

THE COLLETTA CASSETTES

ALSO BY BRUNO NOBLE

A Thing of the Moment

THE COLLETTA CASSETTES

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Indie Novella

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For Collettiani, past, present and future

ONE

‘And I thought the French were bad!’ said Sebastian’s father through gritted teeth as he gripped the mahogany steering wheel of his red Alfa Romeo. The late afternoon sun in his rear-view mirror and the bright headlights of the eager cars close behind conspired to blind and bewilder him. His sunglasses were of little use; no sooner did he put them on than he had to whip them off in order to be able to see his way in the Italian coast road’s many tunnels. ‘In retrospect,’ he continued, ‘the French habit of driving on your tail at a hundred miles an hour with the overtaking indicator permanently on seems positively courteous. At least you don’t feel that the French are actually *trying* to kill you. And where’s the respect? Alright, I may have a British number plate but, after all, I am driving an *Italian* make of car.’

‘Don’t be nasty about the French,’ said Dominic courageously, his compulsion to stick up for his mother overcoming his reluctance to reprimand his father. ‘After all, Mummy is French. And Sebastian and I are half French!’ he added, as

though this were news, opening his eyes wide at his elder brother on the back seat next to him.

Sebastian exaggerated the effect of a turn and brought his elbow down into Dominic's side.

'Ouch! You're squashing me!' Dominic giggled.

'I thought I'd told you to put your seatbelts on?' said Peter Kentish, glancing in the rear-view mirror at his sons.

'It's not compulsory,' said Sebastian. 'I know my rights,' he added as he sat upright and fumbled for his seatbelt.

'It is compulsory in this car,' shouted Mr Kentish, having to raise his voice above the noise of car engines in a tunnel. It was so hot that they had to drive with the windows down.

Sebastian didn't like to say so for fear of upsetting his mother but he didn't feel French or even half French: he didn't feel French at all. France had lost to Italy and then to Argentina in the group stage of the World Cup and not progressed to the second round and he hadn't felt sorry, not really. Nowhere near as distraught as when England had failed to qualify for the tournament and not even boarded the plane for Argentina. Although both born in England, his paternal grandparents had been Scottish, so Sebastian could at least try to feel Scottish with some legitimacy, but Scotland had lost to Peru and only managed a draw with Iran. If Peru beat Iran that evening, Scotland was unlikely to beat Holland and go through to the second round. He thought then that he wouldn't like football so much, after all.

Jacqueline Kentish raised her sunglasses to the top of her head and waited patiently for the car to leave the tunnel so she could consult the map on her lap. The improvised hairband resembled a visor on a blond helmet. Sebastian marvelled at his mother. While the wind blew his buffeting hair about his eyes and ears, Mrs Kentish had not so much as a hair out of place.

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While his father lost himself in childish enthusiasm, his mother never lost her composure. She had what Sebastian thought of, at times, as class and distinction and, at others, as snobbishness and indifference. Sebastian imagined a border that ran down the middle of the car, separating his mother and him on the left from his father and Dominic on the right. Tall and blond versus short and dark. The four didn't resemble a family so much as natives from two different countries.

'Not far to go now,' said Mrs Kentish once she could see again. She kept a finger on their destination as she lowered her sunglasses and looked out of the car window, out over San Bartolomeo Al Mare and the Ligurian Sea. 'Another twenty minutes on the *autostrada* and then another twenty or so to Colletta.'

The coastal road, when not winding its way in and out of tunnels, twisted up and down vertiginously high viaducts, the stilts and buttresses of which plunged hundreds of feet into ravines and dry river mouths. Sebastian watched the needle of the speedometer rise as his father accelerated down a long straight and then fall as he braked, took the turn and dropped a gear to accelerate up a long climb into the clear sky ahead.

'Where are we going on holiday again?' Sebastian had asked when told to pack a suitcase.

Mrs Kentish had shown him on the map. A long day's drive to Lyon for a couple of days' stay with his maternal grandparents – *Le général* and *Mme la générale* – and then another long day's drive to Colletta di Castelbianco.

'But that's in the middle of nowhere!'

'It's in Liguria, in Italy. In the mountains. You'll love it, you'll see. And it has a swimming pool.'

‘But why are we going *there*?’

‘Daddy has to meet someone for work there and we thought it would be nice to make a family holiday of it.’

‘I’m sure it’s going to be perfectly boring.’

