

The Night They Burned Sacco and Vanzetti

OR

The Fictional Life of Pietro Di Donato

by

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1: Vasto, 1887.

The bell would ring in the Great Hall today. A baby would appear in the foundling wheel. She was confident this would be. For it all appeared in her dreams foretelling the event as it always had the night before.

But this! A drowning baby in the box of the wooden wheel! *Che significa?*—In anxious illusion the turntable rose, rising on edge transforming to become vertical waterwheel, the cupped compartment containing the newborn reaching its apex as the wheel turned icy-cold water to soon flood and drown the new precious child. Is the innocent angel someday to meet such a death of nightmarish suffocation. What does this mean?

Yes. As had been intuited the ancient bell sounded downstairs in the Great Hall of the edifice on Via Aimone. Once a palazzo of the ruling d'Avalos family, with its fortified walls and battlements, it now served the nobler purpose of orphanage. It was a January day beautifully clear and sunny, but cold and a bit windy, so there was no time to be wasted in rushing downstairs to check the revolving compartment built into the exterior wall of the landmark well known to all in Vasto. Giulia's heart was sure to race upon hearing that bell. What order of sweet little *bimba* awaits in the wheel's box lined with woolen blanket—they, the helpless ones, the innocent.

But it was not a sense of surprise. It was, rather, her conditioned excitement having heard the clapper strike echoing the bell downstairs many times throughout the years. No, she was not surprised for she had been seeing a young girl, of perhaps sixteen, on the streets and in the marketplace for at least six months now.

Giulia brings up her mental records—Yes. She first appeared back in early August. She is always on the lookout for young faces that appear in Vasto and act as if on their own—on their own unable to conceal their constant expression of worry. There are always a few of these poor children each year whom she must take under her wing. They appear as if from nowhere. The rest of the unwed young mothers-to-be are of the town or from nearby *borgo*; and they become conspicuous over time by their absence from school and church for no apparent reason.

This girl, however; this girl has been looking very swollen and ready to give birth for over a week now. One of the town's midwives has been funneling her information: The girl's name is Angelica; and she is from a mountain village two days travel due west up in the high foothills of the Maiella, a little town known for its fine woolen *coperte*—blankets, and especially its durable uniform material—a town called Taranta Peligna.

The bell rang one last time. It was a strong, concerned alarm. She could feel the girl's worry for her baby in the cold compartment of the *ruota degli esposti*—wheel of the exposed. And she was more aware of the girl's inner struggle, her anguish, than anyone in the town, or its churches, was capable of. For she has been working with these girls,

crying with these girls, guiding these girls in their spiritual dilemma over the years as few others could possibly have.

—It rang, and she was sure it had been turned. The baby would now be within the protective walls of the orphanage. She was also confident that the young mother was dashing away into the maze of twisted narrow streets and alleys. For she had been spared the disgrace, the stigma, of looking into the eyes of those who would be taking custody of her newborn. In her young mind she was blessedly anonymous. If only she could have realized that there was no verdict of guilt to be passed down within those walls.

How well she knows these girls. After all, has not Giulia Camerini been director of adoptions and holding and loving these babies for the last twenty-six years now! And yes, Angelica has indeed vanished into the medieval labyrinth of the town's center. She will undoubtedly make her way back to that little village up in the mountains. When the midwife asks the girl her surname, she gives: "Di Donato. Daughter of Agostino." The wise midwife is a good judge of character and believes the girl is telling the truth: She is from the little mountain village and her mother is the cook to the owner of the town's largest woolen mill, Vincenzo Merlino.

Abundant water to power the machinery of the mills has made the town on the eastern slopes of the Apennine ideal for the industry. Springs gush from the treeless outcroppings and fissures high above the *villaggio*—bursting from brutal bare rock, tributaries rush on their way to the great Aventine powering looms in buildings of stone and brick at rushing stream's edge.

Angelica's mother, Filomena, makes the walk up the terraced village lanes defying the mountain's steep inclines to the home of Don Merlino, *il padrone*, the undisputed *capo* of Taranta. She arrives each morning at 6 o'clock to fire the large cast-iron kitchen stove shipped all the way from Pescara. Vincent Merlino's fine home sits highest up the hillside within the village. But higher still, it is watched over from above by the parish church of San Nicola boldly placed with craggy mountain wall towering above as backdrop. And before entering by the kitchen door each morning Filomena takes a moment to look up at the wonderful fortress-like *campanile*—bell tower, of her Chiesa di San Nicola, thank the Holy Mother, and make the sign of the cross. With this, her heart would normally be at peace with the blessing of a new day's work.

