

## Running

John and Angelica enjoyed glimpses of other people's lifestyles as they walked slowly back from Wimbledon Common. Lights were coming on in the front rooms of the Edwardian houses, but the residents were reluctant to draw their curtains on such a fine summer's evening.

"I like that," John said, stopping to stare into a bay window. A bare, white room was dominated by a large, square oil painting. "Abstract Expressionist," he said, their prize possession, "I'll bet."

"Yuk," Angelica said, "*non mi piace.*"

They passed a few more houses before John stopped again. "What about this one then? More to your Italian taste?" It was a room full of knick-knacks and ornaments, warmly lit by table lamps. One wall was covered in pictures of all shapes and sizes. "That's what the Americans call a 'studio wall'. You can probably buy it by the yard."

"Is better than the room with the big picture. Was so cold."

"But this one is so busy. If I was in there I would feel like knocking something over, or throwing something."

"Nonsense, John - you never would," Angelica said. "Me, I would. And I did, one time. Came back from school and threw a book. Broke some china animals."

"Didn't your Mum kill you?"

"I wanted her to. But she just hug me."

"What kind of animals were they?"

Angelica aimed a swipe at him. "You want to know about the animals. You don't want to know why I did it, do you John? Why I smash those things? No, you want everything be just nice. Like my mother!" John smiled. They walked on, not looking through any more windows. The road began to slope towards the railway and here the houses were more modest, the front gardens smaller. Angelica ran her hand along trimmed privet hedges.

"Was a rabbit and a fish, if you must know. Rabbit got his ears broken and the fish lost his tail." She skipped on ahead. "Come on, John, I beat you to the house."

Rachel was away this weekend, but she had offered them the freedom of her house. A month ago she had let the first floor to John and had already become something of a mother figure to him.

Angelica reached the door first and peered through the leaded panes that framed it. John let her in and watched as she did a little dance across the hall, raising a musical rattle from the mosaic tiles that were loose under the carpet.

Three weeks ago, in a crowded coffee bar in Victoria, John had sat next to this young Italian with the dark hair and broad, open face. It was her look of misery that attracted his attention. Speaking quietly, almost to himself, he had drawn her into conversation. He learned that her boyfriend, Guy, was the cause of her unhappy state.

This evening John would prepare a meal of soup and pate. Then Angelica would retire to Rachel's spare room and he would go to his flat upstairs. That was his plan. He could never be sure of Angelica's feelings and he wasn't going to rush things. She could be so warm and close but then, for no reason that he could see, she would put distance between them.

A week ago John had brought her to meet his landlady. The three of them walked on the Common and when evening came Rachel persuaded Angelica to stay the night in her spare room on the ground floor. Saturday evening on the tube was a nightmare, she said.

On Sunday morning John, up and dressed early, came quietly down the stairs. Rachel's bedroom was open and he glanced through the door on his way to the kitchen. What he saw made him stop and stare. His eye was caught first by a splash of dark hair on a white pillow and then by the tanned back and shoulders that belonged to it. She lay face down, uncovered. It could only be Angelica.

At that moment Rachel came from the bathroom in her dressing-gown and saw what was engaging John's attention. She took him by the arm and led him into the kitchen. "A pretty picture," she remarked. "I don't blame you for enjoying it."

"I wasn't...I was passing the door ...," John protested. "What's going on?"

"Poor man. Don't worry – nothing's going on. I'll tell you what happened." They sat at the table.

"Last night Angelica had been to the bathroom and gone back to her room. I was just going to sleep. Then I heard her door open. Hello, I thought - is she sneaking up to John? Maybe they've arranged to get together. Then the next thing I hear is someone fiddling with the front door, so I get up and find Angelica there, looking confused. She didn't seem to know where she was planning to go, so I gave her a hug and she just clung. Someone had to look after her, that was obvious. And it was either the would-be lover upstairs – you, or a mother substitute - me. She was like a child, so I took her to my room. She stripped off and got into bed. Held on to me till she dropped off. I was relieved to see her still there in the morning, I can tell you."

"I'm sorry, Rachel. You've been brilliant. God, when I think what might have happened. Poor girl."