‘No. I’m sure there’ll be other children there. It’ll be really exciting. It’s a very old village, medieval in fact. Apparently, it’s been left untouched on the outside while the houses and apartments have been modernised on the inside. No cars. Olive and cherry trees. Wait and see.’

Sebastian had winced when his mother had said *children*. His ten-year old brother had said, ‘Oh, goody!’ but, at sixteen, Sebastian neither liked the term nor felt he quite had the right to object to it. Actually, he didn’t care, so long as there were girls his age. Last summer had been spent on a German exchange misunderstanding the signals of his pen-friend’s sister, a girl of fifteen who had spent a week making eyes at him and slept with her bedroom door open only to scream when he had entered her room one night. ‘I am sorry, I must have mistaken her bedroom for the bathroom,’ had been offered to her pyjamaed parents in his best, sleepest German. Sebastian hoped that this Italian holiday might be more successful than the German one.

Sebastian looked out of his car window onto the sunlit Ligurian hills and admired the view of villages and houses that dotted the hillsides like raisins on buns. He reflected that Colletta might just be better than the out-of-season ski resorts his family usually holidayed in during the summer, principally because they were cheap but also because they allowed his mother to paint and his father to work. He wasn’t actually certain what his father did for a living and had heard him describe himself variously as a journalist, a historian, a researcher, an adviser and a

political analyst. As far as he could see, whatever time his father didn't spend traveling, he spent reading and writing.

Mr Kentish pulled off the motorway and up at the tollbooth half a mile down a single lane road. 'Buongiorno!' he said cheerily to the uniformed woman behind an open window, leaning across his wife and flashing a smile. 'Quanto?' he asked, reaching for his father's *Teach Yourself Books' Italian Phrase Book (First printed 1954)* should he need it. 'Ah,' he added, 'damn it. The *lire* are in the boot.' Mr Kentish got out of the car and popped the boot open where he located the old leather sponge bag he had promoted to travel bag. In it, he and his wife kept passports, car insurance papers, travellers' cheques and foreign currency safe in one place.

The tollbooth sat in a no-man's land, with low mountains to one side and a plain that led to the sea on the other. The colours were bright, distinct, even the olive green of the trees, the grey of the dusty tarmac and the faded yellow of the booth, so that Sebastian had the impression of looking at a world in a Polaroid picture. He admired the tollkeeper's cap that struggled to contain a mass of brown hair, and her tight, blue regulation shirt that, he noticed, also had the attention of his father.

Mr Kentish slapped the travel bag down on the booth's sill and extricated first the envelope marked, in Mrs Kentish's looping hand, *francs* and then the one marked *lire*.

The tollkeeper looked as though she might have been asleep. She smiled with an open mouth, dreamily, and rubbed her eyes with the knuckles of one hand while she held the other out for the toll and Mr Kentish counted out the requisite number of notes. The only noises were the intermittent whooshes from the distant motorway and the throaty purr of the Alfetta's engine at rest.

'Grazie!'

‘*Prego.*’

Mr Kentish and the tollkeeper looked up at the sound of a car approaching at speed, the squeal of its tires audible above the howl of its engine, that braked late and hard so as to not run into the back of the Kentish’s car.

‘Steady on!’ said Mr Kentish to no-one in particular.

‘Hey! *Ragazzi!*’ The tollkeeper leant out of the booth and waved at the car’s occupants. Her face was inches from his father’s.

Mrs Kentish, Sebastian and Dominic looked out of their car’s rear window, at two men in a Lancia that was the colour of the dust that covered it. They each had an arm hanging casually out of a window and appeared unperturbed, oblivious to the notion that they might have been driving too fast. The driver extracted a comb from behind the car’s sun visor and swept his brilliantined black hair back while looking in the driver’s mirror. The passenger waved indifferently at the tollkeeper and resumed his drumming on the car door in time with the beat of a jolly Italian pop song played loudly enough to be heard in the Kentish’s car.

Mr Kentish stood a moment, as though overcome by the sudden shift from summer torpor to noise and movement. It seemed to Sebastian, reclining on the warm leather seat of his father’s car, looking up at his immobile father and at the attractive, expressive tollkeeper, that time stood still a moment, that they were all participants and spectators both in the soundtrack of a sunny day. The tollkeeper tucked some hair under her cap and fixed her smile more widely and her eyes on the men. Mr Kentish looked admiringly from her to the car and back. The song ended in a gurgling diminuendo, disappearing suddenly like water drained from a sink.

