MY MOTHER'S VOICE

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Sample translated from the German
by Lottie Fyfe

The moment my mother's life changed irrevocably and my life became conceivable was when she looked up from her plate and into a grimace. Not that Meneghini's visage looked any different to usual that evening – except, perhaps, that it was even more gormless – and yet the sight of it seemed to her so unfathomable that she believed she was experiencing a hallucination, a grotesque unveiling of some unseen thing. The sounds around her became hushed, seemed to grow distant, and for a moment she was convinced that the world had gone silent, that time had stood still just for her, so that this vision could be bestowed on her. It was as though his face had aged by years, decades even, as though all his boorishness, self-righteousness and money-grubbing had congealed into a mask that not even the most gifted make-up artists could have fashioned. My mother was incapable of averting her eyes, like someone in a dream is powerless to run away, and perhaps it was in fact a dream; after all, for days now, since she'd been on this ship, she'd been dreaming more intensely than ever before. Yet bit by bit, voices from the neighbouring tables filtered through to her again, and she realised she wasn't dreaming at all, and that this was indeed her husband's face. She didn't know what horrified her more –

the sight of him, or the sudden repulsion she felt towards it. How many times had she claimed that her husband was her everything, that he took centre stage in her life, while music came second? With that thought, my mother was struck by the excruciating discomfort of recognising her own lack of honesty for the first time. As she grasped the full significance of that moment, she was reminded of the premonition she'd had a good week before.

It had been at home in Milan, just before their departure. My mother and her also-ran of a husband were there for two days to prepare for the journey; in particular, my mother wanted to have a suitable wardrobe put together. She already owned a plethora of outfits, but fitting herself out for a three-week cruise was nevertheless going to pose a challenge. A challenge that only someone who didn't trouble themselves to understand what this voyage meant to her would mock.

She was looking in the mirror, as she always did, to check her hair and clothes were sitting neatly before she left the house. My perfect mother: a master of self-composure. But this time something gave her pause – a feeling, a sudden notion – and all at once the thought was in her head, as if a voice had spoken: *The next time you look in this mirror, nothing will be the same.* She wasn't sure whether it was her own voice, whether she had perhaps said the words out loud, but what disconcerted her most was the absolute certainty with which she accepted it as truth, like a prophecy. For a moment she stood in silence, then she heard Meneghini approaching; he had been pacing up and down impatiently in the hall for some time. 'I'm just coming!' she called, and swiftly left the room – as there was no way she was going to let him be party to what had just occurred. Without looking at him she swept past and puckered her lips at her miniature black poodle, Toy. The dog, clearly convinced he would be going with them on the journey, fidgeted in Bruna's arms. The ensuing farewell scene was frankly absurd, if you considered the fact that my mother had spent an eternity doing her makeup only to let the dog lick it all off, while explaining to it in simpering baby-talk that it had to stay at home. Any observer would have understood straight away what was really going on here: my mother needed a child, desperately. 'Maybe I'd better stay with you, little one, hmm? Oh, I don't know if I should go after all.' She really did say 'I', not 'we', but what came across as divaesque narcissism – which people liked to accuse her of – was in fact ruthless candour. She was the one who'd been asked on

the cruise, after all; no one would have invited Meneghini for his own sake.

'Maria, please! The taxi has been waiting for half an hour, we'll miss the flight. Of course we're going.'

'Oh, I really don't know why I'm going,' she repeated, shaking her head, her face still fixed on Toy, but it was pure coquetry. She wanted to go, wanted it more than anything; she'd long since passed the point of no return. Yes, she'd refused at first, then acted coy, declining – on grounds of overwork – the invitation that first my father and then eventually Tina, too, had pressed upon her, practically railroading her, at which point Meneghini had tried to bring her round using her own argument – you need rest and recuperation, the doctor says sea air will do you good – and in the end, after a decadent evening in Covent Garden (of which more later) she'd finally consented.