But something has been weighing greatly on her mind. In recent days she has been addressing a special prayer to San Nicola asking him to watch over her Angelica with his well-known compassion. She calls on San Nicola as 'protector of children,' for she is deeply worried that her own daughter is just such a child in need.

Angelica moves through her chores in the Merlino kitchen as in a dream. And Sister Gesuina told Filomena, after mass on the steps last Sunday, that the girl is unable to pay

attention to her lessons at school and “wears a constant mask of worry,” over what is normally her serene, child-like face. Filomena remembers her own stubborn mind at fifteen and knows that questioning her daughter will only drive her deeper into secrecy.

Her ancient intuition though has already given her the answer—told her the truth. She knows in her heart that it is the result of the famous poet’s visit to their town some three months earlier. She felt him a strange man. He did not arrive in a coach of any fashion, nor in a small buggy he would have manned himself. He arrived on horseback outfitted as if rogue scout who had abandoned the military and adopted the dangerous call of the Maiella range he set out to explore, reverting to predator, as if the mountain itself had cast the sign of the evil eye on the gnomish little man.

Word had spread quickly amongst the women the very first day he arrived: He must enter the Grotto of the Cavallone, he was heard exclaiming to the mayor in a boastful manner—that it was a marvel of God’s imagination in karst and that who better than he to enter such pooled and mysterious place—“the Womb of Mother Nature herself!”

“I must experience the mysteries of the grotto firsthand,” he said, “I have an inspiration for a play in mind which would utilize the caves as a key theatrical setting—a scene of tragic violence, fatal struggle between father and son—very dramatic, very ancient—

“For my research I must fully realize the wonders of my Maiella. I must drink in the body of her verdant hillsides on powerful stallion. One must sleep out in the wilds under naked outcropping and awaken before dawn so as to behold her deep golden-rayed penetration—rising, higher, higher still, until ecstatic climax emblazoned with the Abruzzese sun of *mezzogiorno!*”

The women told of how the visitor spoke as if delivering oration on a grand stage. No one in the little town had ever seen a man speak in such manner.

Even upon his arrival Filomena intuited strong messages of foreboding. The poet was to stay at the home of her employer and master of the mills. It had been arranged months earlier by the mayor after receiving D’Annunzio’s first communiques. She must bite her tongue. The honored guest, the Prince of Montenevoso di Pescara, must not be criticized or victim of superstitious rumors originating from her kitchen. Her first action was to perform the reading of the tea leaves; this, just one of the many mountain rituals recalled from a past so distant no one can say for sure whence it came—far preceding the Church of Rome, the Apostles, or any one religious influence.

Gabriele D’Annunzio’s true reason for exploring these hills was largely hidden perhaps even to himself. For he carried within a certain need not fully defined, a great curiosity. He could feel the fading echoes of an entire people’s fantastic—even supernatural—ritual of life rooted in these untamable slopes and high pastures.

Yes, he was of Abruzzi, but from the cosmopolitan center of Pescara. What remains safeguarded in these mountains long since decayed in his civilized city. But here, high in the Apennines isolating its people from the rest of the world, *this* is where he must seek it: those bone-chilling secrets of the awesome *Fattura*—that shadowy region of the Cabbala from whence emanated prophecy; healing; protection from evil spirits; the influencing of love and hate; communion with the dead, and, *il malocchio*—the evil eye, with its cast spells and curses.

Cloaked in conjecture and passed down from generation to generation often its meaning could only be understood through symbolism. For the symbolic remains true to its origins no matter how many generations have passed from living, laughing, loving and hating to distant dead voices moldering in stone crypts.

In these hills you will hear the very old comfort each other. You will also hear of their instruction of the young by revealing the secret power of ‘the older time.’ Habits of primitive peoples forever passed away, persist here—Rites long dead and forgotten elsewhere, survive here—Unexplainable signs and symbols long extinct, remain alive here. “Are we not the sole keepers of the *Fattura*?”

