



The Wedding Officer

Anthony Capella

“I am concerned at the increasing number of applications by officers or other ranks to marry Italians. COs must realize that everything possible will be done to discourage such marriages” – Bulletin issued by the General Officer Commanding, No.3 District, Naples, 5 September 1944.

Part One

One

The day Livia Pertini fell in love for the first time was the day the beauty contest was won by her favourite cow, Pupetta.

For as long as anyone in Fiscino could remember, the annual Feast of the Apricots had incorporated not only a competition to find the most perfect specimen of fruit from among the hundreds of tiny orchards that lined the sides of Monte Vesuvio, but also a contest to determine the loveliest young woman of the region. The former was always presided over by Livia's father, Nino, since it was generally accepted that as the owner of the village *osteria* he had a more subtle palate than most, while the latter was judged by Don Bernardo, the priest, since it was thought that as a celibate he would bring a certain objectivity to the proceedings.

Of the two competitions, the beauty contest was usually the more good-natured. This was partly because it was unencumbered by the accusations of fixing, bribing and even stealing of fruit from another man's orchard which dogged the judging of apricots, but also because the girls of the village were remarkably similar in appearance – dark haired, olive skinned, and built along the voluptuous lines that a diet of fresh air and pasta invariably produces – and it was thus a relatively simple matter to decide which one combined these features in the most pleasing way. The apricots were another matter altogether. Each time Vesuvius erupted, it covered its slopes with a deep layer of a remarkable natural fertilizer called potash, and as a result the mountain supported dozens of species of fruit and vegetables which grew nowhere else in all Italy, a culinary advantage which more than compensated for the area's occasional dangers. In the case of apricots, the varieties included the firm-fleshed Cafona, the juicy Palummella, the bittersweet Boccuccia Liscia, the peach-like Pellecchiella and the spiky-skinned but incomparably succulent Spinosa. Each had their ardent champions, and the thought of the honour going to the wrong sort of apricot provoked almost as much debate as the decision over which farmer had produced the finest specimen of fruit.

Livia was too busy to pay much attention to either contest. A feast day meant that the little *osteria* would be even busier at lunchtime than usual, and she and her sister Marisa had been up since before dawn preparing the dishes that would be spread out on the tables lining the length of the terrace, where vines provided shade from the fierce midday sun. In any case, she had a rather low opinion of both kinds of competition, her view being that in the case of apricots it very much depended on what kind of mood you were in, while in the case of female beauty all the girls in the village got stared at quite enough already. Besides, everyone knew that one of the Farelli sisters would win in the end, and she didn't see why she should give them the satisfaction of beating her. So, while everyone else in the village was out in the piazza, arguing, cheering, booing and clapping the contenders, she concentrated on preparing the antipasto, deftly wrapping *burrata* in fresh asphodel leaves.

“Hello?” a male voice called from the little room which doubled as a bar and a dining room. “Is anyone here?”

Her hands were full of wet *burrata* and shreds of leaf. “No,” she shouted back. There was a short pause. “Then I must be talking to an angel, or perhaps a ghost,” the voice suggested. “If there's no one around, I don't usually get an answer.”

Livia rolled her eyes. A smartarse. “I meant, there's no one to serve you. I'm busy.”

“Too busy to pour a glass of limoncello for a thirsty soldier?”

“Too busy even for that,” she said. “You can help yourself, and put your money on the counter. It's what everyone else does.”

Another pause. “What if I'm not honest, and don't leave the full amount?”

“Then I will curse you, and something very unpleasant will happen. I wouldn't risk it if I were you.”

She heard the sound of a bottle being uncorked, and the sound of her father's lemon spirit being poured generously into a glass. Then a young man in a soldier's uniform appeared in the kitchen. He was holding a full glass in one hand and some coins in the other. “It occurred to me,” he said, “that if I left my money on the counter, and some other rogue came along later and stole it, you would think that it was me who was

the dishonest one, and something unpleasant would happen to me after all, and that would be a terrible thing. So I thought I'd bring you the money myself.”

She pointed with her elbow at the dresser. “You can put it over there.”

He was, she noticed, quite extraordinarily handsome. The black, tailored uniform recently redesigned by Mussolini showed off his lean hips and broad shoulders, and his dark eyes grinned at her from beneath a soldier's cap that was set at a jaunty angle on the back of a mass of curls. Caramel skin, very white teeth and an expression of confident mischief completed the picture. A *papagallo*, she thought dismissively, a parrot – the local expression for young men who spent their time trying to look handsome and flirting with girls.

“What are you doing in here?” he asked, leaning back against the dresser and watching her. “I thought everyone was outside.”

“I shall pray to Santa Cecilia for you,” she said.

“Why's that?” he said, surprised.