"You know, when you first told me about her I thought you were probably bewitched by a cute smile or something like that, but you really picked one there. It's funny though, if you walked down the street with her the heads wouldn't turn – she has no sense of her own beauty."

They finished their supper and sat on at Rachel's kitchen table. John reminded Angelica about the previous Saturday. "Where were you planning to go, that night?"

She looked at him. "Of course you always know where you are going, don't you John."

"I usually do."

"Well, I don't know where I was going. I suppose I just couldn't take it."

"What do you mean?"

"You and Rachel. Being so nice to me." She looked down and was silent for a while, then she said, "OK, I know. That's what I do, I run."

"You didn't run from Guy. Not for a long time, anyway."

"I try lots of times, but always I go back. You don't know how bad he treat me."

"But now you've managed it. You're free."

"Now I found you, poor man. And I'm going to make you another monster. You know that don't you?"

John shook his head. "No you won't." He reached over and took her hands in his. "Listen, Angelica, I don't like to mention it again, but you nearly took off into the night last week. I'm worried."

“I’m a nightmare, aren’t I?” She looked down at the table and seemed to ponder the dilemma. Then she said in a matter of fact way, “You could stay with me – then you won’t worry.”

John’s heart jumped. He wasn’t sure exactly what kind of invitation this was, but that didn’t matter. He went upstairs, changed into pyjamas and hurried down to her room. She was in the bathroom, so he got into the bed. She came quickly into the room wearing Rachel’s white towelling robe and closed the door behind her. Without pausing she slipped in beside him. She turned her back and snuggled backwards against him. When he reached out an arm she took it and wrapped it around her, as if to guard against any urge she might have to escape. John murmured, “I think you’re perfect.” He felt her body stiffen.

“Don’t say that. It’s not true!”

What a fool I am, John thought, to contradict her poor view of herself. But then his playful nature came to the rescue.

“I tell you what – how would it be if you let me pay you one compliment per day? I’ll even tell you when it’s coming, so you’ll be ready.”

She turned over to face him. “OK, I’m ready, or was that it for today?”

“No, that one doesn’t count.”

“Because I’m not perfect after all.”

She laughed at his embarrassment. Then she raised her head and said: “Do you think I have an aristocratic face?”

“No” he answered, without hesitation.

She dropped her head onto his chest in mock despair.

“*Lo sapevo - faccia da contadina*”

He understood – ‘face of a peasant’. “No,” he replied, “You have the face of a Madonna. There’s a Spanish one in the National Gallery.....”

“A fucking Madonna – no!”

She saw his look of shock and put a hand over her mouth.

“I’m sorry. Guy taught me to swear; he liked me to, when we were alone.”

John didn’t want Guy to intrude, but he was relieved. That wasn’t Angelica speaking. He brushed a strand of her hair away from his face and she said, “Now you don’t like my hair!” She let out a peal of laughter when he thought she was being serious.

“Listen – I’m definitely not the Madonna. I’m me and I’m bad.” She smiled and slid on top of him. “Maybe I can please you, though.”

John was awakened by a shaft of sunlight across the bed. Angelica had opened a narrow gap in the curtains. Now she came from the bathroom, wrapped again in Rachel’s gown, her hair tumbling over the collar. She knelt on the bed beside him. He reached up and she silently permitted him to open her robe and slip it off her shoulders.

Angelica reached a hand and ruffled his hair. “Well, my lover, where’s my compliment today?”

John had one ready: “If I was a sculptor in ancient Greece,” he began, “I would be grabbing my chisel and making for the nearest block of stone. The chips would fly until I’d created an image to represent female beauty for all eternity.”

“Oh my God. I can’t take it! You make me run for the door again! That one will do for a week, at least.

John went to the kitchen and made two mugs of coffee, which he brought to the bedroom with an Italian panettone he had bought for her. They sat on the bed, breaking off pieces with their fingers and devouring them. The bed became an island, where past and future were excluded. They seemed to know that once they cast off and allowed time to start running again, they would never recapture what they now possessed. The day was hot and clothes were unnecessary. They picnicked all day, on Rachel's spare bed.