Filomena will safeguard her family by affixing a wax cross to one side of the doorjamb to prevent the entering of evil spirits. But more imminently, the reading of the tea leaves has delivered a confirmation: “Danger has arrived.”

She steps outside the kitchen door and looks up at her Church of San Nicola making the sign of the cross, resolving to pray as she has never prayed before beseeching San Nicola, and the Holy Mother, that they might protect her child—her Angelica.

2: We meet Aleck.

“That Di Donato boy . . . You heard about the filthy magazine I take it. What kind of parents—I ask you,” says Sally Owens’ mother, ringleader of the Godly Crusade in their little town.

“It’s the father. That’s where he gets it,” says Becky Penner’s mother.

How they love to whisper about that kid. Well, it’s a small community still so it’s to be expected. And it will stay this way, small, insular, until the big day when the governor comes all the way out on the Island to break ground on the new State University in another few years.

“Paul Di Donato. That man. He’s simply a disgrace! And that son of his is following *right* in his footsteps—no good. Simply no good!” say the mothers of the other kids at Setauket School—Setauket being an authentic name of the Algonquin Nation (and after

all, Sally's mother is in charge of the costumes each fall for the Setauket Indians Day pageant in the mural-lined auditorium).

"And what's more, how is it exactly the boy is in our school in the first place? You know of course they live out in Mount Sinai. I'd like to know why the boy isn't in their school out there where he belongs, and I plan on getting to the bottom of it. Yes I certainly do! . . . Why, I hear the mother and Paul Gelinis are quite good friends, so I hear . . ."

Apparently the straw that broke the camel's back was just days earlier. Aleck brought a copy of KNIGHT magazine into class with him. He felt very special. The editors had sent his father an exclusive advance copy. Everyone was excited when it arrived in the mailbox; but Aleck was beside himself. It contained his dad's latest steamy fiction: "A Present from Dottie Jackson," about a showgirl who contracted syphilis and passed it on to the big mafia boss, Big Tony. It also contained a color centerfold the boys in class drew a bead on right off, giggling and shoving each other. But Aleck was practically oblivious to the photos gushing on proudly about his father's latest published work, and the fact that the critics in New York said that his father was a great prose writer—"The greatest prose writer of the day," a word none of the other kids knew much about. He performed for his sixth-grade classmates with great theatrics out on the playground behind home plate:

"—So at the end Big Tony dies of syphilis cause these little spirochetes like little maggots! eat holes in your brain, that's the 'present' see, and he's on the slab in the morgue! and they're doing an autopsy. They cut you wide open and pull out all your guts! and the doctor's sawing the top of his head off with like a hacksaw and he's got this pretty young girl see, in a white coat, his assistant, and she's wearing this perfume see, and Big Tony's head is copping from side to side on the slab and all the doctor can think about is the pretty girl see, cause her perfume is driving him crazy out of his mind!"

Little Sally Owens saw the whole affair out with two or three of her friends, also listening on. Sally worked herself up into crocodile tears claiming that it scared her. Mrs. Dobbishire called Aleck inside. They walked down the hall in silence. He followed behind single file mingling with Mrs. Dobbishire's old-lady powder, perfume and perspiration. Entering the empty classroom she crossed and sat down behind her desk. He could hear the other kids out on the beautiful grounds in the sunshine and the shouts and yells of the softball game.

Time was flowing, normal fun for the kids out on the field. His moments ground to a stifling halt he felt trapped in. A feeling swept over him before she even said a word. It was a mix, a brew of shame, resentment, pride, defiance, and anger. He knew he was being singled out. And it was not right. But somewhere deep in his psyche he had made a decision well before Mrs. Dobbishire had sat down: His uncanny ability to not only endure, but to prevail via his superior cultural self was spontaneously called to action.

He would buttress his rationale for the audacious Show and Tell he was performing out on the playground. —Why wouldn't all at school be *thrilled* to see right there in print—and with wonderful artwork too!—his father's, the famous author's, latest splashy fame? "Aleck. Do you know why I called you in early?" Of course he knew. But he wasn't about to give her the satisfaction.

“No. I don’t think so—”

“Well. Some of your classmates were upset by . . .

