

The Humanists

by Alba Brunetti

Adua was the one who was always seeking answers. Ines already knew what they were. For her the emotions and the pleasures of the body were what we needed in this life. If they were fulfilled, you had no questions. I was still young and had no real experience. I could see both points, so I kept my mouth shut.

It wasn't a surprise then when Ines showed no interest in an evening out with her sister and her friends. I would go with Adua and see a part of Rome I had not been to before. And perhaps we would all find some sort of enlightenment.

Nicola came to pick us up in his Cinquecento and his friend Paolo sat beside him. Paolo had to get out of the car for Adua and I to squeeze in the back, inches from each other. Then we were off at reckless breakneck speeds down along the 'muro torto.'

Nicola and Paolo had an easy banter going on between them and quickly involved Adua.

"Where are we going?"

"Bar Amalfi, near the Gianicolo."

"And who are these people?"

"It is a group called the Humanists. They just began a chapter in Rome."

"Ah-ha," said Nicola

"Why couldn't Grazia come?" asked Adua.

"She's tired," said Nicola of his live-in girlfriend, taking one hand off the wheel and circling it in the air — a gesture that clearly meant, excuses, excuses.

Adua had met Grazia at a meeting of feminists in Rome. They were mostly politically moderate women from Rome and the north. Adua had been the only one there from a southern region. Grazia, a big and big-hearted woman, immediately struck up a conversation with Adua and offered her a ride home. Adua accepted and they ended up grabbing a tea at the bar on the corner before saying goodnight. The following week the same thing happened and on the

third week, Grazia proposed going out for a pizza together with her husband, Nicola.

"We're not really married," said Grazia, "but we've been living together for ten years; so we say that not to upset his parents."

The night out for pizza was a big success, partly because Nicola was a gregarious man who loved being in the company of women and partly because Nicola, like Adua, was from the south. True, they were from different regions, but it was a strong bond in a city of Romans and northerners. The night out for pizza was followed by trips to the movies, which sometimes included Nicola's friend, Paolo. Often Paolo would host small dinner parties at his country house near the outskirts of Rome where he would bring out food wrapped in newspaper. From the oily, inky pages would emerge flaming red cheeses and sausages coated with red pepper that he had brought back from his hometown in Calabria. The taste was powerful and potent. The shock of the heat of the peppers that would fill your nose and mouth with fire and your eyes with tears until it gave way to the sweet and delicate butteriness of the cheese and meat. I wasn't used to eating this way. Our region was famous for its fresh cheeses — ricotta, mozzarella, scamorze and sweet sausages that had no heat or bite. Whenever we went to Paolo's country house, his partner Paola was there. They had been together since middle school and they had a fifteen-year-old daughter, Daniela. Since they were both ardent communists they did not believe in marriage. Paola was small and resembled Paolo. They were both short and small boned and their features seemed hardened and lined in the same way, making them look more like brother and sister than life-long partners. Daniela, though, was a beauty. Her long dark hair and small dark eyes seemed fragile and doll-like. I could not imagine how Paolo and Paola could have ever looked so innocent and soft.

Nicola towered over Paolo. He had wild, wiry reddish-brown hair and a long beard, large green eyes and a big, broken nose over irregular teeth. He was large and larger than life, but had the most improbably elegant hands that he would wave about when he told

his funny stories. From the first moment he saw me, he began his campaign of charm and humor because he knew this was how to seduce a woman.

"Be careful of him," said Ines, "he's slept with all of Grazia's friends except for Adua. He really is quite successful with women. And that Grazia doesn't know a thing about it. She thinks all those women are her friends. Really, northerners are so stupid."

I could not see how his campaign of seduction would work on me; I did not find him at all attractive. In fact, to me he looked like Michelangelo in the famous painting, The School of Athens, a pensive, but somewhat brutish man. And Rome was filled with beauties who looked like sculptures come to life. Beautiful men were everywhere with their large dark eyes and full lips and perfect bodies.

If I would answer the phone when Nicola would call for Adua, he would laughingly say my name. He began to call me "pupa" — doll, that would make Ines roll her eyes.

"Do you believe there can be friendship between a man and a woman?" he'd begin.

"Yes, of course."

"Do you believe that if there is an attraction between a man and a woman that it should be acted upon?"

"I suppose."

"Do you believe that if a man and a woman made love they can still be friends?"

"Yes, I can see that."

"Perhaps even better friends than before?"

"Yes, but that would depend on the situation and the couple."

"But is possible. Don't you agree?"

"Yes."

"Then why don't we make love?"

I would laugh and say no.

He would often say, "Why must you be so American? So ordered and logical. It's so Anglo-Saxon. No — to let's make love. Let me speak with your cousin, American."

I would hand Adua the phone and chuckle to myself. I had never had this kind of attention in New York.

"Well, what do you say, pupa? Are you ready to be enlightened?" Nicola said to me as he turned his head back to parallel park the car.

I had no idea where we were. The cypress trees lined the hill behind us and this part of Rome was illuminated by massive streetlights. Nicola reached his giant arms around Adua and myself as we ran across the speeding traffic to get to Bar Amalfi. He dropped his arms to open the door as we walked into the bar, which was elegant and had an air of the bygone age of *la dolce vita*.

