Sleeper

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You expect the momentous events in life to provide some kind of warning. You expect to have some presage of what's about to happen, to be prepared for it when it hits you. But I wasn't prepared. None of us was. Looking back, I was glad that it happened so unexpectedly. Some things hit so hard that you cannot prepare yourself for them. You just have to let them come and hope you survive the blow.

It was a Wednesday evening in June. An ordinary, unexceptional Wednesday evening. We were gathering together – as we have done for close on fifteen years now – for our regular monthly session of string quartets. Rainaldi was the first to arrive. I heard the throaty clatter of his ancient Fiat as it pulled into the drive, then his footsteps as he came around the side of the house. I was on the terrace enjoying the warmth of the waning sun. The garden was streaked with lengthening shadows, the leaves of the olive trees turning silver in the dying light.

'*Ciao*, Gianni,' Rainaldi said. He deposited his

violin case on the table and slumped down into a chair beside me, stretching out his thick legs and resting his hands comfortably on his paunch. Even out here in the open air I could smell the distinctive aroma he always brought with him: a mixture of pipe tobacco and pine resin and varnish. I poured him a glass of red wine and he took a long sip.

'Mmm, that's good.'

'Did you come straight from your workshop?' I said. I could see flecks of sawdust on the collar of his shirt, even a few grains in the grizzled hairs of his beard.

Rainaldi shook his head. 'I had a pupil. Re-scheduled from Tuesday. Nice kid, pleasure to teach. Keen, listens well, seems to want to improve – God, if only all my pupils were like that. He could be very good, if he did some more practice.'

'Couldn't we all,' I said dryly.

'He has potential. If I keep at him, in a few years' time he might be bad enough to get a job at La Scala.'

Rainaldi gave a low chuckle – always the first to appreciate his own jokes – and drank some more of his wine. Thirty years ago he'd been a rank-and-file violinist in the orchestra at La Scala, but he'd quit because he couldn't bear the drudgery of life in the opera pit, Berlioz's 'black hollow filled with wretches blowing and scraping'. He was a violin-maker like me now, but supplemented his income with a bit of teaching on the side. Being a

luthier can be a lonely business and I think he enjoyed the social contact of teaching, the challenge, the rapport with his pupils.

'Where are the others?' he said.

'Antonio rang to say he'd be a little late. Father Arrighi should be on his way. That's probably him now.' I inclined my head, listening to the sound of another car pulling in outside at the front of the house.

I filled a third glass with wine and waited for the priest to come round on to the terrace. Father Ignazio Arrighi was small and slender. His features were delicate, his skin soft and pink and glossy as if it had been swathed in a moist towel for many years. His age was a closely guarded secret, but whatever it was he didn't look it. He was one of those men who never would. At a glance you would think him frail and sickly, like a nineteenth-century consumptive. Until you saw his hands. Father Arrighi had big, strong, square-fingered hands that could shoe a horse or strangle a man. Viola player's hands.

He put down his instrument case and glanced around, his eyes alighting on the glass of wine.

'Gianni, you are a life saver,' he said gratefully, removing the glass from my hand and gulping down a good half of it.

'Communion wine not enough for you, Father?' Rainaldi said provocatively.

'Now, now, Tomaso,' the priest replied good-humouredly. 'I'm not going to rise.' He settled

himself down in a chair and placed his glass within easy reach on the table. He'd come directly from church where every Wednesday evening for the past twenty years he'd been celebrating mass with a devout but dwindling group of elderly women. He'd changed out of his cassock and taken off his dog collar because it chafed his neck when he held his viola, but somehow he still looked like a priest.

'Your garden is looking very fine, Gianni,' he said.

'You think so?' I said. 'I've neglected it a little this year. The flowers are thriving, but I fear my fruit crop is going to be down on last year.'

Rainaldi gave me a worried look. 'Not your plums, I hope. I was depending on you for a good supply. You know the shop ones aren't a patch on yours.'

Rainaldi is the main beneficiary of my plum harvest which he uses to produce a potent – and illegal – home-made brandy with the strength and colour of paint stripper, but, alas, none of the taste.

'I'm afraid so,' I said.

'That's a disaster,' Rainaldi said.

'We must endeavour to contain our disappointment,' said Father Arrighi, who had tried the brandy, though only once.