“Because you are clearly afflicted by blindness. Either that, or you're a cretin. What does it look like I'm doing?”

This sort of remark was usually enough to deter unwelcome visitors to her kitchen, but the young soldier didn't seem at all put out. “You look like you're cooking,” he remarked.

“Brilliant,” she said sarcastically. “The saint has performed another miracle. You can go now, you're completely cured.”

“You know,” he said, crossing his legs at the ankle and taking a swig from his glass, “you're much prettier than any of those girls in the beauty contest.”

She ignored the compliment. “So that's why you're here. I should have guessed. You came to stare at the girls.”

“Actually, I came because my friend Aldo wanted to come, and there's not much else to do around here. I'm stationed in the garrison at Torre El Greco.”

“So you're a fascist?” she said disapprovingly.

He shook his head. “Just a soldier. I want to see the world. All my life I've lived in Naples, and I'm bored with it.”

“Well,” she said, “you can start by seeing the world outside that door. I don't have time to chat to you.” As she spoke she was putting balls of *burrata* inside the asphodel leaves, weaving the leaves through each other so that they formed a natural basket for the cheese.

The handsome soldier was unperturbed. “You're very rude,” he said conversationally.

“No, just very busy.”

“But you can be busy and talk to me at the same time,” he objected. “Look, you've done a dozen of those already. And I can take away the plates you've filled and bring you new ones.” He fitted his actions to his words. “See? I'm making myself useful.”

“Actually, you're in the way. And those plates need to go on the other table.”

“I'll tell you what,” he said. “I'll go away if you give me a kiss.”

She glared at him. “*Quanne piscia 'a gallina', cazzo*. Not in a million years, dickhead. Now get out of here.”

“But my intentions are completely honourable,” he assured her. “You see, I've fallen in love with you. And what's wrong with kissing someone you're in love with?”

She couldn't help it. She smiled slightly, then put her stern expression back on.

“Don't be ridiculous. We don't know each other from Adam.”

“Well, that obstacle is easily removed. I'm Enzo. And you are – ?”

“Busy,” she snapped.

“I'm very pleased to meet you, Busy. Would you like to kiss me now?”

“No.” She had finished the antipasto, and began to chop lemons to accompany the *friarelli*, a kind of bitter broccoli.

“Then I shall just have to use my imagination instead.” He leant back and closed his eyes. A smile played across his face. “Mmmm,” he said thoughtfully. “Do you know, Busy, you're a very good kisser. Mmmmmm... Let's do that again.”

“I hope that hurt,” she said pointedly.

* Literally, “When the chicken pees.”

“What?”

“I just imagined kneeling you in the *coglioni*.”

Enzo clutched his privates and fell to the floor. “Ow! Ow! What have you done?”

Now we'll never have those twenty adorable *bambini* I was planning.”

“Get up,” she said, laughing. “And get out of the way. I have to drain this pasta.”

He jumped up. “Tell me one thing, Busy. Do you have a boyfriend? Am I wasting my time here?”

“The answer to one of those questions is no,” she said, “and to the other one, yes.”

For a moment his brow furrowed as he worked it out. “Impossible,” he said firmly. “Anyway, one good answer is sufficient, to be going on with. Aaargh!” He leapt back. “What in God's name is that?”

Hearing an unfamiliar voice in the kitchen, Pupetta had put her head through the window to see what was going on. Her head was rather large, and was topped by two massive horns, backswept like bicycle handlebars. The horns were considerably wider than the window, but she had long ago worked out how to ease one in before the other. It was this horn which had just claimed Enzo's hat. The soldier turned and regarded the beast with horror.

“That's Pupetta,” Livia said, reaching across to give the buffalo's massive forehead a friendly scratch, retrieving the hat at the same time. “Haven't you seen a buffalo before?”

Enzo shook his head. “Not this close. I'm from Naples, remember? We don't have buffalo in the city.” He took the hat and arranged it on Pupetta's head, where it looked almost comically small, then saluted the animal ironically.

“Then we certainly couldn't get married and have those twenty *bambini* you wanted. I could never leave Pupetta.”

“Hmm.” Enzo scratched his head. “In that case,” he said to Pupetta, “you'd better be the first buffalo to come and live in Naples.”

Suddenly serious, Livia said, “Anyway, we shouldn't be talking like this. You're a soldier, you're going to go off and see the world.”

“Only for a little while. Then I’ll come back and have *bambini*. And *bufale*, of course,” he added quickly.

“What if you have to fight?”

“Oh, we never fight,” he said casually. “We just march around and look fierce.”

There was the sound of a clock striking, and Livia rushed over to the stove. “Now look what you’ve done. It’s almost lunch time, and I’ve stopped cooking. My father will kill me.”

“You still haven’t kissed me,” he pointed out.

