

The Confraternity

by

Colin Pink

email: colin.pink1@virgin.net

Will you teach your children what we have taught our children? That the earth is our mother? What befalls the earth, befalls all the sons of the earth. This we know: the earth does not belong to man, man belongs to the earth. All things are connected like the blood which unites us all. Man did not weave the web of life, he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself.

Chief Seattle, 1855.

'Ouch' is a one-word sentence which a man may volunteer from time to time by way of laconic comment on the passing show.

W.V.O. Quine, 1960.

Death is not what we think.

Thinking is not what we think.

Our thoughts are strangers. They come to us in whimsical shapes that resemble them. We do not recognise them. Because during our story's most interesting circumstances, we do not recognise ourselves. Living is: advance straight toward the unknown to the point of getting lost.

Hélène Cixous, 1990.

The First Page

The paper is torn and burnt around the edges. It looks like it has been pulled out of a fire. Despite the damage the text is legible. It is the first page of Adam Harper's unpublished biography of the Italian film director Stefano Torriti. This is what it says:

Stefano Torriti, as every art-house cinema-goer knows, was an enigma. Born into a wealthy Milanese family he was desperate to avoid settling down on the family estate. Full of restless energy he travelled around post-war Europe and settled for a time in Germany. While studying film in Munich he fell in love with the German actress Ana Bach. Eventually he returned to Italy and made his first feature film *Gatto e Topo* in 1966; 'Cat and Mouse' combined biting social satire with intense eroticism and it was an instant success. There followed a sequence of brilliant films, no two alike, that brought him fame, acclaim and notoriety. In 1969 he made *Pontormo's Ladder* a study of the life and times of the 'mad' Renaissance painter Jacopo Pontormo and in 1972 *Isola del Hadrian* about a failed attempt to set up a utopian pagan community on a Greek island. In the film the beauty of the landscape, photographed with a loving almost caressing gaze, is contrasted with the ugly sentiments of the people. In 1975 he started work on his final film *La Cacciatrice* ('The Huntress').

It was while at work on this film that Torriti disappeared. Immediately there were rumours of foul play. It was claimed that financial backing for the movie (it is well known that Torriti had great difficulty in raising the money) had originated with the Mafiosi and he had somehow fallen foul of his backers. But close friends hinted that he had been suffering from depression in the weeks leading up to his disappearance; whatever happened his body was never found.

Torriti had been filming in woods outside Lucca. In the middle of shooting he wandered off into the forest and was never seen again. The maker of enigmatic films became an enigma himself.

To add to the mystery his final film also disappeared, destroyed in a fire at the editing studio. As a result only a few isolated scenes from *La Cacciatrice* have survived. On the rare occasions when they have been screened, as curiosities at film festivals, most people seem to find them strangely disappointing. Today the film and its maker are largely forgotten.

It is my task in this book not only to revive the reputation of a director with a unique poetic sensibility but also to solve the mystery of Stefano Torriti and his last film. My journey began in London and would take me to

The rest of the manuscript of Adam Harper's biography is missing. And so is Adam Harper.

Meeting Petra

Adam first met Petra Scalesi in a coffee shop off the Charing Cross Road. They both agreed the espresso was no good. They were sitting at adjacent tables and caught one another's eye as they raised their heads from their cups. Both had pursed their lips, pouting them outwards as if waiting for an unwanted kiss. She laughed. He laughed. They got talking. Petra was Italian, so it was no surprise she disapproved of the coffee. Adam suggested they move to a nearby wine bar and take the taste out of their mouths. Petra hesitated and then, to Adam's surprise, said yes.

He directed them to Val Taros wine bar. On the way Adam, who prided himself on his linguistic ability, tried out his Italian on her. She laughed at his accent but it was such a charming laugh, with an open joyous smile, that he did not mind that she laughed. She had jet-black hair that hung in luxuriant curls around her oval face and she spoke English with confidence. When she became animated she rolled her 'r's so fiercely that it was as if she was shooting down the words with a machine-gun. Her deep brown eyes shone with the passion of her conversation.

The cellar bar at Val Taros was reached by descending steep narrow stairs. At this early hour there were not many customers. Each table was decorated with an old hessian covered Rioja bottle with a candle sticking out of the neck. As they sat the waitress lit the candle on their table like a votive offering to romance. Adam ordered a bottle of Valpolicella. The waitress poured the wine and a few purple

bubbles sparkled in the candlelight. Adam took a sip, nodded his approval and said:

‘What brings you to London?’

‘I’m an art historian.’

‘Fascinating.’

‘I’m an assistant curator at the Uffizi and I’m on secondment at the National Gallery. I’m here to learn about infra-red reflectography.’ Petra looked at Adam’s expression and laughed. ‘Now it does not sound so interesting, eh?’

‘Perhaps not. But I’m sure it’s a fascinating subject, if I only knew what it was.’

‘It’s a way of seeing below the surface of a painting. We can see what has gone on underneath.’

Now Adam laughed. ‘It sounds like psychoanalysis for paintings.’

‘Psychoanalysis?’

‘Seeing what’s going on under the surface, delving into the subconscious of the painting, the bits that are normally kept hidden.’

‘You could put it that way. We can see the drawings underneath the paint. We can tell if the artist has changed his mind and whether he has carefully planned out all the details of the picture or invented it during the process of painting. It can be very revealing, as you say.’

They sipped their wine and the waitress brought a dish of olives, crisps and nuts.

‘And what do you do?’ said Petra, popping a lustrous black olive into her mouth. Adam watched her lips as she chewed.

‘I’m a film director,’ he said.

‘Are you kidding?’

‘No.’

‘Are you going to offer to make me a star?’

'No.'

'Good.' She ate another olive. 'It must be exciting, making films.'

'Not really. These days I seem to spend more time arguing with accountants than looking through a view-finder.'

'Would I know any of your films?'

'I doubt it.'

'Try me.'

'You won't have heard of them.'

'Try me.'

