly succumbed to the charm of this characteristic gesture. It meant nothing to him, of course—all Italian men take you by the arm when they walk through the streets with you—and in fact when I spoke of it he let me go, thinking I might be embarrassed. But I insisted that we continue that way. It might mean nothing to him, but it moved me as so many Italian gestures do.

We went down into the tangle of medieval alleys behind the Palazzo Vecchio. I was not paying much attention to where we were going and have never succeeded in finding his place again, though I have talked to several other people who have been there themselves. We talked of many things: his job, for instance (he worked as a bell hop in one of the big hotels) and my travel plans (I was leaving for Venice in a few days). He asked me if I was American, and when I said yes, he said that Americans were very nice. I asked him if he were Florentine and he said no, he was from Rome. He much preferred Rome to Florence, Florence was dead, but he couldn't go back, Rome was finished for him. What did that mean? It was just finished, that's all.

At length we stopped at a door on a narrow street and he let me in. Up two flights of stairs—the building was clean and recently innovated—and into the tiny cubicle that was his home. He opened the shutters while I looked around: a narrow bed with a bedspread to the floor, a tiny table and chair, a wardrobe, a pitcher, a bowl. There was another chair at the foot of the bed and a paperback book opened face down on the table—a detective story.

At the sight of this book vague thoughts of assault and robbery began to gnaw at my peace of mind, though of course that was silly just because of a book. «Your book?» I said, going over to the table and picking it up.

He was standing by the bed now, facing me, his head to one side, smiling invitingly. «Yes, a detective story—*un roman policier*.»

Roman policier. I was struck by his use of the word *roman*—detective *novel*, not story. «How European,» I thought, «to take such a trashy American art form seriously.» I wished that I spoke Italian or that we both spoke French better so that I could share my thoughts with him. I felt that if we could sit

down and talk for a while I would not feel so nervous. But he came over to me and put his arms around me and started kissing me and rubbing himself against me.

I still did not want to go on, but once you have got this far it is hard to stop.

«Give me your coat . . . your pants . . .» He hung them on the chair at the foot of the bed. I grew more and more hesitant. There was something about his brisk efficiency that made me think, by contrast, of my George, who is slow as Christmas at first. Then suddenly we were in bed, and after a false start or two we came to an understanding about what we would do. Then I could do nothing.

«You don't like me?» he asked.

«Yes, I *like* you, but . . .» How could I explain that I was afraid?

«You don't like me,» he said.

«Yes, I do, but . . . I don't want to do anything.» We were speaking French but I was thinking in English and I still don't know if I made myself understood.

He held me close to him. He would not let me go. «*Caro, caro,*» he murmured, holding me tighter whenever I tried to get up. He did everything he could to make me want to stay, but it was no use, and at length he gave up. He seemed so pathetic and I felt such a heel. I dressed myself quickly, trying not to think about it, and after a shamefaced goodbye I left, expecting at any moment to be attacked from behind. But in fact I was quite safe, and when at length I had made my way back to the Piazza Signoria I bitterly regretted my suspiciousness. I still had a few hours to kill before I was to meet George for dinner. I spent them at the Uffizi, in agony as anticipated, and it was not till I took out my wallet to pay for our dinner that I discovered I was missing a twenty dollar bill.

At this point in his story Harold paused to light a cigarette, and I looked at him. He was tall and good-looking and his face had, when in repose, a most dignified expression. He had a good job in a very respectable firm where, if they talked about him, they did so behind his back. In George he had a lover who was very well suited to him; his apartment was in the best part of town; he had a great number of those cocktail party acquaintances who pass for friends in New York, and in short, for someone living this life, he was very well off. No one who saw him (as I did now) stretched out in his easy chair, surrounded by his antiques and his books, or (as I had also seen him) striding up Fifth Avenue at noon, his chin held high and his coat tail flapping in the wind like a man in a magazine ad; no one who had seen him in these circumstances, and in no other, would have thought him unhappy. But I had known him a long time and was very familiar with the worried, preoccupied expression on his face. He was searching for something, searching in his mind and in the world for something that would tell him how he had gone wrong in his life and where he could find his way again. A twenty dollar bill, stolen or lost. In itself the money meant nothing to him—a few hours at his desk and he had more than made it up. But how it had parted from him . . . that was a different question.

