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Youth

Written by Paolo Sorrentino

Translated from the Italian by N. S. Thompson

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YOUTH

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YOUTH

I

In the clear spring sunshine of a beautiful hotel garden, an unmistakably British figure sits with his legs crossed; his pale face is flushed red, he has short fair hair, and is wearing a jacket and tie. He is in his fifties, with an intelligent, earnest expression.

Behind him, at a slight distance, are his two younger assistants.

Further behind them lies a superb swimming pool, surrounded by a few bathers, all wrapped in identical soft white dressing gowns, ready for a dip in the sleepy holiday atmosphere of the early morning.

Gleaming hydromassage tubs are dotted about the immaculate lawn.

In the background stands a wonderful Alpine hotel. It looks warm, sedate and luxurious all at the same time.

And framing the hotel are the sovereign peaks of the Alps.

The fifty-year-old takes out a packet of cigarettes and is about to light one when a calm voice, without any hint of reproach, warns him:

“There’s no smoking here.”

“Not even outside?”

“Nor inside.”

The calm voice belongs to another Englishman, in his eighties, sitting opposite. He is wearing a soft jacket and trousers in matching beige and glasses in imposing black frames, behind which nestle pale watery irises, deepened by melancholy and experience. This is Fred Ballinger.

A table separates the two men. Fred has a newspaper open in front of him. He is calm, quiet and self-contained, his eyes constantly betraying a vague disenchantment as he unwraps a sweet that he pops into his mouth with the practised gesture of the habitual consumer.

“Mr Ballinger, may I call you *maestro*, as the Italians do?”

Fred Ballinger gives a shrug. He has no particular feelings about it.

“Are you enjoying your holiday here?”

“Yes, I am. Very much, thank you.”

“Have you been coming here long?”

“More than twenty years. I used to come with my wife. Then, as I have so many friends here, I carried on coming on my own.”

“But why Switzerland?”

“It’s close to Italy. After London and New York, I was the conductor for an orchestra in Venice for twenty-four years.”

“Of course, how stupid of me! This must be a very relaxing place.”

“Indeed, a most relaxing place. Nothing more.”

The fifty-year-old smiles. Fred does not.

“Do you still conduct or compose, *maestro*?”

“No, I’ve retired.”

“Needless to say, like everyone else, I’m a great admirer of yours.”

“Thank you.”

The fifty-year-old smiles again. “*Maestro*, as I mentioned to you before, I work as the special events organiser for Buckingham Palace.”

Fred rouses himself a little. “You work for the Queen?”

“Well, almost, in a sort of a way.”

“Good. I find the idea of monarchy touching.”

The fifty-year-old is surprised. “And why do you find monarchies touching, if I might ask?”

“Because they’re vulnerable. You only have to get rid of one person and, all of a sudden, the whole world is changed. It’s the same with marriage.”

“Her Majesty would be honoured if you would accept the honour of a knighthood this coming June.”

Fred Ballinger lets a small smile escape his lips. “Do you know what Eric Satie said when they offered him the *Légion d’honneur*? He said, ‘It’s not enough to refuse it, you shouldn’t even deserve it!’ But I’m not Eric Satie. And please forgive me, I have the bad habit of quoting people. Too much so.”

“Her Majesty will be happy to know you’ve accepted.”

“Her Majesty’s never been happy.”

The Queen’s emissary skates over the comment, mildly embarrassed. “Furthermore, the investiture coincides with Prince Philip’s birthday and the Queen would like to hold a concert for him by the London Philharmonic at the Wimble-

don Theatre to which, for reasons that remain obscure to me, the Prince is very attached, and Her Majesty would be very happy . . . that is, honoured, if you would conduct the orchestra in selections from your own compositions.”

“I haven’t conducted for a long time.”

The fifty-year-old smiles. “I’m sure you haven’t forgotten how it’s done.”

Fred Ballinger gives the matter some serious reflection. “No, I haven’t forgotten how it’s done.”

The emissary gives another radiant smile. “Prince Philip and the Queen will be ecstatic when they hear your celebrated ‘Simple Songs’.”

With great calm, almost with resignation, Fred says: “I won’t be performing any of my ‘Simple Songs’.”

