

Days with Antonio

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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Der Kreis : eine Monatsschrift = Le Cercle : revue mensuelle**

Band (Jahr): **28 (1960)**

Heft 2

PDF erstellt am: **20.09.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-567863>

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DAYS WITH ANTONIO

(Diary of Adriaan ten Holt.)

by Wolfgang Cordan

(Conclusion)

With that contraption one dives between the reefs for lobster and crayfish. The harpoon, part of the outfit, a kind of underwater gun, a trident of Neptune, was leaning against the wall. Carelessly thrown on the floor next to the newspaper, the blue rubber swimming fins made a nice color contrast to the pink tiles. A young man is not orderly. Life puts too much pressure on him.

How could he put a world in order which was breaking in on him?

The dark one was standing in front of me. It was only now that I realized how tall for an Italian he was. We looked into each other's eyes.

«I took that room,» he said, «I don't live with my father. Mama is dead. We were in the same cellar at Fondi, when the Americans landed. A grenade was thrown. I got only a splinter.»

He pointed to a scar on his upper left arm.

«I was eleven years old at the time,» he said.

He made a gesture covering the whole room.

«It's clean here. And there is really nothing else in Sperlonga. It is only three thousand lira a month, that would be fifteen hundred for each of us. All right?»

«Where will you get another bed?» I asked.

«Why?» he said, «this one is big enough.»

I must have looked at him flabbergasted for he laughed. And I heard for the first time that word that since then has had a special meaning for me.

«Stupido,» he said in his dialect. He took a step towards me and kissed me. Light as air, brittle also, and fleeting. But right on my mouth.

I stared at him. «What's your name?» he asked. »Adriaan« I said. He would not have caught my surname.

«Adriano,» he repeated, «nice name. My name is Antonio.»

Thoughts were rushing through my head. One of them — really the sum of lightning-like thoughts — I uttered, «How old do you think I am?»

«Twenty eight,» he said.

«You're making fun of me,» I said. «I'm forty.»

«What does it matter?» he said. He laughed again and came near.

I evaded him, turned around and went to the opening in the wall. The yellow of the beach, the blue of sky and sea, the green and gray of the mountains. All I saw were spots of color. They were dancing before my eyes.

I felt Antonio's hand on my shoulder.

«How long will you be staying?» he whispered.

«I don't know any more,» I answered out into that spectrum of colors. Then I turned again, not in fury, by God no, but in a sudden rage as before in the trattoria.

«Do you know what you are doing?» I shot out at him. I had called him jokingly 'bello' but I saw now how beautiful he was. His bronzed face did not change.

«Sempre,» he answered. «Always.»

He turned round and started unpacking my things. I had been one hour at Sperlonga. But forty years went up in smoke.

★

Antonio has now broken completely with his father. It is my fault. We had gone swimming the same noon. Afterwards Antonio had to attend to the boats and I went up by myself. In the lane I met Trani. He greeted me with a show of friendliness and asked, as though nothing had happened, whether I would take dinner in the evening. As I had promised, I told him I'd come.

Around seven o'clock I went. Antonio had not returned home. Trani was sitting in his usual place near the steps. There was no talk.

I had to wait endlessly though I was the only guest. Finally Cornelia brought the spaghetti. It was not done and the 'sugo' — that lovely mixture of tomatoes which is part of it — was pitiful. The roasted fish consisted of four tiny pieces, and no love had been spent on them either. Furiously I finished and asked for the bill.

Trani had to do that in writing. On a dirty piece of paper I read: 725 lira. I did not believe my eyes. That was the end now.

I got up and threw a note on the table.

«That's the first and the last time,» I said harshly. But I spoiled my exit line by getting caught in the rows of beads. One of them broke. I wondered whether he would bill me for it.

When I stood before our door and got out the enormous key, which was now in my pocket, all my anger had gone. Our house, I kept thinking emotionally. Our house. Upstairs I sat on the old-fashioned bed and waited. A little later Antonio arrived.

«That was silly of you,» he said. «You shouldn't have gone there at all. Our food will be prepared by Giulia, from whom I rented this room. I quite forgot to tell her; let's do it now.»

The widow Giulia lived next door in a big room, still darker than the trattoria, since it had no windows at all. When one entered through the rustling curtains one could barely make out the counter in the darkness. There was a pair of copper scales on it. But you could not see that anything was being sold here, save for a couple of sacks in a corner which contained corn as I later learned.