'Okay. Well, my first film was called "The Inner Circle".'

'No, I don't know it.'

'Then I made one called "Defining Dawn".'

'Sorry.'

'My most recent film was called "The Skin of Memory", it should be out on DVD soon.'

'Umm, no, I don't think I know it.' And they both laughed.

'I told you.'

'Yes, you did.' Petra laughed again.

'It's just as well you haven't seen any of my films. I'm nothing like my films and if you had seen them you would probably see me through them.'

'Would I?'

'That's what people tend to do. Anyway, the accountants have pulled the plug on my next film, so I don't think I'll be making another for a while.' Adam picked up a crisp and crunched it noisily. Petra reached across the table and touched Adam's hand.

'Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. What are you going to do?' she said.

Adam sighed. 'I'm going to take a break from film-making. I'm going to write a book instead.'

'How exciting. What's your book going to be about?'

'I'm going to write a biography of my favourite director, Stefano Torriti. Do you know his work?'

'Yes, of course I know him. He made that film, what was it call? I saw it at the student film club. Oh yes, *Gatto e Topo!*'

'That's right.'

'I liked it very much. But it made me sad.'

'I love his films; he is unique. I was asked by this little publishing house to write a book on one of my favourite film directors for a series called "Directors on Directors". I didn't think I'd have time but now my own film has fallen through I have the time after all, so I said I'd do it. I suppose . . . ' Adam fell silent.

'Yes?'

'I suppose I have in mind . . . well, I hope that writing about Torriti, studying his films and his life, will remind me of what's really important . . . of the reason I became a film director in the first place. Sometimes there is inspiration to be had in other people's lives, don't you think?'

'Yes, I'm sure there is. I hope you find what you are looking for in Torriti. So, this book, it will be an homage.'

'Partly.' Adam paused to think and then said, 'But I'm also attracted to the fact that he's a mystery. Mysteries fascinate me.'

'What is so mysterious about Stefano Torriti?' said Petra, tossing her head, her dark curls settling luxuriantly over her shoulders. Adam was momentarily distracted from her question by her hair and said, 'I'm sorry, what did you say?'

Petra smiled mischievously and said, 'Why is Torriti a mystery?'

'Oh, yes, Torriti. Well, one morning he failed to turn up on set. The assistant director went to his trailer to fetch him but there was no sign of the maestro. He was never seen again.'

'Mysterious indeed.'

'Yes.'

'So you are going to be a, how do you say, Agente investigativo?'

'A detective? I suppose every biographer is a detective. Don't you think?'

'Perhaps. I have never been a biographer. I have only seen one or two of Torriti's films.' Petra took a sip of wine and seemed to savour it in her mouth, thinking the while. 'Didn't he make a film about the Renaissance painter Jacopo Pontormo?'

'Yes! *Pontormo's Ladder*. A beautiful film.' They sipped their wine. Adam watched Petra pop another olive into her mouth and said, 'Do you like it in London?'

'Very much. Bella. London is molta bella.'

'How long are you staying?'

'Oh, perhaps three months.'

'I'm going to Florence soon; to research my book on Torriti.'

'Why Florence?'

'Well, Torriti lived in the city for many years. Ana Bach, his long-term partner and the star of all his films, still lives in the area and also Torriti's friend and adviser Tonino Ginzburg who worked on several of his movies. I'd like to interview them about Torriti. The city also houses the national film archive and I want to do some research in the archive.'

'So are you going to find out what happened to Torriti?'

'That's my aim.' Adam looked at Petra and thought he saw a brief expression of disquiet cross her elegant features.

At that moment a boisterous crowd of people descended into the wine bar. By the look of them they all worked together and had gone out for a drink immediately after work. Perhaps it was someone's leaving celebration. The little cellar bar suddenly became noisy and the mood shifted. Adam had to raise his voice to be heard.

'Would you like to see one of his films?'

Petra smiled. 'Of course I would. You have me intrigued now.'

'They're showing 'Pontormo's Ladder' at the National film theatre, part of a season of Italian cinema from the sixties, on Thursday.'

'It's a date.' Petra picked up her glass, her long fingers curling elegantly around the bowl, and clinked glasses. She sipped her wine and smiled at Adam; her dark eyes glinting in the candlelight.

Out of the Wood

Adam glanced along his bookshelves and picked out a long neglected edition of Dante's Inferno. He opened it and read the first lines:

Midway along the journey of our life
I woke to find myself in a dark wood
For I had wandered off from the straight path.

Adam knew where the dark wood was; it was in West Hampstead.

He thought about his meeting with Petra. He liked to believe that life could accommodate pleasant surprises and hoped that this was one of them. She excited him but he wondered if seeing her again would be the start of something or merely

lead to disappointment. He reflected on how he had made many bad decisions in the past year.

The phone rang. It was Jane, his wife. 'I hope I'm not disturbing anything?' she said. Her tone was challenging, as if to imply that he must certainly have someone there, doing something, that he would not wish to have interrupted. Adam felt awkward, as though he really had been with a lover.

'No. I'm not doing anything,' said Adam. 'What do you want?'

'You must be very busy with your new film - apart from everything else.'

There was a long pause on the line while Adam tried to determine what to say.

'Are you still there?' said Jane.

Adam simply said, 'Canal Plus pulled out.'

Now it was Jane's turn to leave silence on the line.

'I'm sorry,' she said. There was a peculiar tone to the way she said it. The sympathy was both proffered and taken away in the same moment. 'Still. I'm sure you'll find someone else to back the project, you always do.'

'I don't think so,' said Adam. 'Not this time. All the other co-production money depended on their participation.'

There was another lengthy silence. 'What will you do?'

'I don't know.' Adam didn't want to talk about it any more. Then he remembered that she had phoned him. 'What did you want?'

'Oh, I was just ringing to arrange a time to come over and collect the rest of my things.'

'Oh yes, of course. Any time,' said Adam. 'Any time is fine.'