'My bag!' she barked at him as soon as the car doors had closed and they'd set off. He passed it to her. His gaze drifted about the taxi but found no anchor, and so he turned his head to the side and looked out of the window, while my mother took out her powder compact to remove all trace of Toy's displays of affection. Meneghini knew she wouldn't address another word to him until they arrived at the airport; during the flight, too, she would shroud herself in silence, just as she'd done for days, speaking to him only when absolutely necessary. He didn't dare look at her – although he'd have liked to, to satisfy himself that she really was the woman he had been married to for ten years. Instead he gazed out at the Via Buonarotti, still dozing in the morning light. In an hour, two at most, the street would be baked in heat – the day-in, day-out, crippling heat of the summer – and although he'd be aware of it, he wouldn't feel it himself, because he'd be somewhere else; somewhere that would also be hot, yes, but a different kind of hot. And though in recent years he had travelled ceaselessly around the world with my mother, he'd never before had such a thought, and was surprised at himself.

Then, with a sudden fury, he was hit by the realisation that everything that happened in that place would happen anyway, regardless of whether or not he was there to witness it, and bizarrely the realisation brought tears to his eyes. Meneghini breathed deeply, sat up straight, blinked. She would calm down

– she was just highly strung at the moment. Two or three weeks at sea and everything would be back to normal. She was definitely in need of a holiday – the last years had been taxing, the workload epic, the hostilities unspeakable. No wonder she needed to recuperate. But was that really what these strops were all about? Stepping back, as she called it – what an idea! And anyway, what would it look like – life without Maria's voice? He couldn't imagine it. He skirted round the idea of life without her revenues, in any case. No, he couldn't allow such nonsense. She would come to her senses, of course she would. The fact that it obliged him to move in such auspicious circles made him uneasy, admittedly, but in light of the dividends that this gig would pay, well – somehow, he managed to look past it.

To my mother's relief, the plane wasn't even half full. There was only one class, but the stewardess had made sure that the seats around her had been kept free. Meneghini had taken a seat in the adjacent row and had fallen asleep just after take-off. My mother hadn't sat next to him on an aeroplane for years. Happily, she'd never had to express her reluctance – she just insisted on a seat in First Class. Meneghini continued to book Economy for himself, calling it thrift, and my mother never raised any objections. As they flew over the Maritime Alps she looked out of the window, making out their white peaks below, and an almost oppressive sense of freedom came over her. What if she really were to be sitting here alone, without Battista? If she were always to travel without him in future? She had no need of someone who burst into her dressing room during the interval of a nerve-wracking performance to bother her about things he really should have been protecting her from. No – in actual fact, she didn't need anyone at all!

Before her lay a long summer, almost two months without a single commitment. The next two concerts in her schedule weren't until September and October, then four shows in Dallas in November – nothing in comparison to the slog of the previous years, when she often gave fifty performances at the opera. She could relax until the Autumn, have fun, recharge her batteries. For a moment she felt a sense of invincibility, as if something inside her was righting itself – only to collapse in on itself again: only a handful of engagements, and nothing at all yet for the coming year! Would it be enough to secure her future? Would she have the strength to handle everything that Battista

had organised up until now, even as she was finding the singing harder and harder? She had never been a strong woman like a Nedda or a Mimi, which was why she had never sung those parts onstage – she'd sung the parts of weaker women instead, *Tosca* or *Medea*; recently, more and more, an enfeebled *Violetta* or *Norma*. She had to admit that she did need someone to support her – just not this husband of hers, who concerned himself with her weaknesses only insofar as they presented an obstacle to him.