Behind the counter a wire was fixed half-high from one wall to the other. Rugs and pieces of cloth in undefinable colors had been put across it and divided the room. Behind that partition the widow Giulia dwelt. There was a shelf full to the brim with paper bags, and a cast iron bed from which unlovely odors emerged.

Antonio went straight through this wall of cloth; from the bed a shadow was moving into the shadows. A light was lighted. With a candle in her hand Giulia, la Giulia, as she was called, was sitting there.

When she saw me she uttered a little cry of surprise and drew a black cloth across her breast. She blinked at me; her left eyelid was covered with huge pink warts. Her face was yellowish and dried-out. How old was she? Forty? Fifty? One cannot guess at the age of such women.

Antonio said shortly that Signore Adriano would live from now on with him and that she had to cook in the evenings for two now. «La pastasciutta as usual,» he said, «and have those fish roasted.»

He put a couple of golden-looking fish on the shelf which served partly as a sideboard. He took them out of a small net which hung from his wrist. I was so mixed-up that day that I had not even noticed he had the fish, nor that he had taken them along.

He told me, «I have been lucky. Those are . . .» He gave me the name but I forgot it straightaway.

La Giulia rose at once from her poor bed. She shuffled to the stove in the corner. With a pair of bellows she rekindled the smouldering fire in the two tiny cooking holes. She was noisy with pots and pans, and poured water from a beautifully designed ochre-colored vessel. An Etruscan one. Or maybe Latin. Once again time stood still.

We went away. We were silent at home. Antonio was lying on the bed and had his eyes with the long dark eyelashes closed. I stood at the window. The colors no longer turned around as in a dream wheel. They were southern — sharply defined. Around nine o'clock Giulia came shuffling up the stairs.

She carried a basket covered by a spotless white cloth. She took every trouble. She lifted the spaghetti out, the plates and the roasted golden fish. She put everything on the small table near the window. Antonio got out a bottle of Fiasco from under the bed. Time and again he filled my glass. I ate and drank. Bowed deeply over his plate, Antonio put away unbelievable quantities of spaghetti. As a matter of fact it all tasted differently from what I had had at his father's.

Before I cut the fish with the fork I gave Antonio a little push. «The first fish caught by you for us,» I said, stressing the words slightly.

«I shan't be able to catch them every day,» he returned, still chewing, «it all depends on the weather.» I realized then that he never takes notice of an overture. He enjoyed his food, while in me everything was going topsy-turvy. Inside me the mists were waving, the long desires of the winter nights, all the

heaviness of the North. For him everything was quite light.

When I got up I staggered; I was drunk. Antonio took my elbow and then he gave me a push that sent me headlong onto the bed. For a short breathing space he stood before me. He looked at me. His lids were closed tightly and yet he looked at me. Then he threw himself over me.

In an interval I saw the blue within the square of the window turn purple.

*

That's the way we live together now. I am not allowed to talk of love — he just laughs or silently takes up some work. It's been difficult for me to get accustomed to that. I went through all the phases: surprise, disappointment, rebellion, thoughtfulness. I believe I have understood something by now. I believe — far more than I had anticipated as an outcome of this journey — I believe to have learned something of the essentials of southern people.

For them air and water, figs and oranges have been given directly by the grace of the creation. And, as in paradise, the fishermen

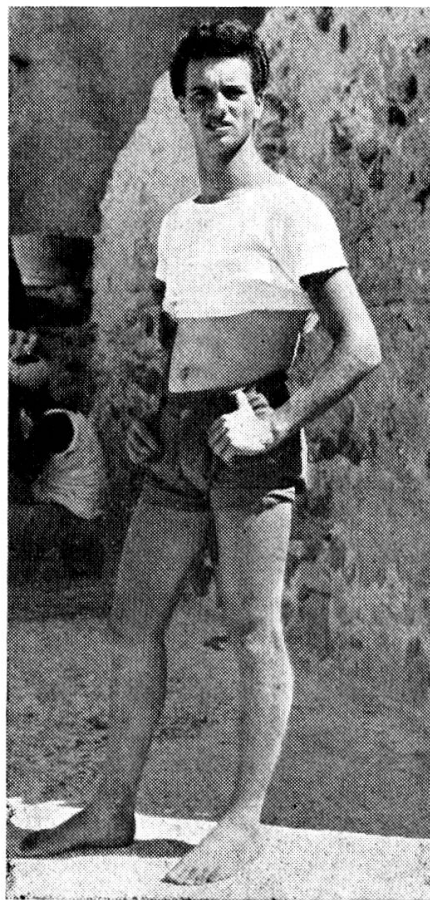


Foto Petronius

live practically naked here. They wear nothing but a pair of strong twill trousers all through the year. Beyond the Alps everything is veiled: the sky, the bodies, the very reasons.

