

Recipe for Life

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Published by Orion

Extract

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Prologue

At Villa Rosa there was an old dog barking in the garden, running between the straggle of artichokes, chasing a bird as though he was still a puppy. He ran across the terrace where the bougainvillea had taken over, through the dappled lemon grove and across the sun-bleached lawns. When at last the dog stopped barking the only sound was the breeze rushing through the pomegranate trees and the pounding of the sea on the rocks below.

The house was empty and locked against intruders, its high gates tightly closed. Only the little dog and the green-backed lizards knew how to squeeze their way through the hole in the wall that was almost entirely overgrown with weeds.

It seemed like a lost, forgotten place. The flowerbeds had long since surrendered and the wisteria grown wild. But someone had been there. The trees had been stripped of fruit at the end of last summer and the pathways swept clean of autumn leaves.

The weather always hit this house hard. The salty wind and the harsh sun had blistered the varnished shutters and faded the wash of pink on the walls. If the roof hadn't been weighed down with stones then the tiles might have lifted in the wilder storms and the heavy winter rains soaked through. Inside the house dust lay undisturbed, coffee cups sat upside down on a draining board where someone had left them, a bed was still unmade. Pictures had been taken down from walls and only their shadows remained.

Cobwebs decorated the ceiling.

It might have been months since anyone had lived here.
Or it might have been years.

PART I

‘Your time is limited so don’t waste it
leading someone else’s life,’

Steve Jobs, CEO, Apple Inc.

Alice

It was his weight I felt first, unfamiliar and wrong, pressing down along the full length of my body. I opened my eyes but all I could see in the darkness was the shape of his hair, curly and long. I suppose I must have screamed and he'd have told me to shut up but I don't remember that bit clearly. My memory is of the sharpness of whatever he was pushing into the side of my face, a kitchen knife or scissors perhaps, and the thoughts that ran through my mind ... not that he was going to kill me but that I would be left with a scar. A cheek ruined by a knife cut. It seems like such a stupid thing to worry about the moment you are raped.

It was a fumbling, messy business that didn't last long. Afterwards I lay still and listened to him running down four flights of stairs. Only when I was sure he was gone did I get out of bed and go downstairs to Charlie's room.

'I've been raped.' I opened my mouth so wide to scream out the words that my jaw hurt.

I'm not sure anyone but Charlie believed me at first, not until they found the stolen money he had dropped as he ran away down the front path. The police even suggested I'd dreamed the whole thing. But that was in the days before they'd had all that special training. I'm sure they wouldn't do that now.

I heard them on their walkie-talkies describing me as 'the victim'. I hated that. And I hated being made to stand on a sheet of brown paper while I undressed in front of a doctor

who put my clothes in clear plastic bags and took them away somewhere. I hated being poked and prodded by him and then left to sit for hours with a weak cup of tea in a brightly lit room. I hated seeing the headlines – ‘Student Raped’ – on the front page of the next day’s newspaper and knowing it was about me. And all my friends, everyone who’d ever been in my little room, being fingerprinted so there was no chance of me keeping it quiet, of not being pointed at whenever I was on campus. ‘That’s the girl who was raped look.’

It changed everything. If I went out to a pub I’d always be thinking, ‘He could be here’. The others would be chatting, listening to the band or playing darts, I’d be looking for the man with the long curly hair.

The nights I was at home alone I’d listen for him coming up the stairs. Sleep was impossible. I barely even tried.

Charlie stayed with me a lot more than I expected. I suppose he felt guilty. If he’d still been my boyfriend he’d have been sleeping in that bed beside me when the stranger came into the room.

It had been such a nice house to live in: high ceilings, thick carpets, central heating. No wonder neither of us had wanted to move out when we broke up. A place like that was hard to come by. So we hung on, Charlie in one room, me in another, both convinced the other should go and too stubborn to see how ridiculous we were being.

In the end it was the bed linen that helped me leave. They’d taken it away to do forensic testing but now, I told the police, I needed it back because I was broke and couldn’t afford to buy more. They looked surprised but fetched it anyway. Once it was spread out on my bed I realised my sheet was still covered in stains. They’d circled some in blue chalk and cut out swatches of the fabric here and there. I balled it back up and threw it in the bin.

That’s when I knew it wasn’t right for me to stay there,

hanging on to the torn edges of my life. I had to be somewhere else. Anywhere else.

I packed up the things I cared about into a couple of bags and caught a train south, not letting anyone except Charlie know I was going. As the train rocked me, I made plans for my new start. I began thinking of this as extra time ... life after 18 November 1985, the date a stranger held a knife to my face. I stared out of the window at England blurring past and decided to treat every day from now on as a bonus. I would use time properly. I was going to squeeze life dry.

Babetta

Babetta looked towards the sea trying to work out what her husband had been staring at for so long. He was sitting in an old cane chair he'd pulled out onto the terrace and, even though it was chilly, he showed no signs of moving. It was as though he was waiting for someone. But no one was expected today. It was rare that anyone came.

This morning there was work to be done. Babetta wanted to plant out a crop of onions – the crisp red ones that tasted so good in summer salads. Usually Nunzio would be out there by now, his back a little hunched but his arms strong as he wielded his bent old spade and made the ground ready. But this morning the cane chair had claimed him and he was busy squinting at the horizon.