Jane specified a day. Adam agreed and hung up. Every time they spoke these days it seemed like another thread among the numerous strands that bound them together was broken. They were having what is termed a trial separation.

Adam thought it was more like trial by ordeal. While working on his last film he had indulged in a brief and not very rewarding affair with one of the cast. It was painful to remember it. So little pleasure and at what cost? Jane had found out. She had stuck with him through all the frequent disappointments and occasional triumphs as he built up his career but this time it seemed like she just needed a reason to leave, and he had provided a very convenient one. After she had moved out a friend told him she was seeing a lot of a mutual friend. It felt like they had embarked on some kind of race to prove who could find a substitute for the other quickest.

The call saddened him. Lately phone calls always seemed to bring bad news. He remembered, vividly, taking the call from Ian Houghton, his co-producer, when he broke the news that Canal Plus had pulled out.

‘But they can’t pull out!’ Adam had declared, as if stating it forcefully enough would make it true.

‘I’m afraid they can and they have,’ said Ian.

‘But Jordi loved the project.’

‘There lies the problem. Jordi is no longer with Canal Plus. All change at the top. They’ve replaced him with a new studio head who wants to make a clean sweep. He doesn’t trust Jordi’s judgement, wants to make his own mark, you know the kind of thing.’

‘It’s the end,’ said Adam.

‘Don’t despair. I have a few other backers I’d like to try,’ said Ian.

After he hung up the phone Adam had to sit down. He could feel the room rocking as all his carefully constructed plans for the next year vanished in an instant. He could almost feel the house shifting; it was as if there was a crack in the day, undermining all stability. The house seemed emptier than he had ever imagined it could feel. Somewhere a dog barked and the sound made his isolation seem more complete. He wanted Jane, needed her, here with him, at a time like this. She would

know what to say to ease his feelings of disappointment. But he had forfeited her support.

It was the middle of the afternoon; normal people, thought Adam, were at work. He needed to do something to distract himself. He went into the sitting room and searched through his collection of DVDs and eventually found his copy of Stefano Torriti's film *Gatto e Topo*. It had been a long time since he'd watched it. He slid open the DVD player, inserted the disc and pressed play. A few moments later the opening credits of Torriti's first film were scrolling across the screen.

The film begins with an aerial view of an Alfa Romeo speeding along a winding deserted road. Once the credits have stopped Torriti cuts to a close-up of the front wheel of the Alfa Romeo coming to a stop. The driver's door opens and we see a close-up of a trouser leg and shiny black shoe stepping out of the car and onto the dirt road. Then a long-shot, following a man as he walks down a track in an unhurried manner, winding his path across a field. In the next sequence we never get a clear view of the man's face; we see him either from a long-shot, medium-shot from behind, or close-ups of parts of him such as his feet walking, his hand reaching out to touch something. Music sometimes accompanies his movements. It is used sparsely but when it appears its effect is to make us sense that this is not a happy man.

The camera follows him, in close up, as he walks; he comes to an abrupt halt. We, the viewers, feel like we are going to bump into him and are suddenly projected into the film itself by this sensation. Then the camera pans back and up, releasing us from our plunge inside the film, and we see, before the man, the ruins of a house. From this point the camera becomes his eyes; we see what he sees.

On the sound track we hear ghostly voices, running footsteps and children's laughter that accompanies him as he wanders through the burnt-out ruins. It is a large ornate house; its ruinous state seems even more poignant compared to the

grandeur that has been lost. Stagnant pools of water cover the floors; he walks through the puddles, unconcerned for the condition of his stylish and expensive Italian shoes. He pauses before one large puddle that covers a submerged family photograph and looks up. The roof has caved in and charred rafters point, like brutal fingers, into the air. It begins to rain. The drops fall, unimpeded, into the ruined rooms. He ignores the rain, even though it grows steadily harder; he searches among the ruins and, simply from the posture of the actor, his hesitant, almost tender movements, as he searches among the rubble we sense that it is his self he is searching for. All the while the rain gets heavier and the sound of the rain grows in intensity on the sound-track creating its own kind of drama until its persistent splashing becomes almost tragically unbearable and then, thankfully, Torriti cuts to another scene.

Adam pressed the pause button and sank back into his armchair and closed his eyes. He knew that the rest of the film would be a journey into the past that would eventually come full-circle to this man's encounter with the ruins of his inheritance and the realisation that the very thing he had been fleeing all his life was the thing he needed to confront. Torriti's visual poetry never ceased to move Adam and he was feeling especially vulnerable at the moment. He wasn't sure he could watch any more.

He decided he needed to be among people. It did not matter who the people were. All he needed was the warmth of the herd. He liked to think of himself as an individualist, someone who never followed the crowd, but now it was the crowd that he wanted.

Climbing the Ladder

Thursday arrived. Adam waited outside the National Film Theatre for Petra. He had the tickets, he had a glass of beer, now all he needed was the girl. Within he felt a mixture of anticipation and fear. He was grappling with a persistent apprehension that she would not turn up. Outside it was a balmy night and many people strolled along the embankment, enjoying the views of the river, browsing among the second-hand bookstalls and listening to the buskers. Adam sipped his drink and looked around him, keeping an eye out for Petra, as he soaked up the atmosphere.

There seemed to be couples everywhere; walking, chatting, laughing, gazing into one another's eyes as if they wanted to erase their surroundings. Adam was thinking about this when a voice broke into his thoughts.

'Sorry, I'm late.' It was Petra. Adam looked up at her and smiled, relief suffusing his being. She was wearing a dark suit; it made her look taller, but also slightly more formal, as if dressed for work rather than pleasure.

'No problem. Plenty of time before the film starts.' he said. Petra sat down opposite him. 'What sort of day have you had?' said Adam.

'Okay. Nothing special. And you?'

'Oh okay, you know.'

'I've been looking forward to seeing the film.'

'Me too.'

'And you, of course, seeing you too.'