He turned to me and said, "You look beautiful this evening, really angelic." And I did feel beautiful; my long hair flowed down my back in soft curls that had been freshly washed. I could only wash my hair once a week and when I did I enjoyed the softness and fresh shampoo smell.

There were circular booths in the room adjacent to the bar where a tall, elegant woman sat with two dark stocky men. Elisabetta was Roman. The two men were living in Rome and were from Argentina. Leandro and Diego were cousins, but looked so alike they could have been twins. Elisabetta began her talk. She, the Argentineans and Adua sat in a semi-circular booth. Paolo sat next to me on my left and Nicola on my right.

"We believe that humanity has gotten lost. When you get to a certain age, you begin to understand how difficult life can be," she began. "Of course," she said looking at me, "when you are still so young, just a teenager..."

"Oh, I am not a teenager," I said blushing.

"But you are so beautiful, so angelic, so innocent," said Nicola leaning into me and brushing some of my hair behind my ear with his hand.

"So beautiful," he said to the group.

Everyone quickly agreed. I felt my face flush hot once more.

"What I'd like to do is begin a meditation exercise," said Elisabetta.

"It's just very easy breathing," said Leandro.

"That way we can all be on the same level. We can all be brothers and sisters. Let's make ourselves comfortable."

Nicola was moving his chair back and I happened to notice that a woman had moved from the bar area to the doorway where she was watching us and smoking a cigarette.

"Ok, comfortable? Let's begin breathing in and out. Just relax and breathe in and out."

I began taking deep relaxing breaths and was beginning to feel calm when the woman spoke from the doorway.

"Hey. I know you."

We all turned to look at her.

"Yes. I know you quite well, in fact."

She was a young woman in her early 30s. She was chubby, with very fair skin and dark hair that she had pulled back into a ponytail. She was wearing a pink parka and a pink sweatshirt and stained white sweatpants that she had tucked into short white boots. She carried a big, floppy white purse. Her outfit was out of style and grimy, but I could not take my eyes off her. She was vibrant, sexy and something about her was animal-like and magnetic. Even under her baggy outfit, you could see the form of her curvy body. I could imagine the effect of her wearing a dress and some pretty shoes. She would have turned every head.

Her voice became shriller.

"Now you don't know me. Is that it?"

Paolo didn't move. He looked straight at Elisabetta, who looked back at him. The Argentineans looked visibly annoyed.

"Yes. You knew me well at Ostia...that Saturday," and her voice cracked.

Paolo still didn't move, though I could feel him shrinking beside me. He looked down at his hands and rubbed them together. He had done the same thing when he was telling me about reading Carlos Castaneda at his country house, and how he had been in love with a woman many years ago, but she did not love him. Inspired by one of the books, he had fashioned a tube out of heavy papers,

which he demonstrated with a newspaper on the table before us and placing it to his lips, exhaled.

"I opened the window and blew out my soul to her," he had said, "so she would know that I loved her." I never asked him if it had worked.

"No, you don't know me. You don't want to know me now. Alessandra. Alessandra Parenti," she said and began to cry.

Nicola got up and softly touched Paolo's shoulder. He went up to her and gently put his arm around her. He spoke to her softly and led her to the bar.

Elisabetta looked relieved, but the Argentinians still looked annoyed.

"Before we were interrupted rudely," she began, "we were talking about how all humanity can be on one level. Brothers and sisters."

I stopped listening to Elisabetta. I watched Paolo who sat still in his chair. He did not look behind him or at me. He looked straight ahead at Elisabetta. I turned from time to time and could see Nicola speaking to Alessandra. He offered her coffee corrected with a shot of whiskey. He stroked her arm as she cried. She reached into her bag and pulled out a crumpled tissue and dried her eyes. They continued talking at the bar. The next time I turned around Nicola was giving her a few thousand liras. She thanked him and put the bills into her parka pocket. Nicola kissed her on both cheeks and she began to cry again. He stroked her arm and said something and she nodded yes. He turned to walk back to the group and caught my eye. I saw Alessandra following him. Nicola kept looking at me. He was nearing Paolo when Alessandra said, "You remember me. You remember me and that Saturday."

Nicola turned and put his hand on her shoulder and gently turned her around, "Now, come, come," he said. He walked her to the bar and out the door. He watched her as she walked away.

Nicola walked back in, but this time had turned toward Adua and Elisabetta. He brought his chair next to mine and leaned close

to me. He put one arm around the back of my chair and with the other began stroking my hair gently.

"It is very sad," he said. I could smell whiskey, the espresso and cigarettes. His breath was moist and warm. I could feel it on my neck and curling into my ear.

"Very sad, pupa." His fingers rhythmically stroked my hair and caressed the outer rim of my ear. I felt myself enjoying the caress and leaning closer.

"She's very sick. She's dying," he said smoothing my hair along my neck.

"It's leukemia. A very rare type," his hand reached my shoulder and stopped there.

"She only has a few months," he said, moving his thumb slowly down my arm. "So, let's make love."

I turned to look at him and around the irises of his eyes I could see tiny flecks of gold.