She could see the coast below her now. She put on her glasses and tried to make out the bay of Monte Carlo, but couldn't – the towns and villages, flowing down to the sea in every colour from pale sandstone to brick-red, all looked alike. My mother didn't yet know that the Monégasque harbour would soon be so familiar to her that until the end of her days she would be able to tell it apart, even from the air, from every other harbour in the world. Provided she was wearing her glasses, that is – otherwise she could hardly distinguish the coastline from the water. My mother was so short-sighted that even when she stood right at the front of the stage she could only just make out the conductor, and never the audience. She found the thick lenses she needed in her glasses so disfiguring that she avoided wearing them in public. Out of vanity she sometimes wore contact lenses, but for some reason she didn't like to when flying, which meant she needed assistance, particularly when boarding and disembarking. After establishing that she was unable to decipher the map laid out below her, she leaned back and closed her eyes for a moment, as she always did on a flight shortly before landing, to reconcile what lay behind her with what lay ahead, and couldn't help thinking once again of the strange prophesy she had heard that morning while looking in the mirror. With astonishment she realised that the words had been in Greek. She opened her eyes in surprise. It was rare that my mother spoke Greek, and even rarer that she thought in it. Every now and then she dreamed a few half-sentences in it. It was in fact her native language, for though she'd been born and raised in New York, her parents had of course spoken Greek at home, and cultivated friendships with other Greek expatriates. She had later lived in Athens for a whole decade until the end of the war, but by now she felt that her Greek had become neglected, surfacing only occasionally. Whenever it did, though, she was captured, like now, by a rapture that felt almost sacred, and marvelled at the power and beauty of the language.

The aeroplane banked away from the coastline and described an arc out to sea, a sea that shimmered in the sun like a glossy blue film. Yachts and little fishing boats left trails of white foam in their wake. Everything seemed to be enveloped in an ease that filled my mother with excitement and longing. She cast a glance over at Meneghini, who was still asleep, draped across his seat with his mouth half-open, his head leant against the window. My mother took off her glasses.

They'd been photographed of course, even in Milan. There was always someone or other lurking outside their front door. Journalists were like bluebottles, irritating but unavoidable, and sometimes it seemed to my mother as though they had a hidden communication system at their disposal that functioned independently of telephones and telegrams, and that allowed the news of her imminent landing in Nice to travel faster than the aeroplane they flew in. In Nice, flash bulbs accompanied her into the taxi; on arrival at the Hotel Monte Carlo a dozen reporters stood with tape recorders at the ready. Unlike my father, my mother avoided all contact with journalists, but what came across as cool indifference was in fact reticence, because she didn't understand how to deal with them; outmanoevre them; use them tactically. My mother wasn't built for such gambits. Too often she had spoken the truth in interviews and only realised the foolishness of it in hindsight. The microphones that were being held in front of her as she got out of the taxi bothered her all the more since she knew every word she said would be taken out of context, twisted and used against her. So she fixed her eyes firmly on the hotel entrance, waved them away defensively and responded to the questions – whether it was true that she was embarking on the *Christina*; where the cruise would take her; whether she had met Monsieur Churchill already (he actually said 'Monsieur Churchill') – with a shake of the head. Meneghini demanded in Italian that her privacy – please! – be respected, but in vain. Only once the door to the suite that my father had provided for her had closed behind them did my mother feel safe again.

She waited until Meneghini had gone to the bathroom, then she drew back the curtains, opened the window and stepped out onto the balcony. Monte Carlo harbour lay before her, bathed in light. She felt as though she was standing in a theatre box, looking down at a stage upon which the prima donna *Christina*

reigned supreme. The ship, aboard which she would spend the next three weeks, dominated the harbour like a whale that had strayed into a goldfish pond; crowds thronged on the quay to marvel at the spectacle. There was something overwhelming about the sight of it, and for a moment my mother felt compelled to tilt back her head, spread her arms and step out from her hotel box and onto that stage. Anyone who knew my mother (so in principle everybody) would have said that it was pride she felt in that moment. And yet in reality it was relief. Relief at being welcome down there.