'Well, thank you. Can I get you a drink?'

'A glass of wine would be nice.'

Adam walked to the bar, his gait animated by the compliment Petra had given him. When he came back she was talking on her mobile phone. She was laughing and speaking in Italian with great rapidity. When she saw Adam she hastily said a few more words and snapped the phone shut with a loud 'Ciao!' She smiled up at Adam as he put the drinks down on the table.

'That was my mother,' she said. 'If I don't "report in" she worries about me.'

'So you've allayed her fears.'

'Yes. But of course,' and Petra smiled cheekily, 'I didn't tell her I was meeting a strange man.'

'I'm not strange.'

'Everyone is strange in some way, no?'

'Well, maybe just a bit,' said Adam, and they both laughed. As they chatted Adam wondered if others were looking at them the way he had been observing the other couples just a few moments before. What would they make of this charming young woman accompanied by a slightly scruffy looking middle-aged man? Adam winced inside every time he called himself 'middle-aged'; it made him feel like an historical period. And why reduce yourself to a category rather than a person? He made a mental note to stop referring to himself in that way.

Before going in to see the film Adam went to the toilet. As he stood at the urinal he glanced up and saw that someone had written on the wall, slightly above head height: 'Do not expect to touch the sky.' Adam smiled and thought to himself, you get a better class of graffiti at the NFT.

As they took their seats in the cinema Adam noticed the auditorium was half-empty; it was a habit he had, estimating the size of audience. He felt disappointed that there were so few people to see Torriti's film. The lights dimmed and the film started, casting resentful thoughts from his mind.

Pontormo's Ladder opens with a sequence of close ups on Pontormo's hands gripping the rungs of the eponymous ladder as he ascends towards a trap door. As he grips each rung his hand dislodges dust into the air. At the top Pontormo lifts the hatch and climbs into an attic room. He pulls up the ladder after him and lets it fall to the floor where it dislodges yet more dust. He sits on the floor. The dust swirls around him, highlighted by the light streaming through the dormer windows like so

many spotlights. He sits very still, waiting for the dust to settle. As he waits the camera pans around the almost empty room and seems, in its movements, to dance like the dust, as if it was light and airy, cast this way and that on delicate cushions of air.

After the dust settles Pontormo begins to paint, a look of intense concentration on his face. He paints and paints. The light from the windows swings around the room suggesting the passage of time as the sun moves across the sky and the day passes. The light begins to fade. Pontormo stops work, lights a fire under a pan of water and boils some eggs. He watches the bubbles. He peels and eats the eggs. When he has finished eating he scribbles in a diary. He hears a noise from below, looks up in alarm, sits very still and listens. Nothing. He returns to his diary. The darkness deepens. Throughout this sequence of the film, despite the complete lack of dialogue, the viewer feels he has come to know Pontormo and to apprehend a pervasive sense of isolation, and occasionally fear, permeating his character.

From this opening sequence Torriti cuts to the glittering excess, the political and intellectual rivalry, of the Medici court. Everyone is busy jockeying for position. Apart from the artist the star of the film is Florence itself. The camera follows Pontormo on his journeys across the city; it dogs his footsteps as he trudges through the streets, climbs the scaffolding to work on his frescoes in the church of San Lorenzo or gazes with watery eyes at his own earlier altarpiece in the church of Santa Felicita. In many ways the film is a loving portrait of Florence as seen through the artist's eyes.

Much of the film consists of scenes of Pontormo, old and ill, labouring, painfully and tenaciously, to complete his last big commission, the frescoes in the choir of the Medici church of San Lorenzo. Repeatedly we see him ascending the ladders of the scaffolding to grapple again with the vast composition of elaborately

intertwined figures. These scenes are intercut with flashbacks to a younger Pontormo building up his career as court painter to the Medici, fleeing the plague, adopting the young Bronzino and making him his apprentice. There are beautiful tender scenes of Pontormo looking after the boy Bronzino and the man and boy working together. As Pontormo becomes old and frail it is now the grown Bronzino who looks after him.

The Medici family view Pontormo as an old retainer; they love him and disregard him at the same time. Pontormo, though old, has a vigorous mind and debates the iconography of his last great work with the intellectuals at the Medici court; he holds his own with both words and brush.

Finally Pontormo is on the brink of completing his master-work. He leans, tired but triumphant on the arm of his adopted son and disciple Bronzino. Shortly afterwards he dies. After his death rival painters plot to convince Duke Cosimo de Medici that the iconography of Pontormo's masterpiece is unacceptable.

As the credits roll at the end of the film we see, just a few years later, a gang of workmen once more ascending scaffolding in the choir of San Lorenzo, this time they are painting thick layers of whitewash over Pontormo's fresco. As the film ends the work we saw him expend so much energy on creating is obliterated. The writhing powerful figures in the fresco disappear under the whitewash. His struggle was for nothing.

Never before had Adam seen end credits with such significance. The wide decorators brushes sweep over the screen in close up, covering over Pontormo's figures and simultaneously erasing the names of the makers of the film in one all encompassing movement. The faces of the figures are wiped out along with the names of the actors, the technicians and the director. Nothing lasts, the film seems to say, and at the finish all the efforts we lived through with the painter and the film were for nothing.

As the audience left the cinema they were quiet. A contemplative mood had descended on them. A typical consequence of watching a Torriti movie, thought Adam. It also occurred to him that maybe it wasn't the ideal film to see on a first date. But was this a date? He had to admit he wasn't sure if it was.

'Would you like to go for a drink?' he said. 'There's a good wine bar around the corner.'

'Sure,' said Petra. As they walked to the wine bar she linked her arm in his and Adam felt that perhaps, after all, they were on a date.