“Why not?”

“Personal reasons.”

“But we can have the great Sumi Jo as soprano.”

“Sumi Jo isn’t the right person.”

“You tell me the right soprano and you shall have her.”

“There’s no-one who is right.”

The decision looks to be irrevocable. Fred Ballinger starts to read the paper again. He has already forgotten all the words of praise. The emissary is taken aback. His head droops.

Silence. The only slight sound is Fred rubbing the plastic sweet wrapper between his fingers at intervals of equal duration. As they alternate, the brief intervals lay down an unmistakable musical rhythm.

The Queen’s emissary puts a cigarette in his mouth, raises the lighter to it, then remembers the ban on smoking.

“Forgive me, *maestro*,” he stammers out in a last awkward attempt, “but the Queen could take this badly. She isn’t used to being rebuffed.”

Still seemingly engrossed in the newspaper, Fred Ballinger suddenly stops playing with the sweet wrapper.

“She’ll learn to live with it. There are far more important things than my ‘Simple Songs’.”

The emissary gets up, disconsolate: “Well, I’ll report back what we’ve discussed. Goodbye, *maestro*.”

He sets off, his two assistants following. As they move away, they reveal a man at another table behind them who looks as if he has listened to the whole conversation.

He is Jimmy Tree, thirty-four years old, from California, a Hollywood star, and handsome in a dissolute looking way. He is eating steak and chips at this hour of the morning. He looks wasted – several days’ growth of beard, dark glasses, his casual clothes all crumpled – and is trying to hide the fact under a baseball hat that does him no favours.

As the three Englishmen circumnavigate the swimming pool to find the way out, one particular figure catches the attention of the royal emissary.

There is a man floating in the pool. Only his swollen face sticks out of the water. He looks South American, his hair dyed an unreal yellow, fleshy lips. He is about fifty, his black eyes are intelligent, his features well worn, but lined with deep furrows that look incongruous in a man still in middle age. He is gazing into empty space.

The emissary stares at him and in a low voice asks one of

his assistants, “Have you seen that man? Is that him?”

The two assistants turn to look at the swimming pool and recognise him immediately. They become excited.

“It certainly is him!”

“My God, it really is!”

The three carry on walking even though they cannot stop glancing back at the South American in the pool who – with the help of a woman of about forty and three pool attendants against whom he is resting all his dead weight – is now getting out of the water and making his way up the easy-access steps. To him, however, they seem insurmountable.

This is because, as we watch him gradually get out of the pool, we realise the man is extraordinarily obese and has immense difficulty walking. Breathless with the effort, this charismatic and cumbersome figure sits on the side of the pool. His arms are tattooed with the faces of famous heroes from equally famous revolutions.

The attendants leave. The forty-something woman with a kindly and patient face seems to be his partner. She sits next to him and starts to rub his hair with a towel, taking loving care of this huge whale of a man.

2

Venice, at night

Every so often, like sporadic irregular implosions from the seabed or deep in the unconscious, the short muffled notes of a guitar can be heard.

What we see now is like a dream.

A very beautiful dream: a deserted Piazza San Marco under the waters of an *acqua alta*. The piazza looks huge, its unforgettable porticos and palaces framing the square lake lapping at its columns.

Across the piazza a long, narrow footbridge has been erected to allow people to cross. But for the moment, no-one is using it.

Then, at night, in this city that is mysterious by definition, Fred Ballinger appears in the distance on the narrow footbridge.

Laborious and frail, he is taking short footsteps, like all elderly people.

Fred looks up. At the other end of the footbridge, he can

make out the statuesque figure of a woman coming towards him. The two continue to walk towards each other, the only human beings in this unreal and flooded Venice. Now they are coming closer, about to pass each other and, with ill-concealed amazement, Fred focusses on the woman: she is one metre and eighty-five centimetres tall, so impossibly beautiful that she seems artificial, with black hair and green eyes. She is wearing a swimsuit with a sash around her that says MISS UNIVERSE.

She is walking along the footbridge with that solemn unnatural strut that top models employ for fashion shows. But the footbridge is only a metre wide, so both move to one side to allow the other to pass without ending up in the water. Inevitably, they brush against each other, Miss Universe's robust cleavage touching Fred Ballinger's meagre pectorals.

