

## The Good and the Bad Weather

Angelica found a seat on the shady side of the train and turned towards the window, hoping to discourage any attempt to engage her in conversation. She knew how gregarious her fellow-Italians could be, especially in the summer holiday season. The journey south from Bologna would take more than two hours and she wasn't in the mood to chat. She gazed at fields of peaches, grapes and olives, set out in perfect lines, but her thoughts were of London, and of Guy. What makes you stay with him, she asked herself, not for the first time.

She remembered how demeaning the weekend had been. They had spent it on Guy's boat, cruising between Chichester and Falmouth, never far from the shore. Guy liked to spend his bonus on something ostentatious and he had hired a sleek white cabin cruiser for the summer. With them this weekend were Guy's boss Richard and his lean, blonde partner Helen.

Guy was counting on promotion to the rank of Partner in their multi-national firm by the end of the year and Richard held the key to that magic door. Guy was doing everything he could to please him. Angelica's contribution was to keep a smile on her face and to tolerate the lewd gaze of his boss while she cooked, cleaned and served drinks, wearing the revealing bikinis that Guy insisted on choosing for her.

Helen, bored with the men's conversation, covered herself in oil and sunbathed. "You don't burn, do you?" she said once, implying that Angelica belonged to a less sensitive race. It was true, though. With her colouring – thick dark hair, brown eyes, olive skin – Angelica never had to protect herself from the sun.

Back at the flat in South Kensington on Sunday evening she threw the bikinis, piece by piece, into the washing machine, reliving the events of the weekend. The shameful thing was that, in spite of everything, a sign of affection from Guy would have made up for it all. Instead, when she was undressing for bed, he told her: "Your tummy needs toning up, Angelica. I'm going to book you in for some sessions at the gym."

On Monday morning she had no thoughts, only the feelings of an unhappy child. Guy went off early to work as usual. Angelica pretended to be asleep and didn't respond to his 'see you tonight' as he left. Then she rose to run a hot, deep bath.

In the expensively-fitted bathroom that Guy was so proud of she immersed herself in the water. She raised her knees and rested her forehead on them. Tears filled her eyes and mingled with the steam that condensed and glistened on her cheeks.

She rose from the bath, picked up her towel and flicked it at the mirrored wall to clear a patch free of steam. She looked without expression at her offending belly and walked to the bedroom. When she was dressed she sat at the computer and booked a flight home to Italy for the following day. Then she phoned her employers and was granted a week's unpaid leave.

When it reached the Adriatic coast, north of Rimini, the railway ran parallel to the beaches with their rows of multi-coloured umbrellas. Angelica listened to the chatter of the other passengers and in time allowed herself to be drawn in. One woman spoke about her elderly mother, whose life had been confined to the home until, against the wishes of her husband, she enrolled in the *'Universita della Terza Eta'*, the University of the Third Age.

"And what is she studying?" Angelica asked.

"Astronomy," was the answer.

Angelica smiled. "Good for her. I'm going to persuade my Mum to take a course. She's got too much time to think nowadays. And too much to forget."

By the time she was met at Porto Recanati by her brother Carlo, London seemed a world away. She ran along the platform and hugged him fiercely, reluctant to let go. For a long moment they became again two frightened kids, cowering together for safety.

The drive home was a steady climb, much of it in low gear round hairpin bends, until they passed through an arch in the medieval wall that surrounded Monte Rinaldo. Neatly kept houses clung to each other along curving alleys through which Carlo steered carefully. Their mother's house - more than two hundred years in her family - was near the little square that was the hub of village life. Posters on the walls announced the annual two-day festival, the *Sagra*, on the coming weekend.

"I expect Mamma has me volunteered to help," Angelica said.

"I'm sure she has. All your old mates will be here."

Her mother was at the door as they drew up. After embracing Angelica she gave her a long scrutiny at arm's length. She rearranged her daughter's hair and the collar of her shirt and felt the flesh on her shoulders and arms; she studied her eyes and her skin and seemed reassured.

"Don't worry, Mamma, I'm fine. Nothing to worry about."

Carlo drove off to the car park, which was outside the walls, and the two women turned into the house. The front door opened onto a steep and narrow staircase; on the left was the door to the living room. Angelica dropped into a chair, leaving her grip bag on the floor beside her. For a minute neither spoke. Angelica looked round the room, at the familiar figurines, knick-knacks and framed photos that covered every surface. She looked up to the ceiling, as if listening. All was quiet.

"He's not coming back?"

Her mother shook her head, looking down at her. Then Angelica got up and they reached for each other. They were both wiping away tears when they separated.

Her father, the man whose anger and bitterness had dominated every day of her young life, had left a month ago to join his brother in a business venture in the north. In time she would rejoice, but today there was no sense of that.

"He was such a different man when I first knew him," her mother said. "No one ever had so many dreams as your father - all the things he would achieve." She paused, and then said, "You and Guy can live together in London, not married. You could even have a child. But here, in those days anyway, if the girl got pregnant you got married. You stayed and you took responsibility; you forgot about your dreams. For your father it was the end of his life; he had been robbed."