Aleck drew immediate satisfaction seeing Mrs. Dobbishire grow uncomfortable. Straightening her back in her chair the simultaneous uplifting of her fantastically oversized breasts was what caught his attention—breasts that were so different from any he had read described adoringly in one of his father’s wonderful articles. She was a rather short, square-torsoed woman of sixty or so. His attention had been drawn to those breasts the very first day of school in Mrs. Dobbishire’s sixth-grade classroom. And ever since he’d been fascinated by the elaborate, girthy brassiere system that was always in place under her blouse no matter what the season. He wondered where she would buy such a thing . . . perhaps Sweezey’s all the way over on the South Shore (that’s where his mom took them for clothes shopping; either that or Saks in the City on the LIRR) . . . Then he tried to imagine what that looked like without her blouse, and even what it looked like with that system removed, like when she got in her bath.

She had been burdened by these breasts for most of her life he figured; and there was nothing about them that would indicate that they were ever something she would have been proud of . . . or that could possibly have been desirable to any kind of man, that he was familiar with at least—especially his father. And he was the expert on such matters!

But he certainly knew she was married and even had two grown children. She mentioned them often. Perhaps, Aleck thought, she hadn’t had such a terrible thing as these breasts when she first met her husband . . . All he had to go on though was how his mom and dad always had such fun, laughing in the kitchen fixing dinner till ten at night over their Four Roses with club soda and a slice of orange—his dad pawing at his mom with his big, calloused bricklayer hands and his mom pushing him away howling with laughter—“I never wore a bra *in my life!* until these days—I don’t know why I should start now.” “—Your perfect breasts pushing up through your crepe-silk dress the night we met in the Taproom. They looked like they were covered in snakeskin, Lovey—remember? I think that’s what got me that night.” Of course he would never really know. But what he did know was that he had already gained the upper hand in this meeting that required being called in from the playground. “—they were upset by a story you were telling just now, by the backstop, and you apparently had a magazine you were showing some of the boys and, other students heard . . . I believe you were describing a story that’s in this magazine, they said. Is this true?”

“Yes I was,” he said after a calculated pause looking at her blankly.

“Do you have this magazine?”

“Yes.” Without thinking he decided to make her ask for it rather than reaching for it folded in his back pocket.

“Can I see it please?”

He casually drew it out and handed it across her desk. She reached for it cautiously and began examining the pulpy girly-cover as if she had been handed a death warrant: KNIGHT *The Magazine for Men*. A plump redhead with very plump breasts reclined on a bed overdone with bolsters, her cheap-looking peach gossamer negligee covering barely more than her crotch and bore a pathetically subservient expression of cheap seduction—all for fifty cents.

“You see, Mrs. Dobbishire, towards the bottom there, in the margin—‘A new story from Paul Di Donato—America’s most talked about author,’” said Aleck defiantly gushing; for by this time he had decidedly gone on the offense.

Mrs. Dobbishire began thumbing through the pages. Aleck made his move.

“The editors sent us a special advance copy and just last week Bennett Cerf, the big critic in the city, and on TV! commented that my dad was the finest prose writer on the stands today. He said that he was ‘the modern master of the short story!’ and it really *is* a superb article.”

Mrs. Dobbishire continued examining the magazine giving no indication she had heard a thing he said. “It’s on page twenty-six, I think, and they gave it a special spread, in color, original artwork by a professional graphic artist in the city—The intro covers two pages! . . . It’s really *excellent* artwork.”

It seemed to be a long time before she looked up.

“Tell me, Aleck. You, I believe are eleven. And your classmates are either eleven or twelve. Would you say that this story—this magazine, is the kind of reading material appropriate for—” He knew exactly what was coming. And here it was: expected; typical; boring; and worst of all—lacking any kind of imagination. He felt like he was being lectured to by a kindergarten teacher—Here we are again. Dad is being pointed at, singled out as somehow “wrong.” This was his own Rubicon that he invariably found himself at the banks of. —His countenance took on a black mood and he made sure it wouldn’t go unnoticed by this woman whom he now clearly looked down on—Don’t give in. Don’t back down. Make it right, make it a *good* thing—

“You should have seen how the other kids enjoyed it, Mrs. Dobbishire. Everyone thought it was really great laughing and everything and they asked a lot of questions about my dad like who are his friends in Hollywood and have I met any famous movie stars yet and —”

“—I don’t see the relevance here, Aleck. I’m not sure I understand your point.