If love is after all the decisive power of human beings, it looks bad for us Northerners. For no love is in its essentials taboo. For us. Every young man goes through his first experiences in a kind of twilight, hurriedly, in fatal rooms — I don't care to write about it. Then finally the girl turns up of whom he has thought all his life, and the same silly rites take place, adhered to by all others, the rites one knows so boringly. One sits in the movies and eats chocolate, holds hands furtively; one takes long walks in drizzling rain and talks of wonderful things. And the girl responds likewise. Every word sounds like the music of the spheres.

When finally everything is fixed and under hand and seal — yes, by then no longer will wonderful things be talked about, nor music heard any more: one broods over the weekly household bills or discusses quite objectively whether one could afford to have a second baby. What comes after passion — camaraderie — has to begin then if the marriage does not turn into hell. The earlier poetry was nothing but a side channel. One is steering towards something quite distinctive, quite necessary: the stage-effect of nature. The German philosopher Schopenhauer put it that way. On his authority I do not think that I am talking cynically.

The Italian does not need such side-channels. When he says, «I love you» it means with him, «Let's go to bed». That's why they guard their womenfolk so carefully.

In all the places of this province, Sperlonga included, they are therefore kept in the houses. There are a great many beautiful girls here — only one rarely gets to see them. Only when there is market-day on the piazza; shopping at Fondi, in church — and there only veiled, never at the beach. A girl doing this would let people know that she intends going with the best male around the next boulder. She would be stamped a whore. In Sperlonga we have an official whore. Antonio showed her to me. She can sometimes be found in the bar though she isn't well liked there. With a lot of peroxide she changed her black hair into blond. It looks very funny.

Antonio has slept with her a few times but he thinks her boring. There are better ones at Formia, he tells me, in the Casa Publico, the bordello. He insists on our going there together one night.

Formia is a super water-place, half way to Naples. What Antonio intends doing in my company shows really the innocentness of our relationship, if I am still allowed to use that word.

In no way have I till now touched upon the fact that here two men live together. And that there is a difference of twenty years between them. An endless chain, the thoughts were running and chasing each other at the beginning through my head, all the more so since I had never in all my life dreamed about such a thing. — I feel no inclination at all today to put foggy northern heaviness upon this lovely white writing paper. That would be an endless beginning...

All I want to say is that it is completely impossible to ask Antonio: «Why? How come? What were you thinking at the trattoria? How did you happen to know about me...?»

He does not talk. He cut short, right at the beginning, every attempt of mine to passionate confessions. And yet — no one can be more tender than he. He

loathes wonderful words — he has daily new wonderful gestures. He arrives with a huge lobster, shows it to me, tells me he is going now to prepare it himself because Giula does not understand a thing about it — and when the fish is done he brings it in with that swaying of his hips he has when he is vain.

«That's well done now,» he may say then, and his lids become small. In such moments the world seems to turn, for me. But he knows all about this already, notices it and starts laughing.

«Have a drink,» he says and fills up my glass.

I look at him and I am already thinking about his embrace. Never did I embrace Corrie as I did him. I confessed it to him, and he laughed. His passion is something unheard of. He goes to sleep on my shoulder, his wild hair is on my chin, on my cheeks. His hair smells wild, and sleep evades me. Oh, those nights — — —

But there are also clouds. The family feud at the house of Trani is raging. The old man never forgave Antonio for preventing his milking of the foreigner. I was supposed to be turned into the golden goose. It started with the room. I know by now that the old man only went to talk to an old aunt of theirs; there he wanted to sleep with his daughter Cornelia and would turn over his own quarters, a room with kitchen, without a view of the sea, to me. For the famous thirty thousand lira.

That was checked. The next blow was my not having dinner there — it meant a daily loss of about a thousand lira. But the real feud was started by some genuine piece of devilry. It was the only time I saw Antonio shy, searching for words, when he told me all about it. The old man started to threaten when all his traps to catch me had failed. He must have expressed himself pretty roughly and voiced his opinion about our living together. I can picture the way Antonio must have looked at him and got rid of him with two or three short sentences. But blackmail was to follow.

For Antonio is the only son and as a much-needed help in the trattoria, he was not called up. The old man threatened to write a letter and to declare this fact as no longer valid. But the memory of the fact that practically no one ever goes to the trattoria and that the old man lives on smuggling and other dark side-issues was sufficient to prevent what he intended doing. The play is at 'stalemate'. Since then the two do not greet each other any more. Antonio meets Cornelia secretly. She leads a dog's life. The old man would have thrashed her if she had risked giving me a decent meal.