"I know." Angelica didn't need reminding; she had always been the living symbol of what he had lost. She recalled his face, the permanent frown, as though something had just happened to displease him.

Angelica grew up convinced that she was ugly; she heard little else from her father. But then, when she was about fourteen, she began to see herself reflected in the eyes of her contemporaries. It was a confusing experience. She attracted attention, more than other girls whom she considered so much prettier. She wore a bikini to the beach because her friends did, but was embarrassed by the development of her body. Why could she not be thin like her friend Maria?

In her teens, life outside began to make up for the misery at home. She and Maria would meet in the late afternoon for the *passaggiata* in the square. Boys were attracted to Angelica, the more so because she lacked any sense of her own beauty, but it was Maria who knew how to entertain and make them laugh.

Maria despaired of her friend, who could easily have found a good-looking, reliable boyfriend. But instead she fell for Federico, son of the local Men's Outfitters,

who played cruelly with her feelings for four years. He would disappear for a week or two without warning and then return, full of affection, only to abandon her again.

Eventually Maria had seen enough; she couldn't bear to see Angelica suffer and she dragged her off to London. There they found work, Maria with a company importing Italian furniture, Angelica with the consultancy firm in which Guy was a rising star.

On Wednesday morning, after sleeping for more than nine hours, Angelica set about helping her mother in the kitchen and around the house. She took down all the lace curtains, washed and ironed them and put them back. On Thursday evening she was mopping the slate treads of the staircase when Carlo announced: "Tomorrow I'm going to drop you at the beach on my way to work. No argument - you're here on holiday."

Angelica suspected that this was a conspiracy between the two of them, her mother fearing the return of an old pattern of obsessive drudgery that had been Angelica's way of coping with unhappiness. She accepted the lift and spent Friday sunbathing and swimming. She lay on her sun bed and let her mind go back to Monday, the day she decided to flee her life in London.

After booking the flight she had taken a cab to Victoria Street. Just round the corner from the Army and Navy Store was the coffee bar where she met Maria every day after work. A need for warmth drew her there that morning, to a place where she was known and liked. She collected a cappuccino and a muffin and found a place on the padded bench that ran along the centre of the café, facing a row of small tables. She took out an Italian news magazine that she had picked up on her way out and flicked over the pages, unable to concentrate. A young man took the table next to her. After a while she heard him sing, almost inaudibly: '*Un vento a trenta gradi sotto zero...*'

"Battiato." Without thinking she spoke the name of the songwriter.

"I went to a concert of his last summer, in Florence," the man said. "It was wonderful."

He was a Scotsman. Their side-by-side position on the bench enabled him to talk without confronting her and he said that he had just walked out of his job. He felt elated and couldn't bear to see her looking so gloomy. He had a friendly face and surely, Angelica told herself, no one who loved the music of Franco Battiato could be bad; she had all the albums. The young man was writing a book, he said, a historical novel set in nineteenth-century Italy.

He suggested that they walk and she agreed. They cut through Queen Anne's Gate to St James' Park and she began to tell him about herself. She spoke of Maria, how they met every day in that café. She told him about Guy and the boat and the partnership and how he was spending more and more time with his ex-wife. It all came pouring out, while he listened. Then she ended the conversation abruptly, saying, "You've been very kind, listening to me like this. I am not so gloomy any more, but I have to go now." She hurried across The Mall, through a gap in the traffic, and ran up the Duke of York's steps. She didn't look back. At the corner of Pall Mall she hailed a cab.

Her brother would soon be coming to pick her up; it was late afternoon now. The sea was still sunlit, but the shadow of the hills was spreading over the beach, where only a few people remained. Angelica rose and carried her sandals to the edge of the water. As she rinsed the sand off her feet she thought about the young Scotsman. "Why do you do it?" she asked herself. "What's the matter with you? He was a nice man and you ran away like you always do."

The festival was, as every year, based on the consumption of cannelloni and the local stuffed olives, with unlimited quantities of wine. Angelica's task this year was to serve food at the counter and she spent much of the evening greeting old friends.

The village was lit by coloured bulbs, just as it was at Christmas time. Locals and visitors sat together at long, plastic-covered tables in the square and as it grew darker the conversation became more and more animated. Children were drawn to the fountain in the centre, chasing round and round, splashing and shouting. An opening from the square led up to the church, in front of which a group of musicians was playing. People of all ages responded to the rhythm in their own styles of dance, undeterred by the steep slope.

When she was relieved of her duties Angelica walked towards the dancing. She was hailed by a familiar voice and turned to see Federico, her first boy-friend, at the edge of the crowd. He was with three other young people whom she didn't recognise, a man and two women. They continued to dance as he introduced them, moving in a restrained, self-regarding way. She had to admit that he looked good, with his light green eyes and dark hair falling forward from a central parting. But now she was free of his spell.