“Just as *your* judgment was woefully misguided, so too, in this particular instance, the judgment of the other children was *most* lacking—due to *your* influence, Aleck.”

Her eyes cast down on the tawdry colorful cover. She closed the magazine. When she spoke again it was as if she refused to look at him—“I must be frank with you, Aleck. This behavior, you bringing this *disreputable*, most *unacceptable* magazine into school,” not allowing herself to touch it again as she spoke, “encouraging your classmates to look at it—performing this *totally* unacceptable, *disgraceful* . . . story!—of your father’s . . . I’m afraid it remains to be seen what shall be done about this, Aleck. It remains to be seen.”

He didn’t know why, but he turned and looked up at the clock in the front of the class with its smoothly sweeping bright red hand. The dreamy afternoon seemed suspended only occasionally the shouts and yelps were heard by him flowing in the open windows on the sunny spring breeze.

He endured the humiliation. He threw up a sophisticated mix of make-believe listening, acknowledging—charming, while running a disdainful strain of dismissal behind the already well-polished mask. Mrs. Dobbishire, frustrated, furious, probably

pushed over the edge by his uncanny sense of privileged self-charm went to the principal, Paul Gelinis (and yes, it must have been that exact same sense that got under the skin of most of the teachers at Setauket School—most, that is. For he did have a small group of adults in the school, and the community, who thought of Aleck Di Donato in a completely different way. He knew who they were, and he was very grateful to have them and he showed that gratitude by treating them with great respect and warmth—like an adult. They always responded in kind).

So you see, it's the mothers. The mothers are the first to the ramparts fiercely defending their kids from the influences of "that family," the Di Donatos.

Because, well, amongst other things, Di Donato isn't exactly an American name. Not the kind that goes way back to the days of America's fight for independence from the Crown and the Forefathers of their blessed little hamlet far out on the North Shore of Long Island, some sixty-five miles or so east of York City.

And the boy, Aleck? He doesn't bother giving it much thought—not now at least. The steel-edged gossip won't get to him for a while still. For now he's too busy living each new and thrilling day. That doesn't mean however that he isn't aware of a certain, something. He is. It's just that it all comes to him as naturally as if it were the salty seaweed smells of the vast Sound with its metal-gray skies and its stalled summer swelterings.

But maybe that was what bothered people. And when his big sister (whom he most certainly worshiped) seemed to gather up all those feelings in the town and, for what seemed like no reason at all, would instantaneously turn on him cruelly berating him for how self-centered and conceited he was—how someday he would regret not paying attention in class and taking everything for granted and doing whatever he felt like doing whenever he felt like doing it—not at all like the other boys and girls at Setauket School—telling him how he was most assuredly heading for a very rude awakening someday. He wasn't sure exactly why. But the almost savage anger in her voice and the lightning in her sky-blue eyes certainly troubled his young mind.

3. We meet the father.

If you were to ask one of the locals in Port Jeff to describe Paul Di Donato, they'd probably say that he was about six-foot tall, athletic, lean—dark hair and eyes; that he walked with a jaunty bounce in his step that matched his outgoing personality. And they'd definitely tell you about how he likes to stop and chat: "All you have to do is catch his eye," they'd say, and tell how you'd end up in a ten-minute conversation in the produce section of Bohack's describing in savory detail how he prepared his sauteed rabe in oil and garlic. Or especially if you ran into him on the back street. Oh yes, especially on the back street along with his friend Johnny Baptista. . .

Most all in town who knew him were proud to have their very own home-grown celebrity (Port Jefferson was natives, down-to-earth working folks, unlike Setauket. Setauket was where the TWA and Pan-Am airline captains and nuclear physicists all

lived) right there on the sidewalks and in Darling's Stationary where he bought his typing paper, and Eikov's Liquors where he bought his jug wine. —And oh yes, certainly in front of the icy display case at Brown's Fish Market. That was his very favorite.

But in reality, he wasn't six foot. He was just five-foot eight. And he wasn't an athlete (although he certainly had been in his pure and youthful Northport days), he just moved like one. His whole presence had a precision of balance, a lightness unlike anyone else and people sensed it. He had been slinging setting heavy block in splattering slippery mortar five, ten—twenty-five stories up since a teenager. He had the combined grace and strength of a fine-tuned athlete and Met ballet star combined. It was something he was unconscious of, though.