He stared, hardly blinking and not bothering to look at her although she was scratching her broom over the terracotta tiles to attract his attention. His dirty brown hat was pulled down hard on his head and he gripped the chair's arms as though he was worried she might try to tug him out of it.

She stopped sweeping. '*Buongiorno*, Nunzio,' she said loudly – he was becoming a little deaf.

He turned to look at her at last, his eyes cold and his face expressionless. '*Buongiorno* is dead, Babetta,' he said, his voice low. '*Buongiorno* is dead.' And then he turned back towards the horizon and it was as though he hadn't spoken.

They were the strangest words he'd said in their many

long years of marriage, mused Babetta as she found the spade and began turning the earth for the onion bed. Now and then she glanced up and saw he was still there, staring into space wordlessly, unconcerned that she was doing all the heavy work.

At lunchtime Nunzio came inside and took his usual place at the kitchen table, waiting for her to bring his food. He soaked his bread in the steaming thick soup of beans and pasta until it was soft enough for him to chew and spooned up the food quickly and noisily. With the last mouthful swallowed, he pushed the empty bowl away and left it there for her to clear while he returned to his post in the cane chair.

By nightfall he had come inside but still he hadn't spoken. Babetta wrapped a woollen shawl around her head and went out to fetch more wood for the fire. It was a windless night, the moon the tiniest sliver. As she picked up her basket of logs, Babetta looked up towards the mountain where the tall white statue of Christ was illuminated as always.

She and Nunzio had lived here for many years, ever since old Umberto Santoro – the previous caretaker – had died, and every night it gave her a feeling of peace knowing Christ was hovering above them in the blackness.

This was a lonely spot. They had no neighbours to talk to and no car to take them up the hill into town. When she was a girl Babetta had lived not far from here and once a week she and her sisters had walked into Triento to sell the baskets her father made. But now the ribbon of road that wound round the coast was so busy with fast cars she wouldn't have dared to walk it even if she'd thought her legs could carry her that far. So she stayed here with only Nunzio and the distant statue of Christ the Redeemer for company.

There were some visitors, of course. On Tuesdays the vegetable man came in his open-sided flatbed truck and

Babetta would sell him the surplus of whatever crop she had harvested from her garden. On Wednesdays it was the butcher in his refrigerated van and, if they needed more money, Babetta would sell him a chicken or a side of prosciutto that had been hanging to age in their cellar since she'd last killed a pig. Every other Thursday the fishmonger would call to offer her some baby squid or a bag of clams. She never bought much, just enough to mix with a little pasta and serve for dinner that night.

Living like this meant Babetta rarely had to touch the money she and Nunzio were paid for tending the gardens of the empty house next door. Villa Rosa was a lonely place, hidden behind high walls. When they'd first come here the family that owned it had travelled south every summer to swim in the sea and sail their boats, and Babetta remembered how it had come alive. But it had been many years now since anyone had bothered to come and the house looked neglected; paint peeled from its pink walls and, Babetta suspected, its roof was beginning to leak.

Still, the house wasn't her responsibility. She and Nunzio were paid only to care for the terraced gardens that stepped down to the sea, covered with lemon trees and pomegranates and, threaded between them, the crops of artichokes and fava beans they'd planted in the cinnamon-coloured earth once they'd realised the place had been abandoned.

Babetta was surprised the money kept appearing in their bank account every month. Why would anyone care if the gardens of Villa Rosa became wild and overgrown? For years her fund had been accumulating until now there was a respectable amount. Whenever her daughter Sofia came down from Salerno, Babetta always insisted they went to the bank to make certain it was all still there as it should be.

Her daughter couldn't understand why she refused to spend it. 'Buy yourself some new clothes, Mamma, or some

bright curtains to cheer up the house. Treat yourself to something.'

Babetta always shook her head stubbornly. She already had everything she needed. And it was comforting to know the money was there, growing steadily month by month.

Chilled by the wind that was whipping up from the sea, Babetta hauled the wood inside and found Nunzio sitting in his armchair, staring into the flames of the fire. She wondered what was wrong with him now. For as long as they'd been married he'd been buffeted by bad moods. Her sisters had always told her she should never have married a man from Calabria – their blood was heated by too much chilli and there was a skein of blackness twisting through them. 'You should have chosen a local boy,' they would say whenever she complained about Nunzio's temper.

Even as they stood in front of the priest, she'd wondered if she was making the right choice. He was ten years older than her and not the husband she'd imagined taking. But by then it was too late. She'd chosen the direction her life would travel in. She had to follow it.

As the decades passed she and Nunzio had grown used to one another. When he flew into one of his rages, she would lock herself in the cellar until he came to the door crying and promising he'd calmed down. Sometimes his bleakest moods could stretch from weeks to months and Babetta knew all she could do was live in his silence until something inside him changed and he came back to her.

But this new mood of Nunzio's seemed very different. She had never known him shirk a day's work before. No matter how forlorn or angry, he would always manage to pick up his spade and go out into the garden. His jobs were the routine ones: trimming back the grape vines in winter or breaking up the ground before she planted out seedlings in spring. He worked hard until the day grew too hot or the light faded.

Never before had she known him to sit in a chair and stare at nothing from morning till night. Nor had she seen that look on his face, blank and still as though he was slowly shutting down.

Babetta began to worry that her husband might be losing his mind.