Two years had passed since she had first stepped aboard the *Christina*, in Venice, when she had met my father and his wife and they had invited her, on the spur of the moment, to an informal breakfast. She laid her hands on the stone parapet of the balcony. She would have loved a set of binoculars, so she could make out who was on board. It was astonishingly bright, and my mother wondered whether the light on this coast was really of such an exceptional quality that it had inspired many artists to create their best work. She closed her eyes, lifted her face towards the sun and took a deep breath, stretching out her arms, imagining she was breathing in the light. Music needed light, too, and so she stood there for a while, feeling and breathing nothing but light, imagining that the light was filling her up, transforming itself into music inside her body; light, airy notes that she could call upon whenever she needed, with the same degree of ease with which, just a few years before, she had been able to achieve anything she wanted through willpower alone. And she'd wanted it all. Abruptly she put her glasses back on and adjusted her posture – the paparazzi might be down in the harbour already with their zoom lenses, and the thought that she might be seen in the next day's papers in such a state of abandon made her turn tail and retreat back into the hotel suite.

A bouquet of blush-coloured roses and lilies stood on the table in the sitting room, so enormous that her arms wouldn't have reached all the way around it. No card. But did it need one? After all, he owned the hotel, just as he presumably owned pretty much everything of note in this tiny city-state. She leant over the bouquet and breathed in its scent. Just then, there was a knock at the door. Battista, who had lain down on the bed in the adjoining room, got up and went to open it. He caught my mother's eye on his way past, looked briefly at the roses, then back to her. His face gave nothing away, but she knew what he was thinking – the resemblance between this bouquet and the

one my father had sent her at the end of the previous year was too obvious. It had been the day of her Paris debut, and all the big names were at the Paris Opera: Windsor, Rothschild, Bardot, Chaplin, Gréco, Sagan. And Onassis. It had been a charity concert, and instead of a full opera she had sung her showcase arias from *Norma*, *Il Trovatore* and the *Barber*, as well as the second act of *Tosca*, and anyone who had managed to get hold of an exorbitantly priced ticket had naturally been thrilled to hear my mother sing. First and foremost, though, it was simply *the* event to be seen at, and the presence of the most famous woman in the world had made the evening a great spectacle, hailed by the press the next day as 'the greatest show in the world, 1958 edition'. Of course, this whole circus made an impression on my father. So on the day of the performance he'd had flowers delivered to her hotel room – three identical bouquets: one in the morning, one at midday and one in the evening, administered like medication, with instructions in Greek. Meneghini hadn't found it particularly amusing, but he'd accepted it; by now, though, with the arrival of the latest dose of pink, his disapproval was plain to see. He took receipt of an envelope from the bell-boy, thanked him and closed the door. He ripped it open, read the card and tossed it next to the bouquet, shaking his head. 'They want us to come for lunch.' He looked at his watch. 'My goodness, we've only just arrived!'

My mother reached for the card. It was the formal invitation to a dinner on the terrace of the Hôtel de Paris that Ari and Tina had already extended in person days ago. There was also a second, hand-written invite, to a lunch at my Aunt Merope's house in Monaco.

'And so it begins,' Meneghini grumbled. 'They send us invites from day one, and we have to dance to their tune like circus horses. We should have arrived tomorrow, just before the ship sets sail.'

My mother exhaled audibly. She would have liked to reply that it was very kind of their hosts to invite them to such an intimate family meal, but she kept her peace and thought instead about what to wear. She was hungry; she had, like most days, left the house without having had breakfast, and was excited by the prospect of Mediterranean – perhaps even Greek – cuisine.

'They'll be speaking Greek all afternoon,' Meneghini continued. This was too much for my mother.

'Yes, they will,' she said, crossing her arms in front of her chest – in that way she often did onstage, giving the mistaken

impression that she was chilly – and as she spoke her voice became sharper with every word. 'They might also speak English, or French. But even if they spoke Chinese, it would be your goddamn problem, not theirs. You've been married to a Greek woman for ten years, and you can't manage more than *kali spera* and *kali orexi*. Which I could tolerate – after all, well, it's only Greek, eh! But the woman you married also happens to be an American, and your English is pitiful too. To say nothing of your French. Is there anything you *can* do?