Maybe nationally, in the national press, he would be called "The Forgotten Author." But here in Port Jefferson he was still someone special; and he relentlessly worked at keeping that image alive with the skill of a Madison Avenue executive. —For in his mind the big comeback was right around the corner—that big phone call from his agent, or an editor, or a movie executive or director, or maybe Brando or Quinn—that one phone call that would ring in the downstairs hall any day now and change everything. And why not? It had happened once before in his life. It was just a matter of time . . . and a bit of luck. And this time, when he was back on top again, he promised himself, promised, he'd get it right—No more booze and swell broads, no more immature displays throwing cash around at swanky clubs and restaurants and shiny new convertibles. After all, he was a lot more mature; and he had a family to support and boys to raise, and a stepdaughter and mother-in-law under his roof also. But most of all, not a cent wasted on his idiot brothers, who he had raised and fed and clothed and spoiled since they were kids—He resented it, all of it, bitterly. It made him spit.

And while his son Aleck, named for his mother's father, Lt. Alexander Richard Dean, is placing his devoted trust in his father, believing him infallible (although, yes, of course he realizes his father has his problems. But don't all great artists?), the infallible father is struggling to write that hit book he so desperately needs.

And yes, of course it's about the money. It was always about the money. But there's a far deeper force in play here, a far deeper need than even the money or fame. For you see it was the only way he knew to . . . His only path to purification. Because he *was* pure. He's sure of it. Well, at least he had been. And in *his* book there's no halfway, no in-betweens. But if he could come clean in his art (for in his mind art was a transfiguration carrying a kind of beatified purity and goodness), a writer's confessional, of sorts, and bare his Soul—

After all, his mother had been pure when she married her childhood sweetheart, Geremio, back in the Old Country, in Vasto. She was pure on her wedding night—there was certainly no doubt about that. Each of the eight children had been conceived and born in the light of His Love and Purity. The question of why he alone should be exempt—un-needing of the same, wrangled endlessly in his mind. Simple. It was much

easier to go the path of pleasure, to turn away from the years of his mother's loving inculcation: her catechisms and Bible stories; holy cards; scapulas; votive candles; her kitchen wall shrine with azure-plaster Holy Mother and colorful framed pictures from the school of Raphael's oh-so-starry indigo sky, and nightly prayers bedside on their knees, all in preparation for his Confirmation at their local parish in Hoboken, San Rocco's. It was inevitable that he'd be asking himself someday if she had been right all along—Of course she had, he admitted to himself during occasional flashes of candor. You're just too damn stubborn to accept it!

But he doubted his writing, mocking his own belief that his "scribblings," as he called it, would somehow bring about a kind of absolution, the cleansing he so desperately needed.

What's the answer. . .? Well. You only have one. Write. Rewrite the history you fucked-up so badly. And while you're at it you might as well tell them about all that wonderful fun and sex with all those beautiful girls you had whenever you wanted it (that's what sells) . . . And the fame. God knows, there's nothing like it. You look like a fool having been famous and rich and now back on the scaffolds breaking your ass like a goddamned animal.

His mind swirls with anxious thoughts, a bad mix of revenge and a pathetic craving for the straight path he strayed from so many years earlier.

The only way . . . The only way. But for what? Be honest . . . What you really want is His forgiveness whom you simply lost faith in.

Yes yes. You renounced him decades ago. But. Still. There are . . . things. Oh, not the stupidity, like being blind drunk down at the marina and having that gang of flag-waving yachtsmen knock you and Pete Petri around and throw you off the end of the dock at two in the morning. Or even for getting lit every night at dinnertime and dragging your Kathleen by the hair through hell. Why? Because she was a widow. That filthy word. Because she had had the gall to marry some other man, the corpulent old Dutchman thirty years older than herself—the hotel manager, the soft-handed one, before she was even aware of your existence, the hotshot young author. No. Not for the obvious—

4: Paul's writing room, 1969.

Closing the door behind him in the upstairs spare bedroom—once Harriett's room, now his writing room—he settles in and flips on the motor of his salmon-pink Selectric. The smooth hum signals the beginning of creation and he begins batting out some lines that have been floating around in his head for the last day or two.