“And I’m not going to,” she said, pulling saucepans out of the cupboard. “But if you like, you can come back later, and we’ll have a coffee together.”

He snapped his fingers with delight. “I knew it!”

“And don’t get any funny ideas,” she warned him, “or I really will knee you in the *coglioni*. I’ve had plenty of practice.”

“Of course. What do you take me for?” He finished his drink and set the glass down by the sink. “It’s excellent limoncello, by the way.”

“Of course it is. Everything is good here.”

“I can see that,” he said. He kissed his fingertips and blew the kiss at her as he walked backwards out of the door. After a moment she noticed that Pupetta was still wearing his hat.

Soon after midday Don Bernardo and her father broke off from their separate deliberations, and a great crowd of people surged across the dusty piazza towards the *osteria*. Within moments every place was filled, and Livia began to serve the food.

Most of the ingredients she cooked with came from the tiny farm immediately behind the restaurant. It was so small that the Pertinis could shout from one end of it to another, but the richness of the soil meant that it supported a wealth of vegetables, including tomatoes, courgettes, cavolo nero, aubergines and several species that were unique to the region, including bitter *friarelli* and fragrant *asfodelo*. There was also a small black boar called Garibaldi, who despite his diminutive size impregnated his harem of four larger wives with extraordinary diligence; an ancient olive tree through which a

couple of vines meandered, a chicken or two, and the Pertinis' pride and joy: Priscilla and Pupetta, the two water buffalo, who grazed on a patch of terraced pasture no bigger than a tennis court. The milk they produced was porcelain-white, and after hours of work each day it produced just two or three *mozzarelle*, each one weighing around a kilo – but what *mozzarelle*: soft and faintly grassy, like the sweet steamy breath of the *bufale* themselves.

As well as mozzarella, the buffalo milk was crafted into various other specialities. *Ciliegi* were small cherry-shaped balls for salads, while *bocconcini* were droplet-shaped, for wrapping in slices of soft prosciutto ham. *Treccia*, tresses, were woven into plaits, served with Amalfi lemons and tender sprouting broccoli. *Mozzarella affumicata* was lightly smoked and brown in colour, while *scamorza* was smoked over a smouldering layer of pecan shells until it was as dark and rich as a cup of strong espresso. When there was surplus milk they even made a hard cheese, *ricotta salata di bufala*, which was salted and slightly fruity, perfect for grating over roasted vegetables. But the cheese the Pertinis were best known for was their *burrata*, a tiny sack of the finest, freshest mozzarella, filled with thick buffalo cream and wrapped in asphodel leaves. People came all the way from Naples just to experience its unique taste. Sometimes they would even buy a few to take back to the city but, as Nino always told them, it was a futile exercise: by the time the *asfodelo* started to turn brown, which was after just a few hours, the cheese was already starting to lose its flavour.

Business was always good, not least because of the prodigious appetites of the Pertinis' neighbours. Visitors from the city might come and go, but the mainstay of the *osteria*'s business was the villagers themselves. At noon each day every last one of them, from Don Bernardo the priest to the widow Esmerelda, the village prostitute, stopped work and strolled over to the Pertinis' vine-shaded terrace, where for two hours they ate like royalty and drank wine made from the same grapes which ripened above their heads.

It was sometimes said of the Vesuviani that, labouring as they did under the ever-present threat of annihilation, all their appetites were gargantuan – whether for wine, for food or for love. They were also much more superstitious than other Neapolitans, which was to say, extremely superstitious indeed. Every lunch began with a dual offering: a grace offered up to heaven by the priest, and a small libation of wine poured onto the

earth by Ernesto, the oldest labourer in the village, a tacit recognition of the fact that here on Vesuvius the ground beneath their feet was considerably more threatening, and closer to their thoughts, than heaven. Like every other village on the volcano, Fiscino was protected by a little circle of shrines, some containing statues of the Virgin, others little effigies of San Sebastiano, who had been protecting them for as long as there had been people on the mountain. Other Neapolitans might object that in that case he had not been doing a very good job, since there had been a catastrophic eruption as recently as 1923, but to the Vesuviani the very fact that eruptions were not more frequent was proof of his remarkable efficacy. However, they were not above hedging their bets, just in case, and many of these protective shrines also bore a little mark depicting a horn, a symbol already old when Christianity came to these parts.