Poor Meneghini was dumbstruck, and stared at my mother with piggy eyes. 'Don't talk to me like that,' he replied eventually, but it sounded so pitiful that it was almost funny. 'That's exactly how I'll talk to you, Battista.' It was clear to him then that it was serious. My mother never called him Battista, only ever Titta, which of course was silly, and had recently become something of a farce. 'Out there,' she gestured vaguely, 'there are plenty of capable men who would learn not just one but three languages on the spot if it meant they got to manage my books.'

Meneghini drew his lips into a pout. If you looked at him closely – which my mother did – you could see that his hands were trembling. 'Nobody,' he uttered, 'nobody in the entire history of the opera has ever negotiated five million francs for one concert.'

'But I'm the one,' cried my mother, jabbing her chest with her index finger, 'I'm the one who earned it. I work for all that money – those fees are only paid because of me! It's my money, and I will manage it, by myself, whether you like it or not.' Without waiting for an answer, she left him standing there and disappeared into the bathroom. She closed the door behind her and sat down on the edge of the bath. She felt dizzy. From a young age she'd suffered from extremely poor circulation, which particularly troubled her in situations like this. She regretted not having eaten breakfast. She was still holding the invitation. It was the first time she'd seen my father's handwriting, and the thought that he'd written those lines recently, perhaps just a couple of minutes ago, touched her in a strange way, and as she recalled the memory of the first time they'd met, all her rage at her husband intensified to an obstinate peak. She stood up, placed the card on the glass shelf in front of the mirror and began to do her hair.

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My parents had met in Venice, two years before, in September 1957, and like everything pivotal in life it might have happened in another place at another time, but it would have happened, one way or another.

I would actually have preferred them to have met under different circumstances, for then I would have been spared the horror of mentioning the abominable Elsa Maxwell, that nasty, scheming piece of work who called herself my mother's friend, but who in reality had hurt her in the most thoughtless way. The Edinburgh drama, for instance – a crucial test, not only for my mother's nerves but also for her voice, and, all in all, the beginning of the disaster – Elsa Maxwell alone was to blame for that. To think that I might owe her my existance – that portly, lumpen pest who did nothing her whole life but bathe in the glow of other people's limelight, revelling under the illusion that it was her own. In actual fact nobody could stand her, but her gossip column, radio programmes and, above all, her parties had made her a pillar of society that nobody could ignore.

She'd wanted to throw a fancy-dress ball at the Danieli during the film festival, in honour of the great Maria Callas, and a fancy-dress party was exactly what my utterly exhausted mother needed. Beforehand, however, she'd had to sing Amina for four consecutive nights, a guest performance at the Scottish Scala, which her doctor had advised against in the strongest terms. But my conscientious mother had insisted upon fulfilling her contract. Out of pure coincidence, while out walking in Edinburgh, she came across a notice in front of the King's Theatre and couldn't believe her eyes: a fifth performance had been announced, about which she knew nothing. Her first reaction was to rage at Meneghini, but on this occasion the poor man was innocent. He had shrugged helplessly. 'Four nights, that's what it says in the contract.'

'What a cheek! He hasn't even informed me, let alone asked. It's unbelievable, I won't be treated like this!'

'He's probably banking on us playing ball. And maybe we should…'

'Play ball? After such a lack of respect? Never! If they want to put on the *Sonnambula* for a fifth night, they'll have to find another Amina.'

When the director of the Scala, Antonio Ghiringhelli, realised that there was no way she was going to sing a fifth time he apologised halfheartedly, implored, and eventually begged, but my mother had made up her mind. Not only was she tired, spent

and not up to a fifth performance, she was also outraged at the way it had all been handled. So she headed home.