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I said nothing about it to George (Harold continued). He was, as a matter of fact, rather quiet himself at dinner that night, so perhaps his little adventure had not turned out well either; and during the rest of our trip he was as good

as gold—at least when I was around. But that twenty dollar bill preyed on my mind. If it had been lost I didn't mind so much; it's easy to lose things when you're traveling. But if it had been stolen . . . well, I don't know. I had expected a lot from Europe, a lot I hadn't found, and if it had been stolen the last of my dreams had come tumbling down in ruins. I couldn't rest till I found the answer to that, and I couldn't find it till I saw the boy again.

During the next few days I had no chance to look for him, for George was always with me. But on our last day in Florence George stayed at the hotel with a cold, and I spent the afternoon wandering up and down in the rat's nest of alleys where the boy lived, looking for his house. What would I do when I found him? Would I flatly accuse him of stealing my money? Would I try to get it back? Would I, if I were really convinced that he took it, demand my money's worth? I didn't know what I wanted. I didn't know what I would do. But the streets all looked alike to me and every house looked like the one next door. Late in the afternoon I gave up my search and went for a walk along the Arno. Florence was beautiful. The late afternoon sun struck the mouldering churches and palaces, turning them pink and gold, and the hill of San Miniato, its spears of cypresses dark against the sky, looked down in splendor. I stood on the Santa Trinità bridge, watching the people go by. They were all intent on their business, shopkeepers bustling about, housewives going home from the market, tourists enjoying the sights, and in the clear, cool light of Italy I remembered a motto I had seen on one of those pottery ashtrays they sell in the tourist shops: *Chi vuol vivere e star bene, prende il mondo come il viene*. To live a good and happy life, take the world as it comes.

«Well,» I thought, «I've been had. I should have known better, I *did* know better, in fact, but I've been had.»

The thought seemed to comfort me. It seemed an Italian thought, in keeping with the still, classic beauty of the view and the limpid light of the dying afternoon. It seemed to sum up, in its calm acceptance of things as they are, the lesson that Italy has to teach foreigners. It reminded me of all the things I still had to be grateful for, and, thinking of George once again, I started back to the hotel, at peace with myself. But as I was crossing the Piazza Signoria I saw the ferret-faced boy once again at his stand by the Loggia dei Lanzi, and at the sight of him, up to his old tricks again, my new-found philosophy vanished and I went angrily up to him, determined to have it out.

When he saw me he started and I thought he would run away. But he quickly recovered himself. «*Bonjour,*» he said, smiling tentatively with a suaveness that sets my teeth on edge to this day. «You have not left for Venice yet?»

«No, I have not.»

«You like Florence, then?»

«I detest Florence. It is a city of thieves.»

He started again and I thought, «Aha, I've got him now!» But still he didn't turn and run. Like most of my compatriots I was not prepared for the reality of wickedness, and I didn't know what to do next. I suddenly realized how young he was, how nervous and poor. He had bitten his nails down to the quick and his coat was threadbare at collar and cuffs. «If he *did* take it,» I thought, «he probably needed it more than I.» And yet when he looked at me with those ferretty eyes I found myself trembling with rage at his impudence.

«Let's have a coffee,» I said.

It was the hour of the *passeggiata* and we found a table at a sidewalk cafe nearby. The din of motor scooters was deafening and all Florence seemed to have poured out into the square. For a long time we sat in silence. I stirred sugar into my coffee until it was cold; then I looked up at him. He was gazing out over the square, his eyes flicking here and there, quite at his ease. To a stranger it might have seemed that we were old friends, such good friends that we did not feel the need to talk. But I never felt more like a foreigner in my life.

At length I said, as steadily as I could, «What are you looking for?»