Similarly, it was accepted that while doctors might be good for certain straightforward medical problems, such as a wound that needed stitching, more complex maladies required the intervention of a *maga*, or healer. The *maga* fulfilled many of the functions of a pharmacist, dispensing herbs and recipes to treat everyday ailments such as toothache or the flu, as well as potions that would make a woman fall in love or a man stay faithful. On Vesuvius, the magical powers of the *maghe* were even more widely distributed than usual, so that one family possessed the secret of medicine for warts, while another had the cure for earache, and another the remedy for the evil eye. Within each family it was a matter of some speculation as to who would inherit the gift. For the Pertinis, the matter resolved itself early on. Both Livia and Marisa helped their mother in the kitchen, but while it soon became clear that Livia had inherited her mother's ability at the stove, Marisa preferred to concoct recipes of a different kind, involving the blood of a cockerel, dew harvested at dawn on the Feast of St John, or obscure herbs gathered from the depths of the pine woods that covered the slopes of the mountain.

Livia could not remember learning to cook. Agata had begun to teach her when she was very small, bringing a wooden step into the kitchen so that Livia could reach the stove. By the time she was twelve she had graduated from helping out when the restaurant was busy to being in charge when her mother was ill – a circumstance which occurred increasingly often. She no longer had to bring any conscious thought to what

she was doing, nor was she ever aware of following a recipe. As a mathematician is said to be able to see complex equations in terms of patterns, or a musician can improvise melodies from a dozen different scales, she knew instinctively how to bring out the best in whatever ingredients she was using. When she was asked how she had cooked something, or what it was called, she would simply shrug and say “It's *sfiziosa*,” – a Neapolitan word which has no exact equivalent in English, or even in Italian, but which means roughly 'for the hell of it,' or 'as the fancy takes me.' The restaurant's customers soon learnt not to ask, and were simply grateful for the presence of such precocious talent in their midst, even if the owner of the talent was something of a *scassapalle*, possessed of a fiery temper and a sharp tongue.

During the meal Livia noticed that Enzo was sitting with a group of other soldiers, and that he was easily the most handsome of any of them. She also noticed that the beauty pageant contestants were sitting nearby, shooting the soldiers limpid glances out of the corners of their eyes; glances that did not go unnoticed by the young men, who responded by indulging in increasingly raucous horseplay, which the girls then pretended to be offended by. The three Farelli sisters, of course, were flirting more than anyone. Livia sighed. It seemed to her unlikely that Enzo would come back for that coffee after all. Colomba, the eldest of the sisters, was clearly setting her cap at him – or rather, her bonnet, a ridiculous concoction covered with glass fruit and feathers. So that was that. It was Colomba who had coined the nickname *stechetto*, little toothpick, for Livia, because she was so scrawny. She had filled out a little since her sixteenth birthday, but she would never have Colomba's curves.

Then she saw that Enzo was getting up from his place and coming towards her. She turned away. He did not stop, but as he passed her he whispered, “I was right the first time, when I called you an angel. Because surely only an angel could cook like that.”

“Save your flattery for whoever wins the beauty contest,” she said. But she flushed with pleasure despite herself, and when she saw Colomba Farelli looking at her with daggers in her eyes, it was nice to be able to smile sweetly in return.

As she was serving the huge platter of sliced apricots in wine which was the inevitable *dolci* of the feast-day lunch, something rather remarkable happened. A row had broken out between Colomba and her two sisters, Mimi and Gabriella. And not just a row: within moments, it had progressed from name-calling and screaming to hair-pulling and scratching, much to the amusement of the watching soldiers. It required the intervention of Don Bernardo himself to calm the warring parties, getting to his feet and thumping the table with an empty bottle of wine until there was silence.

“This is a disgrace,” he thundered. “And as a consequence of your appalling behaviour, I shall not be awarding the prize to any of you.”

“So who will you give it to?” a voice asked from the crowd.

“To no one.”

“But if you don't give it to anyone, it'll be a draw, and they'll all have won,” the voice pointed out. There was a murmur of agreement at the irrefutable logic of this.

“Then I shall give it to...” Don Bernardo's gaze raked across the terrace, and came to rest on Livia. “I shall give it to someone who truly deserves it, because she provided us with all this food.”

Oh no, Livia thought. To enter and not win would have been bad enough, but not to enter and to win because the priest was angry with the Farelli sisters would be completely humiliating. Colomba, for one, would never let her forget it.

The same thought must have belatedly occurred to Don Bernardo, who was quailing slightly before the ferocity of Livia's scowl. “Um...er...” he said. Enzo jumped to his feet. “He means Pupetta,” he shouted. “Pupetta the wonder-cow, who provided the milk for our wonderful *burrata*.”

“Exactly,” Don Bernardo said, relieved. “I mean Pupetta. Where is she?” Pupetta, hearing her name, looked up from the end of the terrace, where she was just wondering if she could pretend to be a goat and eat the soldier's hat.

“*Viva Pupetta*,” someone shouted. There was a general shout of agreement, and people started to clap. The Farelli girls rearranged their bonnets, and settled down again to flirt with the soldiers. After all, there was no shame in losing to a buffalo.