The space available for dancing was getting crowded and Federico suggested that he drive them to a nearby village for an ice cream. They sat at a table in a deserted square and Angelica was questioned about her life in London. She spoke about Guy but gave the impression that she still shared a flat with Maria. Federico was silent, allowing the others to lead the conversation. After a while he announced that he would take them all home. The two women were dropped off at a block of flats on the outskirts of Porto Recanati and the other boy at a villa on the seafront. Now Federico, with Angelica beside him, drove past the turning that would have taken them inland to their village and sped out of town on the coast road.

“Where are we going?”

Federico didn't reply. Soon he turned off the road and crossed some rough ground towards the sea. He parked facing the water and switched off the motor. Angelica knew the place well – a stretch of beach where a few aged fishermen still pursued their occupation. Scattered along the shore were bits and pieces of old and rusty furniture, nets, winches and derelict boats. This had been their private place. They used to find a couple of old chairs and sit facing the sea. She would listen as he talked about his dreams of riches, far away from here. This evening the beach was deserted. Angelica said, “Federico, I would like to go home now.”

“Listen, Angelica, I don't want to hear about what you get up to in London. This is where you belong. We were always meant to be together, you know that.” He seemed to have prepared this speech.

“Were we together? Were you ever really with me? I loved you, even when you were taking other girls out. You want me to go back to that?”

“You know they never meant anything to me. I let you keep me at arm's length and now I hear you've been shackled up with this man in London. Never mind how I know, the point is no one else does here, except that witch Maria. I'm prepared to forget it and I want you to come back.”

He put his arm round her shoulders and tried to draw her towards him. She stared ahead, making no response; he pulled her more roughly. She felt herself withdrawing into a passive state, as if this was no more than she deserved. Then, from somewhere came the urge to protect herself. She spoke firmly: “Federico, will you please take me home?”

“I'm not ready to go yet.” There was anger in his voice. She reached for the door handle, but found it locked.

“The angelic little Miss has turned into a tart, but I'm not good enough for her.”

His arm was closing round her neck, the other hand wrenching her t-shirt and reaching for her breast. Angelica was familiar with this car; she dived for the door-locking lever, twisting her body and catching Federico in the stomach with an elbow. She got her door open and slid backwards, fighting off his grip. Now she was down on the sandy gravel, her shoes slithering as she tried to get to her feet. Federico was out of the

car, coming round to her side. There was only one chance of escape; she stumbled towards the water and dived in. When she surfaced she swept her hair back, slipped off her trainers and struck out into the darkness, using them as paddles. She was a good swimmer and she knew that Federico had no confidence in the water. She could hear his voice, shouting, "Whore! You're a little whore!"

She was beginning to feel safer. A rowing boat, floating at anchor, loomed up in front of her. She hung on to it while she caught her breath and peered towards the shore. The engine of the car started up and she waited for it to move. Then she was dazzled as headlights shone across the water. Keeping her head down behind the boat, she wondered what to do next. She looked out and saw him standing on the beach, outlined in silhouette by the lights. She shouted: "Addio, Federico."

He got into the car and accelerated away, tyres spinning on the gravel. Angelica tied the laces of her trainers together, looped them around her neck and swam southwards with a steady stroke, heading for the more populated beaches.

"Maria, it's me. Did I wake you?"

"No. You know me - always up and doing. How's it going? What have you been up to?"

"There's plenty to tell, but it'll keep till I see you; this phone's running out. Listen, can I stay with you when I get back?"

"Sure you can. Hey - does this mean you've seen the light? No more bad guys?"

"Could even be."

"Talking of men," Maria said, "what have you been keeping from me?"

"What d'you mean?"

"Well - Friday, I'm in the café after work, like always, and this good-looking guy comes over. I'm in luck. But no, as if I couldn't guess, it's my beautiful sexy friend he's looking for (who doesn't deserve him, I'll tell you.) Seems you met him on Monday. Anyway, the thing is this - I've given him my number. He'll be phoning. Do you want to see him?"

Angelica was silent. Then she replied quietly, "Yes."

"When are you back?"

"Tuesday."

"I'll fix it."

Angelica remembered how her brother Carlo, at the age of nearly sixteen, had retaliated violently against his bullying father and in that instant had become a person who did not submit. She felt as though she had liberated something of that kind in herself, that evening on the beach.

By the time she phoned Guy on her return she was less resolved. She didn't at first break off the relationship as she had intended, but she claimed some time alone to 'sort herself out'. Then she heard Guy's harsh voice: "You don't need to tell me. That bitch Maria's been getting at you."

Nothing could have provoked her anger more surely. She said "Goodbye Guy" in the same tone she had used to dismiss Federico from behind a boat in the Adriatic Sea.

In the morning Angelica gave in her notice at work. They allowed her half an hour to be out of the building - company policy, she was told, nothing personal. She didn't care; Maria was going to fix her up with a job at her firm.

She walked for the last time across the marble foyer and out onto Victoria Street. She stood on the wide pavement, dazzled by the sunlight. So much had happened, and all so suddenly. There came to her mind an expression of her mother's: '*He's the one who makes the good and the bad weather.*'

Now, for Angelica, there was no one to make the good and the bad weather. But nor was there any sense of liberation. She turned in the direction of the coffee bar.