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‘Hey! *Sbrigati!*’ The driver raised his eyebrows and both hands.

‘One of them is called Ragazzi and she is called Sbrigati,’ noted the observant Dominic, kneeling on the back seat.

‘No,’ said his mother, ‘*ragazzi* means *boys* and *sbrigati* means *hurry up* – Peter! They want you to hurry up!’

‘*Allora! Sbrigati!*’ The driver had his head out of his window.

‘Oh!’ said Mr Kentish and then, ‘Damn it!’ as he dropped the Italian phrase book in his hurry. Some of the pages had come loose from the binding and a cajoling wind blew them about the dusty ground and up against his car’s back tyres. He scrabbled for them with one hand while holding the other up in apology and then shuffled them together, reinserting them higgledy-piggledy between the book’s covers. He ran to the driver’s door, slammed it shut behind him, dropped the phrase book in his wife’s lap and accelerated hard over the short distance to an intersection.

‘Left here,’ said Mrs Kentish, ‘in the direction of Garessio and away from Albenga. Come on, what are you waiting for?’

Mr Kentish had been looking in his rear-view mirror. ‘It’s funny, they don’t seem in a hurry. Unless it’s simply a hurry to chat,’ he said and took the turn.

‘Drive on the right,’ said Mrs Kentish automatically.

They drove north, passing olive groves, industrial estates, fields of rosemary in pots, vineyards and hamlets and then left over a bridge by a deserted petrol station. They entered a wood and then passed a working quarry, an open-pit mine according to Mr Kentish, that lay quiet and still, as it was a Sunday. The quarry formed a deep scar on the landscape, its benches widening as it climbed the mountainside as though spreading an achromatic disease of ash and granite greys, bleeding the light

and colour from the surrounding vegetation. At its base, behind rusted iron fencing and padlocked gates, pools of black water had formed and reflected the quarry's dark stepped sides and the concrete shells of some yet to be completed buildings squatting sinisterly beside them. Giant bulldozers stood silently by in enclosures, sleeping animals in a malevolent, mechanical zoo.

And then west into a narrow valley on a winding road that followed the river that had shaped the valley over millennia. Shaded in the valley but driving in the direction of the setting sun now, the back-lit mountainside trees and bushes presented gradations of muted greens and of browns, greys and, furthest away, purples, much as a stage set might. Butterflies and other flying insects above the meandering road caught what little sun broke through the trees. The Kentishes stayed speechless as though in unspoken agreement not to break the spell of what felt, to Sebastian, after the heat and noise of the motorway and the gloom of the quarry, to be an enchanted, mystical place. But then he forgot himself and exclaimed, 'Look!' sitting up and pointing straight ahead in the distance. 'Interlocking spurs! I've just studied them in geography,' he explained to Dominic, settling back in his seat.

They drove uphill on a gentle incline, up and out into the open, leaving the river at some distance below them.

'Are we nearly there yet?' asked Dominic as a joke, knowing full well that *Are we there yet?* and *Are we nearly there?* were allowed and tolerated by his father but that the tautology wasn't.

'Yes. Not long to go now,' said Mrs Kentish. 'In fact, not long at all if your father continues driving at this speed.' She looked from the speedometer to Mr Kentish. 'Peter, what's got into you?'

Mr Kentish nodded in the direction of his rear-view mirror. 'It's those chaps who were behind us at the toll. They've been

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following us. And now they want to overtake us.' Mr Kentish changed down a gear before he took a corner and accelerated out of it. The Alfa Romeo's engine noise reverberated off the rock wall bordering the road.

'Peter! Slow down!' Mrs Kentish gripped the door handle.

Sebastian swung into Dominic again.

Mr Kentish changed up for a straight and put his foot down. 'I can't believe it! He's making a move!' The road narrowed. 'Ha! That'll teach him!'

'Peter!'

Mr Kentish, in a right-hand drive car, couldn't always see what was coming before his wife could. She emitted a cry. The four breathed in deeply. The van's long hooting faded into the distance behind them.

They came out of the turn into a short straight and then a left turn. They passed a couple of cottages in the blink of an eye.

'I can't believe it!' exclaimed Mr Kentish. 'Now he's flashing me!'

'Peter! Think of the children!' Mrs Kentish gripped the dashboard with both hands.

Sebastian didn't know whether to be afraid or elated and decided he was both. Dominic felt for his brother's hand and held it tightly.