And once the miraculous ball (and miraculous it is. With that twelve-year-old curiosity of his he's as impressed by that ball as one of those deep-Congo cannibals witnessing the supernatural powers of the white-man's carbine for the first time) slaps the bonded Sphinx typing paper with those inky characters, so clean, so precise, his thoughts transform, genie like, becoming his destiny he controls from his fingertips: *The regrets of our past, as time goes by, weigh as an anchor chained to the heart day by day dragging down—Imperceptibly heavier—Down to cold darkness. Down to the inevitable black oblivion. . .*

He likes it well enough. Not bad not bad, he tells himself. He happened to have thumbed through some Conrad the other day. But it wasn't that. He'd already found himself writing these types of lines these days.

He stares down at the sheet with the latest incarnation of his attempt to reorder time. Reading it over several times he isn't sure if he truly believes what at first he had thought to be so true.

Maybe goddammit he isn't ready to succumb to those regrets. Maybe he would defy the way of things—of life, and refuse to play The Penitent . . . save all that crap for your deathbed—which, by the way, maybe, just maybe there's a way around . . . For Christ sake. Do you really believe you're going to be the first exception! —*Couldst thou make men to live eternally, Or, being dead, raise them to life again?*

Wishful thinkers like you have been scheming since God-knows how far back in sheer disbelief that 'the show goes on' once you become nothingness. Just another death-obsessed author. Pretty boring stuff. And as we all know, in the writing game boring is the Kiss of Death.

—Well, if he is destined to join everyone else in that cold oblivion, Mahler's Ultimate Destination (and let's be honest: for some comforting reason you find it a bit easier to face knowing that every single somebody else in the world faces the same shitty end. And no exceptions! Not mother. And certainly not father. Not the faceless every-man in the street OR the president of the U-nited States of America—not even the Pope!), it wouldn't be before he had reaped his sweet revenge on all the sonsofbitches. And that goes double for the egghead critics in the City who had him washed up and ruled out—effete pricks. Sure. All of them.

And you know what some of the locals, the reactionary slobs say behind your back: "Isn't that the guy who wrote that famous book, *Christ and the Bricklayers*, or something? Sure. That's him. Paul Di Donato. He wound up broke. Now he's laying bricks at Stony Brook. Better to never taste the good life in the first place, I say . . . On top of that, I hear they call him 'Paul the Red!'"

5: Couldn't stay Upstate.

There weren't many of the natives around anymore in Port Jeff, the ones who had branded him back at the end of the war: He was the fancy writer who sat it out while the rest, their brave boys and husbands, their sweethearts and brothers, were laying down their lives overseas defending Democracy. That's right. He had retreated to the grassy dunes of the North Shore while the war was still on. He wanted seclusion. They certainly could have stayed Upstate in New Ionia, where they met, now that he could afford to live anywhere he liked. New Ionia would have been a fine place to settle down, if, they hadn't met. But they had. And it was that one indelible twist of fate, that one cast of the die, that made it out of the question. For the mere mention of the name New Ionia, as in the New Ionia Hotel and its bloated old manager, Harry Mull, triggered his implacable rage. No. Upstate would never do. He would return to the familiar pull of the boroughs, taking his new wife with him.

Kathleen was open and pliable, going along with whatever over-life-sized emotions *her* new—her second—husband spewed from his guts. She even managed to overlook (well, it was all very new at the time) the mortifying embarrassment of the public scenes: in taverns; and restaurants; or train stations when men would back him into a corner or tail him speaking loudly and threateningly, calling him a dirty CO bastard—a traitor—the lowest of the low and barely letting him escape without getting the hell beaten out of him.

So they looked farther and farther out. Then they found her. Kathleen called her their “guiding angel”—in the tiny village of Stony Brook, roadside on 25A in her shed office opposite the railroad station. The sign on the front of the tiny building beneath the gooseneck lamp with green rusted enamel shade read:

AMY ELZON
—REALTOR—

No sooner than they had introduced themselves than she told them with a charming little smile: “I’ve been saving *just* the place for you. I’m not going to say another word about it. I want it to be a real surprise—other than you’re going to fall in love the moment you set eyes on it.”