«Cornelia must marry as quickly as possible,» Antonio said at the end of this tale.

It was during dinner. In the course of the night Antonio would have to go fishing. Before he left he pushed a thousand lira note towards me.

«I haven't more at the moment. But take this.»

«Please,» he added in a voice I had never heard before. He had turned crimson. I do not understand him always. But this time I understood right away. He had to regain his pride. He did it by one of his gestures. The note is still in my wallet. As I am, after all, a Northerner with deep and sublime feelings . . .

Antonio goes to mass every Sunday. Now and then he also goes to confession. I was once in a mood in which I found the courage to ask him whether he confessed e v e r y t h i n g.

«Of course,» he said imperturbably.

«And what does he say?» I wanted to know.

«Nothing special,» Antonio returned, «What should he say after all? Everybody does it. *Così fan tutti.*»

It was at this occasion that he asked me whether I was a Catholic myself.

«No,» I said in high spirits. «Do you know we fought a war for eighty years against the Catholics?»

«It's high time then for a peace treaty,» he said and stroked my chin.

Things stand well for him: he can be sure of absolution. I have to battle with my own conscience. I am afraid that I shall be losing that conscience some day.

I am losing a good many things here. But what am I gaining instead? Once before my life took a sharp turning. I had just about finished school and wanted to go to a university, to study history of art. But then my father died and there was no more money. I worked my way up, took a wife, started my own household, begot a daughter. I knew how much I should be earning ten years hence and at what time I would be pensioned off. There was no need for me to worry about my existence.

All of a sudden all this was put in question marks. I do not say that my life has been wrong. The world exists by millions fulfilling their functions as I did. But now I am no longer able to do this. I have tasted from the source of life. All the texts I translated so painstakingly as a boy, rumble inside me, nay, they have become alive. How should I feel guilty in meeting that which was taught to us at school as the far-away high ideal? When I see that the «Antike» isn't dead at all, that there has been barely any change, that all is still alive on these shores.

All the same I am worried and know of no solution. These pages, for which I do not know the reason of writing, I shall show to Tjerk. I feel sure of his good advice.

A week ago Tjerk turned up here. We were bathing at the grotto at the end of the far flung shore, at the next cape. It's a widely open half-circle, like those pavillions in which Prom concerts are given. It is said that Tiberius used to enjoy himself here. We lay there, right at the beginning, for a whole night, for we were unable to part from each other. In the morning we threw ourselves into the waves. Antonio called out to me, «Dive!» and under water he glided along and kissed me. I shall never forget the way his head with the dripping locks arose from the water. Since then we have always been bathing there, without a single word, always there.

On that morning, a week ago, a yacht turned up from the south, cruised, turned by, and threw anchor. A boat left the ship. A young woman sprang out, and two men. A third man was carried onto the shore by two sailors. He seemed barely able to walk. The boat went back and forth several times; three tents were erected on the beach. Rugs, baskets, and luggage were put down. One of the sailors remained. The yacht lifted anchor and disappeared south. She is anchored at Formia and comes daily to this spot. There is no real harbor here.

Naturally we watched this unusual invasion. Then all of a sudden I recognised Tjerk.

He does not belong to our Amsterdam branch. He works for the head office at The Hague, for which he is doing special work. He is high up the ladder and can afford to mail his formulae from the South. He rarely puts in an appearance

in the Netherlands. Still more rarely does he show up at Amsterdam. A tall figure, nearly as thin as a rail, he walks with quick steps through the rooms, always dressed in gray, a trench-coat thrown over one arm. He is usually closeted with the boss for an hour; then they leave for lunch together. I have seen him this way three or four times. His eyes are like water, and hard. I only realized here that there was something else to them. The party used to eat in the other trattoria, down at the huts and the boats. The food was quite good there, and the wine wasn't mixed. We also went there sometimes for a change, and that's how I got to know Tjerk.

We did not talk very much on the first evening. Next time he came and fetched us to his party. There was talk about God and the world. And all was said with an unbelievable freedom of expression. Since Italian was used, Antonio sat there not believing his ears. The radicalism wasn't strictly political though once the fact was mentioned that Tjerk had fought in Spain against Franco. He called it himself 'on the government's side.' The painter interrupted. The lame man was a painter, it's been said he was wounded in the war. He drank enormously. Around midnight he looked like a late Caesar: massive, sparkling, and masterly. All that is missing is the ivy garland sitting askew on his head. Behind him the sailor stood who afterwards carried him back to the barge; in the meantime he kept his glass full.