It was almost dark now. The blossoms on the trees, the flowers in the borders had lost all colour. They were just shapes, textures in the night. I went in through the French windows and switched on

the lamps in my back room. Light flooded out on to the terrace, grazing the clusters of lavender along the edge of the lawn, touching the sage and rosemary and thyme in my herb garden with an ethereal lustre.

Father Arrighi and Rainaldi followed me inside. Rainaldi opened his violin case, took out his bow and began rosining it. He always puts too much on, giving his tone an unnecessary harshness, but he says he likes to feel the bow hair biting into the strings. By the end of the evening the belly of his violin is so covered in rosin dust it looks as if it's been dipped in talcum powder. He gave the bow a couple of swishes through the air and put it down in the lid of his case. Then he lifted out his violin and slung it across his chest like a ukulele, plucking idly at the strings.

'What're we going to play?' he said.

'How about some Haydn?' said Father Arrighi. 'Break us in gently.'

Rainaldi pulled a face. 'Not Haydn. I don't feel like Haydn.'

I lifted down a pile of music from the top of the piano and leafed through it.

'What about Brahms? We haven't played Brahms for ages.'

'No Brahms,' said Rainaldi. 'I'm not in the mood for all that rectitude, that gloomy melancholy.'

I felt obliged to speak up in defence of poor Johannes. I'm rather fond of the old boy. He was German, of course, which is something of a

disadvantage in Italian eyes. But he's a dead German which makes it all right.

'It's not at all melancholy,' I said.

'Yes, it is,' Rainaldi insisted. 'It's dark and depressing and dull. No Brahms. That stolid, repressed, boring . . .' he searched for another insult '. . . cat harpooner.'

Father Arrighi turned his head. 'That *what*?'

'Take no notice,' I said.

'Cat harpooner,' Rainaldi repeated. 'Everyone knows that.'

'Rubbish,' I said. 'That's utter rubbish. There's not a shred of evidence to support it.'

This malicious calumny – that Brahms enlivened his mornings of composition by harpooning stray cats from the window of his study – was put about by supporters of Richard Wagner. As any gardener knows – and I am experienced in this matter – it is almost impossible to hit a cat with a stone from ten paces, never mind a harpoon from a second-floor apartment. Besides, where in Vienna would Brahms have got a harpoon?

'Beethoven,' Rainaldi declared. 'One of the Razumovskys. What do you think, Antonio?'

Rainaldi turned to Guastafeste who had just stepped in through the French windows, his cello case in his hand.

'What was that?' Guastafeste said.

He put his cello case down in the corner of the room and looked at the three of us in turn. He was

still wearing his work clothes – the worn grey jacket and cheap tie that all the detectives at the *Questura* seemed to favour, as if they were anxious to distinguish themselves as far as possible from the liveried finery of their uniformed colleagues. He looked hot and tired. I handed him a glass of wine. He nodded his thanks, then pulled off his jacket and tie and tossed them casually over the back of a chair.

'We were discussing what to play,' I said.

'I don't care,' Guastafeste replied. He flopped down on to the settee and sipped his wine, in no hurry to start playing.

'Hard day?' I said.

'The usual.'

Guastafeste is in his early forties, twenty years younger than the rest of us. Rainaldi, Father Arrighi and I are old enough to have either realised our ambitions in life, or given up on them, but Guastafeste is in the prime of his career – overworked, underpaid, unappreciated. Sometimes I feared for his health.

'Have you eaten?' I said.

'I didn't have time.'

'I'll get you something.'

'Gianni, that's not necessary.'

'It's no trouble.'

I went into the kitchen and returned with some bread, sliced salami and a bowl of black olives.

'You didn't have to, you know,' Guastafeste said with a weary smile. 'But thank you.' He slid a

couple of pieces of salami between two slices of bread and bit into the sandwich.

'Did we decide what we were playing?' Father Arrighi said, tuning up his viola.

'Yes,' Rainaldi replied. 'Beethoven.'

So Beethoven it was, one of the glorious lyrical middle quartets that seem to creep inside you and massage your soul. Midway through – as occasionally happens – the whole thing went to pieces. Rainaldi put down his bow and the rest of us stuttered to a halt.

'That wasn't right,' Rainaldi said. 'Someone was out.'

His eyes roved accusingly over us, coming to rest on me. We have a culture of blame in our quartet that would make an interesting psychological study. Rainaldi is a former professional, so of course he is never wrong; Father Arrighi – being a priest – believes in the doctrine of his own infallibility; and Guastafeste is a master at keeping his head down, so I usually end up carrying the can for any mistakes.