Archdukes wine bar, located underneath the railway arches behind the Festival Hall, was, as usual, crowded. Adam and Petra managed to get a table on the upper floor. Adam ordered a bottle of Merlot and they ate smoked chicken salad. From their seat they could look out over the lower floor. There was a noisy crowd downstairs who seemed to be celebrating something, but neither of them could determine what it was. Petra picked at her salad. Adam kept taking nervous drinks of wine and had to order another bottle. He felt like a young man again, unsure, expectant, but so very unsure. But eventually the conversation began to flow and the longer they talked and the more animated they became the more confident and at ease he felt.

Adam and Petra were busy discussing the significance of the ladder in the film when a tall angular man, dressed in black leather, whose movements had the careful but ineptly executed quality of someone who is extremely drunk, leaned across their table and said a loud, 'Ciao, Lucia,' to Petra. The pungent smell of sweat and stale liquor wafted across the table from their visitor.

Petra looked up, irritated, and said, 'You made a mistake, my name is Petra.'

Their visitor pulled up a chair, almost knocking over the table in the process, and rested his arms on it; he ignored Adam's hostile look and Petra's coolness.

'Okay, Petra,' and he elongated the 'air' sound in Pe-tra as if to say, I don't believe

you, you can't fool me, but I'll go along with your game. 'If that's your name now that's fine with me.' He picked up the bottle of Merlot, peered at it in an unfocused way, and said to Adam, 'Is this good?'

'It's okay,' said Adam.

The drunk put down the bottle and turned to Petra again. 'How's Gianni?' he said.

Adam noticed Petra stiffen but she replied, 'I don't know who you're talking about.' The drunk smiled, pleased that his question had broken through her reserve. 'I don't see much of him myself these days,' he said. 'I've got my own band now anyway.'

'How nice for you.'

'If I see him I'll tell him I ran into you. I'm sure he'd be interested to know what you're up to these days.'

'Go away.'

'I'm going, don't worry, darling.' The drunk got up, winked at Adam, and staggered back into the crowd.

'Who was that?' said Adam.

'I don't know,' said Petra. 'Never seen him before.'

'He seemed to think he knew you.'

'He's drunk. Must have mistaken me for someone else,' she said. 'Let's go now, he's spoilt this place.' And she got up abruptly. Adam followed her towards the door. In the cool air outside she turned to him and kissed him quickly on the lips.

'It was a lovely evening,' she said. 'I really enjoyed it. Thanks.'

'The pleasure was all mine.'

'Come back to my place,' she said. 'I'm feeling lonely.'

Without waiting for his reply she strode down the street towards Waterloo station and Adam had to hurry to catch up with her.

Adam followed Petra up the narrow stairs that led to her flat in Tufnell Park. Stale cooking smells from the ground floor flat permeated the entrance hall of the old house. Before him Petra's legs moved, as if in a close up in a film. He admired their shapeliness and elegance. He was hypnotised as if by a moving image on a screen. But it wasn't on a screen, it was flesh and blood, here with him, before him, leading him.

She stopped at the second landing and searched for her keys in her bag. She turned to him and said, a little nervously he thought, 'Why do they always get to the bottom?' Her hand searched quickly and with a rattle extracted a set of keys. 'Got you!' she said to them, but Adam had the impression the words were also applicable to himself.

Once through the door Petra flicked the light switch. A naked bulb illuminated the hallway. She led Adam to the sitting room, gestured towards the sofa and said, 'Make yourself comfortable, I'll make us some coffee.' She turned and left the room.

Adam did not immediately sit down but paced the room and read the spines of the books on her bookcase. He always liked to check the reading material of new friends; he felt it gave him an insight into them, into their tastes and interests. Petra's bookcase kept its secrets. It mostly consisted of books on artists and art history. Not surprising for the library of a young art historian, though he did discover, lurking among the monographs, a battered copy of *The Story of O*. Adam sat on the sofa, which was so low that he was forced to sprawl rather than sit on it.

Petra came back into the room carrying two tiny coffee cups. She looked down at Adam peering up over his knees, awkward and ungainly on the sofa, and she laughed.

'Sorry, this place isn't very comfortable.'

'No, its fine, fine,' lied Adam.

'I expect your place is much nicer.'

'Well, it's different.'

'I've 'borrowed' this place from an English art historian who is on a placement in Italy at the moment and she's staying at my place. None of this stuff is mine.'

Petra sat next to Adam and handed him his coffee. He took the coffee and sat looking down at it, feeling self-conscious. He gazed at it for a long time, as if there might be some secret message inscribed on its liquid surface telling him what to do next. He didn't want to taste the bitter coffee; he wanted to taste the sweetness of her lips. He put the coffee down, turned and kissed her.

Petra smiled. 'I thought it would take you a lot longer to get around to that,' she said, leaned over and kissed him back, but longer this time, a luxury of tongues. She rested her hand on his thigh as they kissed and the combination of her hand and her tongue generated a tight pressing urgency in his loins.

'The bedroom is more comfortable,' she said and rose, took his hand, and led him down the hall. She picked up some discarded clothes and hastily pushed them into a drawer. 'It's untidy,' she said, laughing. 'I wasn't expecting you to see it.'

Adam didn't notice the room. He pressed her to him and as they kissed and held one another he could feel the warmth of her all along his body. His body responded by feeling more joyously alive than it had in a long time. They descended to the bed and began the cumbersome task of removing their clothing.

They stroked and tasted and explored each other's body - feasting like gourmets on each tender and urgent touch. They made love for a long time, sometimes slow and luxuriant, sometimes with a fierce power. Adam was surprised by the ferocity of Petra's sexual appetite. She seemed to be insatiable and fucked like her life depended on it. At a certain point Adam began to feel that he was no longer really there for her, that it could be any body thrusting against hers, that she

had passed to a plane where all things merged, and there was no longer any issues of identity.

Finally Adam flopped back onto the bed exhausted, sweat covering his body, his chest heaving as he regained his breath. Petra smiled down at him, kissed him on the nose, and said, 'You're good,' with a wicked smile on her face.

Adam just lay there panting but contented, and mentally patted himself on the back. Petra turned over, curled up on the edge of the bed, and promptly fell asleep. Soon afterwards Adam too fell into the deep sleep of sexual satisfaction.