He looks at her from the toes up, as if examining something both tragic and benign.

Like all beauty queens, the figure's frosty gaze is lost in empty space and she ignores the ambiguous, fleeting touch of her perfect body against Fred's.

Having overcome the risk of an accident, they continue on their way. Seen from behind, Miss Universe goes off swinging her hips under the full moon, surrounded by the mass of water as if in some dubious dream-like advert for Dolce & Gabbana.

Fred continues along the footbridge and starts to feel frightened – and with good reason – because the water level is suddenly rising. It covers the footbridge, swamping his feet, his ankles, his knees.

Fred tries to move more quickly, but he is old and the water pushes at him. He turns round and gives a strangled cry, as if asking Miss Universe for help.

“Melanie! Melanie!”

But Miss Universe is no longer there. She has vanished into thin air.

Fred struggles a little way forward, the water up to his chest, now his neck, his chin, and in his panic gives another strangled cry when, fortunately . . .

3

He wakes and immediately gathers himself together. He struggles to get up from the armchair. It is late. No-one is around except, far off, a knot of night-owl hotel guests.

Those muffled notes on the guitar are now real and clear and continuous.

Fred sets off, with his usual short footsteps, the underwater lights of the swimming pool providing him with some light.

He walks across the deserted lawn and, over the notes of the guitar, he hears the melody of a song coming from the knot of guests.

The song is "Onward". A wonderful sober example of a modern ballad. Instinctively, Fred draws closer to the music, but keeps to the edge of the knot of people where, guitar held close, Mark Kozelek is playing. There are three women as well as a youth of about twenty and Jimmy Tree. This small relaxed and easy-going gathering is enjoying the Indie American singer's rendition.

Fred Ballinger stops and stands still a little way away and

listens to the beautiful song. Mark Kozelek has noticed him and finds it difficult to hide his emotion at having such an illustrious spectator in his audience. He makes a slight reverential bow with his head during an instrumental break and calls out "*Maestro*" to Fred.

Fred smiles back.

Jimmy Tree, who is lying on the grass with his eyes closed, opens them and sees Fred. They exchange greetings, then Jimmy beckons to Fred to come closer.

Fred obliges and sits on the edge of a sunbed next to Jimmy who offers him a cup. "I secretly poured a little gin and tonic into the herbal tea. Would you like some, Mr Ballinger?"

"No thanks. I would have preferred a little herbal tea in a gin and tonic."

They both smile.

Fred takes out a cotton handkerchief, blows his nose quickly, expertly folds the handkerchief and, with a practised gesture performed countless times, wipes it cleanly across his nose four times, before putting it back in his jacket pocket.

Hidden behind his bold smile, Jimmy Tree has observed Fred's action with the handkerchief. "I was thinking today that you and I have the same problem," he says.

"Let's hear it."

"Having once given in to popular taste, we're stuck with the reputation for the rest of our lives."

"Could be. Popularity's a temptation that's hard to resist."

"I've worked with the greatest European and American directors, but all the public ever remembers me for is 'Mr Q', a dickhead of a metallic robot. On top of that, I had to wear

ninety kilos of armour plating. You couldn't even see my face! Every thirty minutes someone reminds me that I played 'Mr Q' and they remind you that you wrote those 'Simple Songs'. They forget that you composed 'The Black Prism', 'The Life of Hadrian' and all the rest."

Fred Ballinger breaks out in a smile and Jimmy too. They have bonded, two subversive partners.

"Pandering to popular taste is a perversion, isn't it?" Fred says. "Anyway, what are you doing in Europe?"

"I start filming in Germany in a month. I'm getting ready for the part."

"Is it a popular character?"

"Depends on your point of view."

"Is it coming along well?"

"We'll have to see."

Mark Kozelek sings the last note of "Onward". The group of friends applauds softly. Fred does not join in. He takes his leave of Jimmy. "It's getting late for me."

"Not for me."

Fred grins. Jimmy raises his fingers to his temple, giving Fred a playful military salute.

Fred heads off with the unsteady gait of the elderly. Jimmy takes a drink and studies Fred as he walks away.