'You were a bar out, Gianni,' Rainaldi said.

'Was I?'

'And just after letter F you were all so loud I couldn't hear myself playing.'

'If only we were so lucky,' I said.

Rainaldi snorted and tried to scowl at me, but his heart wasn't in it. 'Let's go back.' He tapped the tip of his bow over his part, counting the bars. 'Twelve before F. And try not to speed up this time.'

I caught Guastafeste's eye and he winked at me. We both knew which of us had been a bar out, but Guastafeste would never come clean and admit it. He'd been a police officer long enough to know that honesty – in music or in life – is most definitely not the best policy.

The Beethoven under our belts, I went into the kitchen to refill the carafe with wine and bring out a plate of biscuits. When I returned, Rainaldi was in the middle of a scurrilous joke about viola players. It seemed somewhat tactless, but he made due allowance for the fact that Father Arrighi played the viola by telling the joke very slowly.

'More wine?' I said.

Rainaldi reached for his glass, but stopped suddenly. 'I almost forgot,' he said. 'What about something stronger?'

He went across to his violin case and bent down, opening a plastic carrier bag he'd brought with him and lifting out a bottle of malt whisky.

'I brought this back from England.'

'You've been to England?' I said. 'When?'

'Last week.'

'You never said.'

'It was an impulse decision.'

'A holiday?' Father Arrighi asked.

'Not exactly,' Rainaldi said vaguely. 'More a sort of quest.'

'A quest?' I said. 'What do you mean?'

'Fetch some glasses, Gianni.'

'What sort of quest?' I said when I'd dug out some glasses from a cupboard and Rainaldi had filled them with whisky.

'I can't say,' Rainaldi replied, enjoying the air of mystery he was creating around himself.

'Why not?' Guastafeste asked.

Rainaldi waved a hand in the air. 'It's too soon. I'll tell you another time.' He raised his glass to his lips and sampled the whisky. 'Not bad. Not bad at all. Now, what are we going to play next? I fancy Smetana. What do you think, Gianni?'

'Well, I'm not sure. What about Dvořák?'

Rainaldi turned to Father Arrighi. 'Father?'

'Dvořák for me too.'

'Antonio?'

Guastafeste shrugged. 'Dvořák's fine with me.'

'Okay,' said Rainaldi. 'Smetana it is then.'

Guastafeste stayed on after Rainaldi and Father Arrighi had left. He packed away his cello while I folded up the music stands and sorted through the quartet parts. My own violin I left out on top of the piano, the slackened bow next to it, ready for my practice in the morning. When I'd finished, with the music neatly stacked on the table, I went to the French windows and stepped out on to the terrace. It was cool outside, but not unpleasantly so. The warmth of the day lingers for a long time in summer. I could smell the scent of lavender and jasmine from the garden.

Guastafeste came out behind me and we sat in

the chairs at the garden table, drinking more of the bottle of whisky Rainaldi had left behind, and talking intermittently. I'd known Guastafeste since he was a child. We were comfortable with each other, sitting there in the semi-darkness, watching the insects dancing in the light from the French windows.

'I'd better be going,' Guastafeste said eventually, but he made no move to get up.

A heavy lethargy had settled over us, pinning us to our chairs so that we couldn't find the energy even to stand up. Then the piercing ring of the telephone broke through our torpor. I thought about ignoring it, but the bell kept going insistently, demanding to be answered. I dragged myself to my feet and went into the house. It was Clara, Rainaldi's wife.

'Is Tomaso still there?' she said.

'No, he left about . . .' I checked my watch and was astonished to see how late it had got '. . . about an hour ago.'

'He hasn't come home. I'm worried, Gianni.'

'Maybe he stopped off at his workshop,' I said.

'I've rung there. There was no answer. What if he's had an accident, crashed the car?'

'Calm yourself, Clara,' I said reassuringly, though my stomach was feeling suddenly unsettled. Rainaldi *had* had rather a lot to drink. 'Antonio's still here. I'll get him to check and we'll call you back. Okay?'

Guastafeste was at my shoulder. He understood

immediately what had happened. He called the control room at the *Questura*.

'No reports of any accidents,' he said, replacing the receiver.

I rang Clara back and told her.

'Then where is he?' she said. 'He's never been this late.'