In the middle of the night he awoke. He could hear a siren in the distance; perhaps that was what had woken him. He rolled over to face Petra. She was still lying huddled up like a small animal on the edge of the bed. She twitched and began muttering in her sleep. Adam lay still, listening, trying to discern what was going on in her dream. He wanted to find a way inside her head. He didn't know why, it just seemed to have the fascination of a distant land with beautiful scenery and strange customs. It was hard to make out what she said; it was just snatches of mumbled words, in Italian. He thought at one point she said, 'Gianni, basta,' but he couldn't be sure. After a while she shifted position and the muttering stopped. Adam lay listening to her steady breathing and the regular sound lulled him back to sleep.

The animosity of inanimate objects

The following day was chilly and rainy. Adam made his way across town to his house off the Finchley Road. Despite the elements his internal weather was bright and sunny. His stride was buoyant with the memory of the previous night. He was impressed by Petra's sexual skills. She had performed a number of erotic tricks that he had never experienced before. He wondered how she had learnt to do such things but didn't dwell on it. He was just grateful that he was benefiting from it.

Adam walked up the narrow path to the stolid façade of his Victorian semi and slid the key into the lock. He opened the front door and stooped to pick up the slough of mail that lay behind the door. He could tell, in a single glance, that there was nothing of interest in the post. It was obvious junk; offers of loans, enticements to switch credit card, flowers for all occasions. He sighed and dumped the post on a little semi-circular table that stood in the hallway with its back to the wall.

Then he realised that something was wrong. He couldn't tell what it was, he just felt it. It was like the air was unsettled. He walked into the sitting room and looked around. He was hesitant, as if looking at his things with stranger's eyes. He moved into the kitchen, which he entered with caution as if someone might be lurking behind the door with a gleaming kitchen knife; but it was empty. He went upstairs and walked into the bedroom, looked around, surveyed. But there was nothing unusual, apart from the fact that everything felt re-arranged. He walked back downstairs, slowly, thinking, and returned to the sitting room. He sat in an armchair and scanned the room. Everything was in its place and out of place at the same time. He had the unnerving feeling that someone had come in, picked up each thing, and carefully put it back in its place but not exactly the same place it had occupied before.

He picked up the phone and, rather reluctantly, dialled his wife. When she picked up he said, 'Jane!' with an unplanned urgency in his voice.

'What is it? What d'you want, Adam?' she said, picking up on his tone and reacting with suspicion in her voice.

'Sorry, sorry, I just, sorry for phoning like this but . . . '

'Yes?' The irritation was still there.

'But, um, have you, did you, visit my, our, place yesterday?'

'No, of course not. Why?'

'Oh, nothing. I just, well I just thought maybe you had been over, to collect something or . . . something.'

'No, I have not been over. Are you all right? You sound odd.'

'Me? I'm fine, yes, fine. I just thought. . . '

'Don't worry, in the unlikely event that I want to come over I'll give you plenty of warning beforehand. I wouldn't want to disturb your "new life".'

'I'm sorry to have bothered you.'

'No problem. Take care.' And she put down the phone. Adam sat with the receiver clutched to his ear for a few moments. He looked around the room and it appeared to be mocking him. He closed his eyes, and heard that song, 'just my imagination, playing tricks on me', and opened them again. For a disturbing moment he remembered that children's game where you turn your back on your playmates, and they try and creep up on you, but mustn't be caught moving when you turn to face them. It was as if the things in his house were playing that game, and each artefact, utensil, domestic appliance, item of furniture, was a smug master of the game.

'Nonsense,' he said, out loud. 'Must be my imagination.'

He saw the script of his movie sitting on the coffee table and picked it up. As he flicked through the pages, reading a scene here and there, he imagined how he would have made it, if only he'd been able to raise the money. As he read the script he could see every scene, imagine the movements of the actors, the lighting, the camera angles, all the intricate mosaic of elements that made a fine movie. He knew it would have been good, very good, his best work yet. He put the script down on the coffee table where it lay a mute reminder of one of the many things that might have been.

Actaeon

Over the next few weeks Adam and Petra saw a lot of one another. As their relationship grew Adam felt increasingly reluctant to leave for Italy and risk stalling something that was progressing so well. But all the arrangements were made and he felt committed to the biography even if it was inconvenient for his personal life. He asked, tentatively, whether Petra might like to come to Florence with him and help him with his researches. She declined. She had to finish her studies at the National Gallery, but she promised to come out and visit him for weekends.

The last day they had together before his trip to Italy they visited the National Gallery. Petra was his guide; she showed him her favourite paintings and wore her knowledge lightly when she talked about them. They strolled through the spacious rooms and stopped at Titian's painting called *The Death of Actaeon*. Petra gazed for a long time at the painting. Adam began to feel uncomfortable. He was aware of a conflict within himself between wishing to look at the pictures with her and really wanting to gaze only at her. He found the painted images, however great they might be, no competition for the living, breathing, vibrant woman standing beside him.

There was a hush in the gallery, like church, a reverent silence. Then it was broken by the tip tap rhythm of a woman in high heels traversing the wooden floor, an ambulant metronome of precise walking. Her footsteps said, I'm too busy to look now, you pictures must wait your turn.

Adam listened to the receding footsteps and then dragged his attention back to the picture; he found it rather dull compared to Titian's earlier paintings. He preferred the *Bacchus and Ariadne* with its bright blues, reds and golds and its party atmosphere. But this painting was dark, roughly executed, composed mostly of various subtle shades of brown and rusty reds. On the left a vigorous young woman, one breast exposed Amazon style, was shooting an arrow from her bow and on the

right a man, Actaeon, with the head of a stag, was falling backwards, stumbling as he was pounced on by a pack of hounds. Adam was reminded of times dogs had jumped up at him and almost knocked him off his feet. Perhaps that was the visceral sensation that Titian wanted the viewer to experience. Perhaps he wanted to convey in paint what it was like to be turned on, savaged, made a victim, for the hunter to experience the terror of the prey and long for the pity he as hunter always withheld.