The human voice, and in particular my mother's, is the most wondrous of instruments. Unfortunately it is also the most sensitive. No other soprano in the world would have been reproached for having to cancel an engagement – let alone one that hadn't even been agreed. For my mother, however, different rules applied, and so the press had a field day, omitting all mention of the backstory, which of course nobody knew anything about. My mother had indeed agreed the terms for this guest appearance with the Scala – for four performances only. But the Scala had then gone and arranged five nights with the Edinburgh Festival, and that shyster Ghiringhelli now refused to clarify the situation and admit his part. Utterly without scruple, he had let my mother take the fall, and for years afterwards she had sought an apology, but to no avail. She could have withstood all of that, though, had not the narcissistic Elsa Maxwell promptly put it about in her column that she was *oh* so delighted that the great Maria Callas had passed up a performance just so as not to miss her party in Venice! Which seemed to confirm to the whole world, once again, that the soprano hadn't fulfilled her obligations – and not even on the grounds of protecting her fragile health, but so she could party until all hours with the jetset.

Ah, Venice! The first time my mother had been to Venice, incidentally, was ten years previously at the age of twenty-three, and since then, whenever she travelled there the memory of that first evening resurfaced. But the emotions that accompanied the memory had altered over the course of the years – at first imperceptibly, then more and more tangibly, until eventually she struggled to recall the happiness that she had once associated with the place.

Simply put, you could say that my mother, who had only visited Italy for the first time in the summer of 1947, had married the first Italian who'd crossed her path, but of course it was much more complicated than that. She had travelled from New York to Verona to sing *La Gioconda* – her first respectable (if shamefully underpaid) engagement outside her Greek homeland. She'd emigrated to New York, full of hope, at the end of the war – so she could finally see her father again and retain her American citizenship, certainly, but most of all to begin her

career proper. But nobody had wanted to hire her. Although she'd managed to get an audition at the Met, she hadn't been successful, and it was pure self-preservation, not pride, that kept her silent about the setback. There was only so much humiliation a person could take.

'I turned them down,' she told my grandfather on the evening after the audition. Something akin to awe flickered in his eyes, and she knew she'd done the right thing. 'It wouldn't have worked, I can't sing Cio-cio-san,' she said, looking past him to the floor and gesturing vaguely with her hand.

'Oh no, no, of course not,' my grandfather agreed quietly, and let the subject drop.

At that time my mother weighed nearly fourteen stone, and Edward Johnson, the director of the Met, had in fact rejected her not only on account of her voice, but also because of his doubts that a woman of such stature could portray the delicate Madame Butterfly.

She could sing *Tosca* or *Aida*, my mother had offered, but Johnson needed a Cio-Cio-San, as well as Beethoven's Leonore, which she'd sung in Athens three years previously during the German occupation.

'Can you imagine, they want Leonore in English? I'm not doing it!' she told my grandfather as indignantly as she went on to tell everyone else, until at some point it ceased to be a lie and even she could have sworn that that's exactly how it had been.

At thirteen years of age my mother had come to Athens from her birthplace, New York, and there, for almost a decade, through all the commotion of the war, she had relentlessly channelled all her energy into her voice, clinging unwaveringly to the belief that one day she would achieve success and recognition, but the breakthrough she had hoped for so determinedly had eluded her. If she lied, then she lied only so as not to despair. And she certainly would have despaired, had the call to Verona not finally come – through a colleague, the tenor Nicola Rossi-Lemeni. So my mother booked a cheap passage on a cargo steamer and went to Italy. She had to cover her own travel and accommodation costs during rehearsals, so she'd borrowed money from her godparents, as the gig – two hundred and forty dollars for four performances – was anything but lucrative. But she would have sung for nothing to be able to showcase her talent, to finally be heard, and employed by one of the big opera houses. On her arrival in Verona, on 29 July 1947, my mother was a destitute, insecure and noticeably overweight

young woman. At that point, onstage was the only place she could be a prima donna.

Completey drained from the journey, she sat in the Piazza Bra that evening having dinner with her colleagues from the Arena. That is to say, the others were eating; although she herself was hungry, she was in no fit state to eat anything. At least not in front of other people. She wished she'd stayed in her room. She wouldn't have let on for the world, but the looks she received from her colleagues didn't escape her, even without her glasses. Looks ranging from the barely disguised to the downright overt, travelling down her body to her legs and resting there for an appalled moment. The kind of looks with which one might regard the deformed or leprous. Looks that asked the question: how is she going to go onstage like that? She had been glad to finally sit down and hide her legs beneath the table. Her calves, which had always been chunky, were so swollen from the journey that they hurt, and her feet hardly fit in her shoes. Walking was a struggle. She'd had to stand in an overcrowded train from Naples to Verona until her toes had gone numb.