And Amy was so right. She drove them up through Port Station and out country roads that ran through lush undulating terrain dispersed with sunny open fields and orchards, then descended the North Shore’s steep hills to a hamlet hidden away on the water.

She found the opening to the dirt drive almost consumed by the woods and rounded curves through the turning leaves of October until the bleached gray farmhouse opened

into view. Paul looked to Kathleen. She was glowing. “Wonderful! Amy,” he had said back then, “We’ve found our new home. . .”

Strange, because the grayed old place—its clapboard beaten through the twenties, thirties and forties by the unsheltered buffeting of the Sound and baking beachside summers—wasn’t at all the kind of place Kathleen’s former life was accustomed to. However, like Paul, she was drawn to the hidden acres *with their own beach* and the magnetic Sound.

Giving the stalwart two-and-a-half story structure a quick look, Paul led her around to the backyard with its quiet transition to dune grass and the white sand beach rich with satiny-smooth colored stones: all shades of tan; white; dark glassy gray and black and rosy-pink quartz—and wanting to be immersed in such beauty and feeling the sun-warmed breeze on her cheeks she spoke from another world. She was the strangest of enigmas. There was no explaining her. Her upbringing (Chicago’s upper-crust neighborhoods with a black nanny and cook) could never have accounted for such a worship of the mysteries of the natural world—except that she had always adored when her Grandpa Williamson read to her from one of his Wordsworth volumes—And was she not of the age of Jack-in-the-pulpits and dragonflies, of garland-streaming nymphs dancing in moonlit meadows? Yes. And he already knew of her very private little-girl stories she wrote with her fountain pen to her father freshly, and gallantly, fallen in the night sky over France when his biplane struck telegraph wires in heavy fog.

Why did little girls with broken hearts resort to fantasies receding into shadowed woods living amongst the animals in a thatched-roof cottage, he wondered to himself that first night in the Tap Room of the New Ionia Hotel. That night was just like any other in a swell hotel full of opportunities to pick up beautiful girls now that he was a celebrity. It could have been any city, any girl, anywhere on one of his book tours. New Ionia meant nothing to him.

She poured her heart out to him. Just him? She must have told the same secret thoughts to the dead manager. The thought left him with the ground shifting under his feet. He couldn’t catch up with the jealousy which sprang instantly from nowhere. It shocked him. He would have felt more secure twenty stories above the teaming traffic sliding on scaffolds blotched with slippery-wet mortar.

After all, this love was something new to him, the guinea kid from Jersey’s Hoboken—a truly American girl, a white girl he could call his own yet not fully grasp and, despite his intuitive warnings, could not give up.

He was entranced, bewitched by those deep stirrings of hers, her creamy white skin and auburn hair. How she loved to gush forth feelings inspired by brave chickadees and gentle furry creatures, the mysteries of that other world below the surface and the wind

rustling the treetops. She knew it was something more than just wind. And in her mind it justified her existence—even more, made sense of her will to go on, giving her an indomitable spirit. “Can’t you just feel it, darling? —the pervasive beauty of it all,” is what she had said upon first standing by the Sound that day. “It’s my secret . . . You’ll see. Someday.”

Yes, it was so beautifully revealing of whom she was. And although Paul thought he was drawn solely by his lust of the flesh—yes it was that, of course, because that’s all it had ever been, following his whoremaster father and recklessly dashing his mother’s Old-World admonishments of chastity and purity. But there was something else too, something about the intimacy, the heartbreaking sincerity of her thoughts expressed in her rich contralto voice and smelling the dark richness of her auburn hair, which drove his obsession.

She could *never* have laid her life out so unabashedly, so fearlessly, before any other man. No! You don’t believe that for a second—you can’t! And even in those early days when you walked at the water’s edge and she was composing her innocent poetry, it mingled within that unreachable world of hers. . .

*There is a certain place
where I must go
to dwell and know
there to linger.
A place of Wind and Tide
of Marsh grass tall
where Bird and Fish
and Fowl may feed.
Small creatures scurry
finding haven for a nest
in this quiet place
so kindly blest.
This certain place is where
no earthly feet have trod
and where
if you are very still
you may hear
the gentle breath of God.*

For information on the complete manuscript:
The Night They Burned Sacco and Vanzetti
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