

*Undressing*

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## *One*

The garment is a white satin camisole, one of the simplest items in the shop. As I lift it from the shelf – carefully, supporting the edges in both hands, like an offering – the material feels supple and almost waxy between my fingers, like rose petals. I can imagine how drops of rain wouldn't soak in but would simply collect on the surface, like tiny silver beads. If I crushed it in my fist it would spring back uncreased, blossoming in my palm, like a slow white flower. If I buried my face in the soft, spreading folds it would smell clean and papery.

Neither gesture – the smelling or the crushing – is thinkable now, of course, as I place the camisole on the counter under Francesca's watchful gaze. Those other things are what I do when I'm alone here; drifting from garment to garment as if in a daze, touching them, feeling the different textures of the fabrics – muslin tulle, airy as candyfloss; thick chenille; fresh cool silk...

“So,” Francesca says with a nod.

I fold the camisole once and place a piece of tissue paper inside before folding it again. The tissue is translucent, like ground glass, like soft grey cashmere. It's there to protect the camisole from wrinkling.

Now I slide the square of folded cloth-and-tissue onto a pile of slightly thicker turquoise crepe. Taking half a dozen pieces, I tuck them over, sealing them with an adhesive label bearing the shop's logo, an entwined G and M. The labels, Stefano has told me, are specially made in Milan. They won't tear the paper when they're taken off.

Giving the package a half turn, I repeat the process four more times. When the package is so fat with crepe it can be balanced casually on one hand, like a parcel of *prosciutto* from the butcher, I lay it carefully inside an ivory-white cardboard box. The top of the box settles into place with a soft pneumatic rattle, a sibilant whisper of crepe. I cut two lengths of ribbon and tie the box with a bow, pulling the ends briskly over the blades of the scissors to curl them. Finally, I take a white paper carrier bag from beneath the counter and shake it open with a loud crack. I place the whole assembly in the bag and hand it to Francesca with a polite smile.

"*Prego*," I say formally.

"Very good, Natale," she says. "Perhaps a little too much crepe, but otherwise very good."

She takes the box out of the bag and with a few quick movements undoes my handiwork, pulling the crepe sheets open, smoothing their creases, until she reaches the camisole. She holds it up, inspecting it critically. Then she nods and returns it to the shelf, deftly refolding it as she does so.

I feel absurdly pleased. All I have done is wrap up a white satin camisole to my employer's satisfaction, but I want to jump up and down and shout with delight.

I don't do any such thing, of course. In the shop we preserve at all times an air of decorous, muted inscrutability.

How to wrap was one of the first things I learnt when I started working at Gavuzzo & Morelli. This apparently simple operation was – like so many others – complicated both by Francesca's perfectionism and her demand that it always be carried out in precisely the same way. "The wrapping is as much a part of the gift as the garment," she'd say as she made me practice over and over, rejecting every effort that wasn't exactly as she wanted it. "The way it's presented is the way it'll be received." Maybe, but I think these elaborate, perfect wrappings were also a statement of Francesca's own feelings about what she sold. These items aren't just underwear, she was saying; they're things of beauty in their own right, as gracious as

any ballgown, as considered as any *haute couture*. I think, too, there was something about this careful ritual of dressing and undressing the gift which spoke to her idea of femininity: ceremonious, elegant; a series of quiet erotic revelations, each one smaller and more perfect than the last. For what were her garments themselves but a kind of wrapping for the body, an outer layer which had the power to transform what lay within? What were her crepes and gift boxes but a kind of outerwear for the lingerie she sold, a cover for these delicate coverings of flesh?

Not that such thoughts occurred to me at the time. They came later – much later, when I was able to look back on that summer and reflect on it, to peel away some of the layers surrounding those strange events and see them for what they were, without their various deceptions and disguises.

I was seventeen when Francesca and Stefano arrived in Monforte – arrived quite suddenly, so that it seemed one day they weren't there, and the next they were open for business. They'd taken on Bruno Cavelli's long-closed *enoteca*, a tiny cupboard-sized wine shop with a little apartment above it, so small that no one had bothered to lease it for years.

To be honest, I wasn't terribly interested at first to discover that a lingerie shop had opened in our town. The garments that appeared in the tiny window that autumn weren't the sort of thing that appealed to me; not remotely. Francesca's goods were luxurious, sophisticated, a little over-the-top; intricate assemblies of padding and bows and embroidery. Some were decorated with lace flowers, or embedded with tiny seed pearls. I bought my underwear from department stores in Alba or Turin. They were cream or pale, in plain pastel shades. The garments that Francesca and Stefano sold were like objects from another world, one that had no relevance for me.