They came out of another turn into another straight.

Mr Kentish double de-clutched and accelerated. Sebastian was pressed into the back of his seat. The sound of an Alfa Romeo in full voice was the most glorious sound in the world, he decided.

'Damn!' Mr Kentish's knuckles were white on the steering wheel. 'He's stuck fast behind me!'

The road widened ahead. The Lancia pulled to the left and drew parallel with the Alfa, its driver laughing, his black hair

beating about his clean-shaven face in the wind. The passenger was so close that Sebastian fancied he could reach out and touch him and as the Lancia pressed ahead the passenger, now just inches from Sebastian's mother, turned sideways in his seat and stared at her. Sebastian could see his beard's stubble, flecks of grey in his sideburns, the oil in his hair, a scar on his chin, the gold of one molar in a row of stained, yellow teeth and the thick links of the gold chain around his neck. The whine of the Lancia's labouring motor, only just heard above the Alfa's bellowing exhaust and, above them both, what sounded like the same tinny pop song they had heard at the tollbooth, receded as the Lancia pulled ahead.

Mrs Kentish rested her hand on her husband's arm. 'Let them,' she said. 'Let them, just let them go. Don't do anything stupid.'

Resignedly, Mr Kentish decelerated. 'Well, we *are* fully laden,' he muttered. 'Still, to be overtaken by that rust-bucket...'

The Alfa slowed. To Sebastian's surprise, so did the Lancia. Having sped ahead of the Alfa by a good distance, its brake lights flashed red and then stayed red. It skidded and stopped in the middle of the road, its brake lights illuminating the cloud of dust behind it like the red eyes of a mythical monster in a fog. Mr Kentish had no alternative but to brake too and the Alfa came to a stop only a car's length from the Lancia.

The sun lit the mountains' peaks and forested sides, but the valley and they were in shadow. Above and ahead of them, the series of interlocking spurs that diminished in the distance seemed to suggest that this was a replay of an event that the valley had witnessed many times before.

Mrs Kentish tightened her grip on her husband's arm. 'Wind the windows up. Lock the doors,' she commanded her family calmly, but the driver had already left his car and was

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striding towards them, a silhouette of a person now, dark against a pinking sky. The passenger had got out too but stayed by the open car door, leaning nonchalantly against it, one arm along its top and the other along the car roof, his legs crossed at the ankles.

The driver drew close and Sebastian saw that he was still laughing. And then there he was, right by the passenger door of the Alfa, leaning down and looking in and holding up the Kentish's leather travel bag.

'Hey! Mister!' He inclined his head briefly at Mr and Mrs Kentish and acknowledged Sebastian and Dominic with a narrowing of his eyes. 'You left this at the – *come si dice, casello?* You left this,' he finished by saying, holding, in a hand extended through their car's open window, the bag that contained their passports, their money – their life in mainland Europe.

Sheepishly, Mrs Kentish took receipt of it. 'Thank you. *Grazie,*' she said weakly.

Mr Kentish looked from the driver to the travel bag and back again and opened and closed his mouth.

The driver leant forward a little and said, across Mrs Kentish to her husband, 'That was fun! Yes? Great, much funs! Where are you going? We raise you there!'

'No. No thank you,' said Mrs Kentish. 'We don't race anymore.'

The driver looked from Mr Kentish to his wife and back. '*Bene!*' He nodded. 'We don't raise any more.' It was implicitly understood that, were it not for his wife, Mr Kentish would have relished a race. The driver stood straight and drummed his fingers on the roof of the Alfetta, directly above Sebastian. '*Bella macchina! Arriverderci. Buonasera!*' His back to the Kentishes, he waved goodbye as he returned to his companion and his car. They drove off.

Sebastian noticed the butterflies again and a large number of dragonflies that, strangely, were somehow more visible in the absolute silence. At some point, Mr Kentish had pulled the car to one side of the road and cut the motor. Mrs Kentish rifled through the travel bag and the envelopes it contained. 'It's all there,' she said.

'Well, of course it would be,' said Mr Kentish.

An insect entered the car from Sebastian's open window and made a lazy escape out of Dominic's. The boys watched it come and go.

'I must admit,' said Mrs Kentish, 'to feeling a little ashamed.'

'So do I,' said Mr Kentish, looking straight ahead.

'Come on,' said Mrs Kentish, 'let's get to Colletta before the sun sets.'