He looked up at me in surprise. It was clear that he had forgotten I was there, and as he fixed his eyes on me I could almost see his mind working. «A stupid American,» I seemed to see him think. A dope. A schnook. He'll believe anything I say.» A crafty expression flitted over his face; he hesitated, then smiled sadly and said, «*Je cherche un grand amour.*»

Nothing he could have said would have been more surprising to me. «*Un grand amour?*» I thought. «This whore? This thief?» I stared at him in astonished disbelief but he did not falter or blink, and when I had recovered somewhat I said, «And do you expect to find it in the streets?»

His smile grew sadder and he looked down modestly. «One never knows where one will find love.»

«But in the streets?» I exclaimed. «With foreigners you will never see again?»

He looked up at me for a moment with such an expression of innocence in his eyes that I could almost believe anything. «Florence is beautiful,» he said. «It's a pity you have to leave. Perhaps, if you stayed, you could be happy here.»

For a moment I almost believed, but only for a moment, and only almost, and then, leaning over toward him, as if to speak of love, I placed my hand on his sleeve and said, in my gentlest voice, «Did you take my money?»

«What?» he said, drawing away from me and looking about nervously, «I don't understand.»

I tightened my grip on his arm. «Listen,» I said, still in the same tender voice, «I don't want to call the police. I don't want to make any trouble. But there's something I want to know and I must have the truth. I had twenty dollars in my wallet when I went to your room, and when I got back to my hotel it was gone. Did you take it?»

He stared at me for a moment without a word, alarm, distrust and suspicion playing across his face. Then he seemed to realize that I really knew nothing, and an air of injured innocence overwhelmed him. «I'm not that sort,» he said. «I don't want money. I only wanted to find a little love. Now you want to spoil it all by accusing me of things . . . of wicked things . . . and—»

«But if you didn't take it, who did? *Somebody* did.»

«Well, I don't know about that. I don't know who else you saw. You foreigners are all the same, you go with anyone, and—but of course you are right to be suspicious. You must be careful in Florence. There are many wicked people here who prey on foreigners. You are lucky it was me.»

«Yes, yes,» I said, feeling rather flat.

There didn't seem to be much left to say, so I paid for our coffees and got up to go. He started up as if to ask me for something, then thought better of it and sat down again with a smile. I said goodbye and left, and as I was quitting the square I turned and looked for him. He was still sitting at the cafe, watching and waiting, and when he saw me looking back he waved and smiled.

And that was the last I ever saw of him.

When Harold had finished his story he sat for a moment staring into the fire which, characteristically, he insisted on building on cold winter nights, though his apartment was so well heated that he had to turn off the radiators and open the windows to make the room bearable. The lights were off too and we were sitting by the firelight thirty floors above the streets of Manhattan. George of course was not there, he was visiting his mother, and as Harold stared at the twisting flames his face grew gloomier and gloomier.

«It was bad enough that I couldn't do anything,» he said to me at length, «and I thank God nobody knows about that but you. But even worse was the money. I still don't know how he took it—or even for sure that he did. He never got near my wallet except when he was hanging up my coat, and I was watching him then.»

I looked at Harold with a smile. It seemed a pity to have to tell him what had happened, and yet I could see that he really wanted to know. «Did you say the boy hung your coat at the foot of the bed?»

«Why, yes,» said Harold, looking at me in surprise.

«They always do.»

«Why, what do you mean?» Harold said.

«Furthermore, I'm afraid you and he weren't the only ones in that room.»

Harold's consternation when he heard this was so comical that I burst out laughing. He looked at me in dismay, then began to get angry, and in pity I had to explain it all to him: how they work in pairs; how one walks the streets while the other waits at home, often with a *roman policier*. How, when the one in the room hears footsteps on the stairs, he hides himself under the bed, and how, when things on the bed have reached a certain point—which in Harold's case they did not—he quietly reaches out and extracts the money.

«And is that why the boy seemed so affectionate?» Harold said when I had finished. «Why he clung to me so and wouldn't let me go?»

«I'm afraid so.»

«He really didn't care for me at all?»

«Well, who is to say about that—»

«But how do they dare?» Harold sputtered. «Don't they fear the police?»

«Well, of course some people do report them, and then they are generally run out of town. That's probably what happened to your friend in Rome. But most people seem to prefer to let them be. Most people just don't want to go to the police with such a tale. Would you have liked to?» I said.