‘A bit harsh, don’t you think?’ said Adam.

Petra turned at the sound of his voice. Her eyes were wide, bigger than he had seen them before, as if they had been drinking in the canvas and were still thirsting. After a moment she said, ‘It depends how you look at it. He disturbed the Goddess, saw what was forbidden.’

‘So she kills him.’

‘He kills himself. His curiosity dooms him. It is his own desire that condemns him.’

‘A kind of tragic destiny, like in a play?’

‘If you like.’ She looked at her watch. ‘They’ll be closing soon, we should hurry if we want to see the Pontormos.’

On the way out, passing through the shop, Petra bought a postcard of *The Death of Actaeon* and gave it to him as a memento of the day.

Arrival

Adam arrived in Florence on a hot and dusty day in June. He had flown to Pisa and then taken the train, alighting at Stazione Santa Maria Novella on the western edge of the city of Florence. The station was all bustle. Large flocks of tourists wandered around looking bewildered as they searched the departure board for trains to Roma, Pisa and Siena. Despite the tourists’ colourful presence the modernist architecture of

the station maintained a rather formal and austere aspect, as if it suspected dark intentions behind everybody's journey and did not approve.

Adam, dragging his suitcase on wheels behind him, exited the shadowy interior of the station and emerged into the dazzling light of Florence. The traffic buzzed around the station; urgency without commitment. But a short walk brought Adam into the relative tranquillity of Piazza Santa Maria Novella. On one corner he could see Alberti's majestic façade of the church of Santa Maria Novella while the opposite side of the piazza was defined by a stately loggia. In the middle was a wide expanse of grass, one of the few grassy places to be found in Florence, which attracted large numbers of backpackers who sat around in informal groups, strumming guitars and chatting.

Adam walked onto the grass and sat down facing Santa Maria Novella. He gazed across at the big stripy façade of the church, the pale stone outlined by darker stones making strong geometric patterns across the surface. But after a few moments he had the uncomfortable feeling of eyes boring into his back. He looked around and saw a group of backpackers were staring at him. They made no attempt to disguise their curiosity when he looked at them. He began to feel awkward. Am I really so out of place here? he thought.

He pulled out a crumpled piece of paper and checked the address of his pensione, the 'Mia Casa'. It had been recommended by a friend and was supposed to be at number twenty-five. He looked around but could see no house numbers so he began walking slowly around the square. He walked past a few shops with their shutters down, it was afternoon and all the shops were shut until 7pm, and then he saw a small blue plaque with white writing on it which read 'Mia Casa'. Beside the plaque was a large pair of wooden doors which were half open revealing a dark inner courtyard. Adam went through and, seeing a flight of stairs, ascended them to another door, shut this time. He rang the bell and waited. After a few moments the

door opened and a tall, thin, shaggy looking man stared down at him. 'I am Adam Harper,' said Adam. 'I have a reservation.'

The tall man beckoned him inside and rummaged behind the desk for a key. He retrieved one with an improbably large fob and asked Adam to follow him. The corridors of the Mia Casa were quiet and dark. Gloomy looking murals could faintly be discerned on some of the walls and ceilings denoting past glory. Adam followed the man through the winding corridors until he stopped at the door of number twenty-four, which he unlocked, announcing: 'Your room, signore.' Then he handed Adam the key and departed.

Adam stepped inside. The room was austere but clean. It was all he wanted. A bed, a little table, a chair. This would be his monk's cell while he researched his book on Torriti. Adam looked out of the window but the angle was such that all he could see was a section of wall and a bright blue patch of sky. He looked at the sky and thought about Petra. Already he was missing her. He got out his laptop and fired it up. To his surprise and relief the wireless connection worked and he was able to get onto the internet. He immediately typed an email to Petra.

Dear Petra,
Arrived safely. Mia Casa is okay. Missing you already.
Love,
Adam
xxxxxx

He clicked send and imagined the little message flying to its destination in Tufnell Park. He switched off the laptop, unpacked his clothes and notebooks and sat in the chair leafing through the plan of his biography of Torriti. Doubts assailed him. Sometimes Adam questioned the whole idea of writing someone's biography. He didn't even understand his own life so what chance did he have of making sense of another's? But he consoled himself with the thought that often it was easier to see

the shape of things from outside. Distance provided a clearer view of the whole whereas your own life surrounded you like an impenetrable forest. Besides, Torriti had got under his skin the way no other film-maker had. He found himself mesmerised by Torriti's movies and in turn mesmerised by the man. Part of the fascination was that Torriti was such an enigma. In his films, and in his life, everything seemed to be veiled, disguised, both itself and more than itself. It made Adam want to peer beyond the veil.

He had been captivated by film ever since he was a child. The way it drew him into a completely different world transfixed him. He became so absorbed in the films he watched it was as if he was being taken over. The entrance into the dark of the movie theatre was an initiation into another realm where almost anything could happen. It was in such utter contrast to the dull daylight world outside.

Often, when his parents arguments had reached screaming pitch, Adam would take himself off to the cinema and find thankful peace in the hectic whorl of images, colour, sound, music, people, landscape, speed, the whole coalescence of a perfectly imitated reality. Everyday fears and anxieties were left outside in the glittering lobby. Going home was another matter; but could always be put off for a while. When he left the cinema he would long to make those seductive other worlds, so far from the narrow constraints of home, for himself.

That evening Adam ate in one of the local cheap restaurants. Such places had no menu, there was only a choice of two or three dishes anyway, but all of the them were delicious. It felt lonely returning to the pensione on his own. Once inside Adam couldn't resist switching on the laptop and checking his email. To his delight there was a message from Petra waiting in his inbox.

Ciao Adam!