*Garments* – I realise that, even after all these years, I'm lapsing into the language Francesca herself habitually used. I don't think I ever heard her say the word *lingerie*, still less *underwear*. Even the words which described various styles – bustier, basque, babydoll and so on; or in the case of bras, half-cup, plunge, underwired, balconette – she used only in a technical way, to distinguish one shape from another. The garment was always *the garment*, or occasionally *the piece*. She'd been trained, Stefano later told me, at a prestigious fashion school in Paris, and that was the way they spoke of such things there.

Why had the two of them come to Monforte? It was a mystery. There were fewer than a dozen shops in our little town, even if you included the florist, butcher and greengrocer who sold their wares from stalls in the tiny piazza. If you wanted a washing machine or a

telephone you asked Phillippo Staura the electrician, and he brought it in his van; if you wanted a car, you went to one of the roadside dealerships towards Alba; for desserts and pastries you'd go to the famous pastry shop in Barolo. It seemed inconceivable that a town that didn't have its own *pasticciere* could support a lingerie shop, however tiny. "They'll be closed by Christmas," most people predicted.

Nonna Rosa, who owned the pharmacy where my mother worked, was one of the most vocal sceptics. "I hope Bruno got his rent in advance," she declared with a sniff. "They're not the sort who'll stick around if it goes wrong again, those two."

"What do you mean, again?" I asked.

"Let's face it, they haven't come here out of choice," Nonna Rosa said darkly. "Perhaps they're bankrupts. Or perhaps it's something worse. We can't even be sure they're married."

That part, at least, seemed possible. When I cycled past the tiny shop on my way home that afternoon, I saw there was now a card taped up beside the bell. It said simply *Francesca Gavuzzo & Stefano Morelli*. That wasn't in itself unusual – in Italy a woman doesn't generally take her husband's name, although in a town like ours it would be normal to indicate by attaching 'Signora' that she was no longer single – but what definitely struck me as curious was that they'd put her name before his.



I'd half-dismounted from my bike to read the card. Now, looking up, I realised I was being watched. Inside the shop an elegant woman wearing a rather formal red cardigan was looking at me calmly. Behind her, a man appeared. He was about the same age as her – in his thirties, I guessed – but something in the way he moved, a delicate, almost effeminate quality, made me certain that it was her who was the stronger personality.

I felt a little awkward, caught snooping like this. I nodded at them politely. The woman nodded back. The man, more eager, raised his hand in greeting.

“She’s called Gavuzzo,” I reported to my mother and Nonna Rosa when the pharmacy reopened later that evening. “That’s a Piemontese name, isn’t it? Perhaps she’s from round here after all.”

“Perhaps,” Nonna Rosa said. “Or perhaps she just wants to give us that impression.”

“Why would she do that?”

“If you’re going to take a name, better to choose a common one, wouldn’t you say? That way we all assume she’s local, without actually being able to check. She’s certainly not related to Eleonora Gavuzzo, or any of the other Gavuzzos I know.”

“But why would she take a fake name in the first place?”

Nonna Rosa shrugged theatrically. My mother and I exchanged glances. Nonna Rosa's appetite for gossip was legendary, and when there wasn't enough of the genuine article to go around she created more out of very little, like the thrifty housewife she was. So we didn't take her theories very seriously at the time.

"They'll be gone by Christmas," she repeated.

But they weren't gone by Christmas. When I returned to Monforte after my first semester at university, Gavusso & Morelli was still open. In fact, it was starting to look quite prosperous. Some very modern miniature halogen spotlights – modern for the time, that is – illuminated the tiny shelves that had once held bottles of wine and which now held brassieres, slips and panties. The brilliant light bounced off the pearls and tiny pieces of glass in the more elaborate pieces as if off shards of ice. Even the window display had grown in confidence. Hanging by threads from the ceiling, so that they seemed to float at different heights, was a parade of voluptuous bustiers, frothy muslin *peignoirs* and pretty floral brassieres; the overall effect as extravagant as Christmas decorations on a tree, or a host of underwear-clad angels ascending into the air.