A plate of veal cutlets – the leanest dish on offer – lay untouched in front of her. To ward off scorn she had taken only a tiny portion of the risotto that was served to the table as a starter. During the meal she had been silent. When asked a question she answered shortly but politely; hardly anyone spoke to her, though, which at the time was absolutely fine for my mother – the less she was observed, the more she was able to listen unobtrusively. She always unwittingly took in everything that was going on around her: voices; words and the tone in which they were said; the gestures and body language of her fellow diners – and although she was only twenty-three, by the end of the evening my mother had captured the character of every single one of them so perfectly it was as if she had the experience of a long life to call upon. None of this was beknown to her, but in a way it was part of her make-up as a great actress.

The meal was almost over, darkness had fallen, and my mother would have liked to retreat back to her hotel room, crying fatigue from the long journey, but was reluctant to stand up and give the others the view of her calves and her cumbersome gait. At that moment an older gentleman, friendly with the director of the Arena, came up to their table and sat down opposite my mother. She sensed immediately that he would have preferred not to be there; perhaps he was tired as well. He didn't want to eat anything, he said, or at most just a

bite, a veal cutlet perhaps. My mother saw her chance: 'Please, sir, you can have mine – it was the last one, they don't have any more.' With great relief she passed her plate over to him. The director of the Arena had invited her to the dinner and it would have been a faux pas not to finish her meal. 'I haven't touched it.' But she hadn't reckoned with his politeness. 'That's kind of you, Signorina,' he replied, 'but I can order something else.' My mother recognised that he was a gentleman, and that the conversation could become a back and forth as absurd as it was polite, eventually drawing the attention of the whole table, so she did something rather rash: she laid herself bare and let him see her distress, casting him a beseeching look and saying, very quietly but with the greatest insistence, 'Please, Signore.' And Giovanni Battista Meneghini understood. He understood that he was dealing here with a lost soul that needed to be saved. As he communicated his understanding with a brief nod and took her plate, he decided that he would do everything to save the soul and beautiful black eyes of this woman. And he began straight away. Without taking no for an answer he filled her wine glass, asked her politely and with interest about her journey and her impressions of Verona, took her and her two American companions on a late-night promenade around the Piazza dei Signori, and invited her on a trip to Venice the following evening. My mother, who'd been afraid to show her unshapely legs, was relieved, and followed him – the first living thing that had come along – like a goose. She did, however, decline the Venice invitation so firmly that Meneghini became suspiscious: a young woman so enamoured with the beauty of architecture, passing up a trip to Venice? If self-doubt had been a feature of Meneghini's character he might have let it go, and my mother's life might have taken a completely different course. But Meneghini insisted, sent for her again the next day, and eventually my mother found herself sitting in his car.

'I understand that you're still exhausted from your journey, but you must not miss Venice, Signorina – I can't let that happen, it would be a sin. You can rest a little in the car, the drive will take a good hour.'

'No, no – I'm not tired, Signore.'

'So why in heaven's name were you so adamant that you wanted to stay at the hotel?' There were any number of reasons why a young woman might have rejected the invitations of an older man, but Meneghini was not gifted with imagination.

'I… well… ah, it's awkward, you see. I only have this one blouse. I had to wear it on the journey, and it got stained yesterday evening. I… I was embarrassed.'

Meneghini looked at her. This woman had backbone, but no stability. He smiled involuntarily, and because the smile came from deep within his heart, he would remember it from then on as the moment he fell in love with my mother. In reality, he fell in love with a business idea, because Giovanni Battista Meneghini was a businessman. And it was to be the greatest deal of his life.