Great to hear from you so soon. I miss you too. Have fun in Florence, and don't get into any trouble. :)

Your Petra, xxx

He read the email several times, wishing it was longer, and then just sat for a while staring at it. Then he typed a message back.

Dearest Petra,

Thanks for your message!

Just got back from the local restaurant. They had no menu! That confused me at first. The waiter rattled off the choices so quickly I could barely make out what he said, so I just ordered the thing that I thought I could recognise. It turned out to be a kind of meat stew. It was good.

Going to the Archivio tomorrow to start my research.

Thinking of you.

Love,

A

xxx

The Archivio Cinematografia Nazionale is hidden down a narrow backstreet. The entrance is behind an undistinguished door. Nothing but a small, almost apologetic, nameplate indicates that it is there. It is not high on the list of tourist attractions in Florence and is rarely visited by anyone other than the most ardent cineaste. This was where Adam spent his days.

Inside the Archivio is a place of contrasts. The reception is adorned with posters of famous Italian films; garish and noisy posters for Fellini; mysterious brooding images for Antonioni; and the lush, sensual posters of Bertellucci. Once past the inspection of the receptionist one enters a small exhibition space. This is all high-tech and interactive as if it was too nervous to have any faith in its contents and wished to distract the visitor with 'activities'.

But behind the public displays there is another archivio; the archive itself, the neglected part of the building; room after claustrophobic room crammed with shelving

where canisters gather dust containing rare footage from forgotten films; then there are the books and scripts bound in a variety of ways; and there are the files containing the accounts, correspondence and publicity materials of long defunct movie companies.

Several years ago, inspired by the possibilities of new technology to disseminate and preserve the contents of the archive, the government set aside a sum of money to fund the digitisation of the gradually disintegrating reels of film so that they might be preserved. But the funds had, as usual in Italy, been tied up in bureaucratic thickets, all the better to disguise the gradual siphoning off of the funds into private pockets and unsanctioned purposes. So the archivio remained its old dusty self.

It was to this neglected part of the archivio that Adam regularly made his way each day to toil among the partial and confusing cataloguing system. The staff had grown used to him and, apart from the occasional brief conversation, largely ignored him. So far the material Adam had turned up about Torriti had been very dull. Most of it consisted of records of the business side of film-making. Useful for confirming dates and tracing the tortuous process of bringing a project from original idea to finished work but not giving much insight into Torriti's methods or life.

La Cacciatrice

While he was going through the records at the Archivio Adam discovered the address for Enrico Bagnoli the film editor who worked on the edit of Torriti's last film *La Cacciatrice*. Adam contacted Enrico and arranged to meet him at his apartment.

Enrico lived in a small, cramped apartment in an unfashionable part of town on the outskirts of Florence. It was a part the tourists never visited. Enrico was a tall, lean man, full of nervous energy. There was an intensity and enthusiasm about

his recollections of working with Torriti that Adam found contagious. He clearly respected Torriti a great deal. As he said, more than once, he was the Maestro.

Though it was only eleven a.m. Enrico insisted on opening a bottle of wine and offering a toast to the memory of Stefano Torriti. As the interview progressed they would get through no less than three bottles of wine.

As they spoke about Torriti, and Adam asked what it was like working on *La Cacciatrice*, Enrico warmed to his subject. He would periodically leap up and retrieve, from the surrounding clutter, various mementos of his time working with Torriti. It was almost as if, by showing him these objects, he wanted to convince Adam, and himself, that he really had worked with the great Stefano Torriti, even if no one had ever seen the fruits of their labour.

‘Tell me what it was like, working on the edit of *La Cacciatrice*?’ said Adam.

‘Torriti was very demanding,’ said Enrico. ‘Perfection was only just good enough for him.’ And he laughed. ‘They were long hard days in the editing studio. But, it was very interesting at the same time. Torriti had picked a little studio that wasn’t usually used to cut feature films; I was puzzled by this. But the whole situation was very difficult. I think Torriti had financial worries, I assumed that was why he picked that crummy studio. We had limited time to get the film edited. And also the atmosphere at that place, it was strange. Normally people would come and go, in a friendly casual way, but for this edit Torriti demanded absolute security. Only myself and Torriti were allowed into the editing suite. When we worked on the film we were completely isolated. This I found odd. I had never worked in those kinds of circumstances before. Torriti even had security guards at the building to keep people out. I was sure they were armed.’ Enrico laughed again, pouring himself another drink. ‘You would think we had stacks of gold bullion in the studio rather than reels of film.’ Enrico sat back and contemplated his glass. ‘Ah, but of course, to Torriti film was the real gold.’

'Did Torriti explain why he had so much security?' said Adam.

'No. I asked, but he just said there had been break-ins lately and he didn't want anyone to know what we were doing. That was why the edit was done by just the two of us and in such an out of the way place. I tried to question him more but he became irritable if I asked too many questions, so I stopped. After a while I got used to the security and the strange working conditions. It seemed unnecessary to me but it was Torriti's choice; after all he was the Maestro.'

'What happened to *La Cacciatrice*?'

Enrico poured another glass of wine and drank it down before answering. 'It was destroyed. Such a tragedy.' He said it as if he was speaking of the death of a child. 'We had virtually finished editing the film. But Torriti, ever the perfectionist, was unhappy with some of the scenes shot in the forest, the light was not right, so he decided to re-shoot some footage to replace what we already had. So we stopped work for a bit while he went off to shoot the scene again. It was while he was shooting the extra footage that he disappeared. I had not even heard the news about that when a friend rang me and told me the studio had burned down and I must come at once. It was a complete mess. Gutted. Everything was in the studio: all our stock, the negatives, the prints; everything was lost. I just stood there and wept. I was trying to figure out how I could break the news to Torriti when I heard that he had disappeared. It was all very confusing.'

'Did they ever find out how the fire started?'

'They said it was an accident. Electrical fault. It was an old building and had bad wiring. I didn't believe it then and I don't believe it now. I think it was arson. Someone didn't want anyone to see our film.'