'Did he say he was going anywhere on his way home?'

'Where would he go? He always comes straight home. Something's happened to him, I know it.'

'Now, Clara . . .'

'He could be in a ditch somewhere.' Her voice was rising, becoming more agitated. 'Who would notice him? It's just a country road out where you live, Gianni. He could be seriously injured, bleeding to death. Oh God, where *is* he?'

'Clara, stop imagining the worst.'

'What else am I to imagine? He hasn't come home. He always calls if he's going to be late.'

'Listen,' I said. 'We'll go and look for him, if it will put your mind at rest, all right?'

'Would you, Gianni? That's so kind.'

'He might have simply broken down, or got a flat tyre. Stop worrying, Clara. I'll call you later.'

I put down the phone. Guastafeste was slipping on his jacket, folding his tie and stowing it away in a pocket.

'I'll do it, it's on my way home anyway. You don't need to come with me,' he said.

'No, I'll feel better if I do. Two pairs of eyes are better than one. I'd only worry if I stayed here.'

'You think something's really happened?'

'I don't know.'

'Maybe he went to a bar.' Guastafeste paused. 'You don't think he's got another woman, do you?'

'Tomaso? Good God, no. I can't see it, can you? Besides, even if he did, he wouldn't be stupid enough to call in on her when his wife was expecting him home.'

We drove into Cremona, along the quiet, isolated lanes between my house and the city – Guastafeste at the wheel while I scanned the ditches, the fields for any sign of Rainaldi's car. We reached the outskirts of the city, a scattering of houses along the edges of the road, then the urban sprawl closed in around us oppressively, shutting out the night sky. The buildings were mostly in darkness, their occupants long gone to bed. Occasionally a car came towards us, its headlights and engine noise a jarring intrusion in the deserted streets. There was no one about. No pedestrians, no drunks stumbling home, no stranded motorists waiting for a lift. Guastafeste pulled into the kerb just before a crossroads.

'Where now?' he said.

'Let's try his workshop, just in case.'

Rainaldi's workshop was in a scruffy side-street off the Corso Garibaldi, not one of the more fashionable areas for violin-making in the city, but then

Rainaldi was not a fashionable luthier. The road outside was crammed with parked vehicles so we left our car fifty metres further on and walked back along the pavement. The workshop was on the ground floor of a three-storey building. It was set back from the street, accessed through an archway which led into a small paved courtyard. There were no lights on in either the courtyard or Rainaldi's workshop, just an eerie yellowish sheen over the stonework from the lamps out on the street.

'He doesn't appear to be here,' Guastafeste said.

'Then where on earth is he?'

'Probably home by now. We'll call Clara again and find they're tucked up in bed together.'

'You got your mobile?' I said. 'Antonio?'

Guastafeste was peering in through the window of the workshop, his hands cupped around his eyes to cut out the reflections from the glass. He'd gone very still.

'Antonio?' I said again. 'Your phone.'

He didn't appear to hear me. He moved away from the window and headed for the archway.

'I'll be right back.'

When he returned, moments later, he was carrying the torch he kept in his car. He shone the beam through the workshop window. Something about his manner alarmed me.

'What is it?' I said. I stepped towards the window, but Guastafeste shifted his position slightly to block me. He clicked off his torch.

'Antonio, what's the matter?' I said.

Guastafeste didn't reply. He went to the workshop door. He took out his handkerchief, wrapped it carefully around the door handle, then depressed the lever. The door was locked. Guastafeste took a pace backwards, lifted his leg and smashed the sole of his shoe into the door. The wood around the lock splintered and the door flew open with a bang. Guastafeste stepped over the threshold. I made a move to follow him but he motioned me back.

'You'd better stay outside, Gianni.'

I stared at him, bewildered. 'Why? What's happened?'

Guastafeste flicked on the light switch just inside the door. I caught a glimpse of a figure slumped over a workbench in the middle of the room before Guastafeste closed the door behind him, shutting out my view. I could have gone to the window and looked in, but I didn't want to see. I didn't want to know. There was a sickness in my stomach, a ghostly touch of premonition on my neck that made me shiver.

Guastafeste came back out into the courtyard, his mobile phone in his hand.

'Go and wait in the car, Gianni.' He punched a number into the phone.

'Tomaso . . .' I said.

Guastafeste touched my arm gently. 'Go and wait in the car.'