One thing the painter possessed that none of the Caesars had — a strange charm. Across his red face bloated by wine there could go a smile which is irresistible. He even managed to draw out the girls from the galleries, sottopassaggi, holes of 'begetting': they sit near the grotto on the stones and have themselves sketched. Sperlonga is living through a series of earthquakes.

This unexpected party consisted of four people. The third person was a young German or Austrian prince. He is called 'Sua Altezza', and naturally that went off with a bang. Even Antonio was delighted, though he goes occasionally to communist meetings- like all the fishermen and peasants. But that is an independent act, not connected with the power of the old hierarchy which is otherwise still in full force around these parts. King, duke, priest — they are indisputable facts whoever the person may be. Our priest is fat, dirty, and a drunkard. Antonio makes fun of him, even despises him. And yet he goes there for confession.

The Prince is dressed in a bohemian way, the same way I'm dressed now. But though he gives himself no airs at all you feel the nobility around him. He is a delightful young nobleman. His wife, on her side, brings the far-away world of extreme luxury, and an unaccountable number of forbears into the tavern. The way her trousers are cut towards her slender hips! The color of her sweater. The Moroccan jewelry, dangling from her wrists... She also is deeply tanned by the long Mediterranean cruise. With unrest I realize how Antonio keeps looking at her secretly.

I cannot go on describing all the talk of this round table, nor pin down the conversations, nor try to show that there is something genuine in this gaudy and luxurious 'grande' world of theirs which seems at first glance so artificial. There is something genuine in it, for theirs is a life without the common duties. I may tell of all this later on. It has no place on these pages. And I'd better not put down my ideas about these people anyway, since Tjerk will be reading all this.

I made up my mind to let him read all this on account of a brief remark he made to me. We met yesterday at the shore. He was coming out of the sea. He

sauntered past us and said in his own way, very nearly without standing still, in Dutch to me: «Take care of yourself, ten Holt. The Goths and Vandals have already lost themselves on these shores.» Maybe he will have some advice.

*

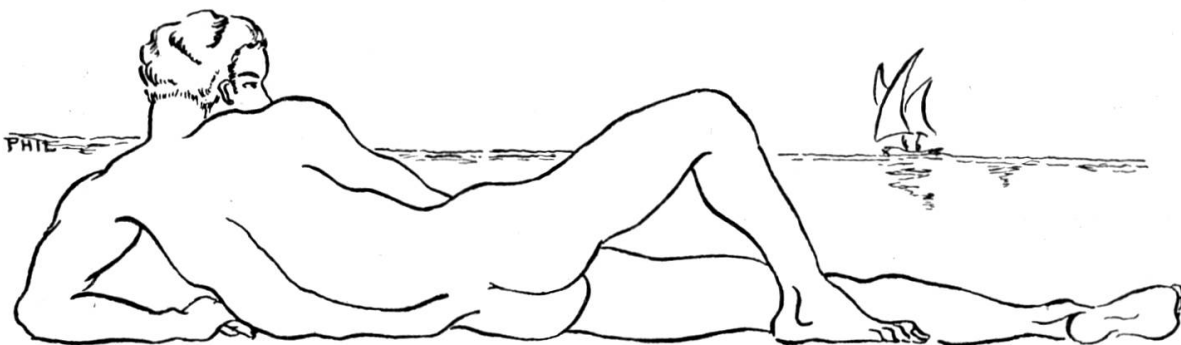
The Saint has been burned down long ago, the flame of the candle is fluttering around the red rings; the morning breeze is coming in through the open window. Over the Grotto of Tiberius dawn is breaking. Another day begins. A day with Antonio. On these pages, I know it only too well, nothing essential stands. A citizen from Amsterdam tried to draw a balance account. It did not add up like all balance accounts. I do not want any advice. Fate does not turn up haphazardly. I want things to happen which are bound to happen. I want to empty the cup of life as I have emptied the bottle of Fiasco on my table without realising it. Now there is nothing left for Antonio. He likes a drink when he returns from the sea.

My God, I can hear his zoccoli on the cobble stones outside. Soon he will be pushing the door open. How shall I continue with my life? I cannot return.

(This «Diary of Adriaan ten Holt» is independent but forms part of an as yet unpublished novel «The Terrace».)

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(Translation by Rudolf Burkhardt.)



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