If anything, though, I was even less interested in the shop now than before I went away. Things had changed for me. At that time, in the

early seventies, Italian college students couldn't decide if they wanted to be American flower-children or German anarchists, and usually ended up being an uneasy mixture of both. I was no exception. In that first semester I had smoked my first joint and been to my first sit-in. I'd had relationships with boys who were almost, but not quite, boyfriends. I hadn't actually slept with any of them, being as yet unable to reconcile the tantalising notion of sexual freedom with the practicalities of an actual relationship – that is to say, I was terrified that the moment I did succumb to a boy's pleas, he'd lose all interest; a possibility that seemed not to have been addressed by the radical feminists whose books I was now defiantly carrying around – but I confidently expected that it was only a matter of time. I'd joined the Communist Society and protested against the Vietnam war by dancing round an American flag as it burned. I'd been to a concert by The Grateful Dead in Milan and a reading by a Beat poet in Venice. I expressed my new loyalties by wearing at all times a military combat jacket, its lapels decorated with badges representing marijuana leaves and the peace symbol, along with a black felt hat that had one of my male friends' coloured handkerchiefs tied jauntily around the brim. Secretly, I thought of myself as a cross between Edith Piaf, Bob Dylan and Ulrike Meinhof, the founder of the Red Army Faction.

As I passed the lingerie shop on my way to and from the centre of town I sometimes saw customers going in or coming out. Most were

men, buying gifts for their wives or girlfriends. Some slipped through the door a little furtively; some whistled confidently, as if to emphasise the casualness of their purchase. But I also saw how they looked when they left – satisfied, happy, a little excited, as if they'd bought a present for themselves rather than for their wives; which I suppose in a way they had.

Personally, I found it hard to imagine having the kind of relationship in which underwear might be a gift – my university friends would think such an action hilariously bourgeois. But other customers were women, and I wondered even more at those. They seemed to leave the shop in a dreamlike daze, as if they'd just had a massage or met a lover. And I saw how, while the men swung the ultra-smart white Gavuzzo & Morelli carrier bags containing their purchases jauntily from their hands, the women would push the handles up into the crook of their elbows so that they could keep them tight to their sides, the packages bumping snugly against their hips as they walked away.

I noticed something curious, too, about the window displays. Not only did they change every week or so, but each one seemed in a strange way to have a reason behind it. For example, there was a girl who was getting married, Antonia Fabbri. I knew her a little: she was marrying a handsome young winemaker called Beppe Fucilla. Everyone – that is to say, Nonna Rosa and her friends – said she was

lucky to have got him, but that she'd better look out: as well as the matter of his good looks, his family was wealthier than hers, always a recipe for trouble. One day soon after Christmas, the display in the window of Gavuzzo & Morelli changed to show a range of white garters, arranged on a cloud of frothy white muslin. In the centre of the display there was a pair of lacy red knickers.

It was unmistakably provocative. It wasn't just the way the knickers had been arranged – casually, as if they'd been slipped off and simply discarded where they lay – it was the twists of violet, turquoise and white tissue paper with which the window had been scattered, reminiscent of confetti. Without it being in any way overt, the whole arrangement somehow said *wedding night* as clearly as if it had been given a caption.

For three days the display stayed there. It felt as if the town were holding its breath – or perhaps it was just me: I found myself going past the little shop more often than before, just to see if anything happened. And then, after the fourth day, I spotted Antonia coming out of Gavuzzo & Morelli with two brown carrier bags in her arms. Seeing me, she gave me a smile that was both furtive and radiant as she hurried away.

I paid rather more attention to the displays after that. That generously-sized peach-coloured bustier surrounded by silver forks: that was directed, surely, at the rather overweight lady who ran the

restaurant at the top of the town, dispensing grappa on the house to a crowd of men; flirted with by many, courted by none. The red silk plunge bra and matching red knickers, sprinkled with wood shavings as if they'd been left on a workbench – that was intended for the wife of the carpenter, who everyone knew was chasing other girls since she'd given birth to their first child. The cream chiffon nightdress – that was for someone older, someone like Signora Passarello, widowed last Easter but not, surely, too old to have another chance... And sure enough, there was the lady in question now, coming out of the shop with a defiant look on her face and a white paper carrier bag tucked under her arm. It amused me that Francesca and Stefano, despite being incomers, had somehow read between the lines of our little town so quickly and so well.

Then, not long after Christmas, the window display changed yet again.