

Letter From Milan

by Andrei Navrozov

The Book of Italian Excuses



A decade ago, Celeste Dell'Anna, to this day the only interior designer in Milan with a world reputation and a beautiful wife, was doing our new house in Knightsbridge. We became great friends, initially because I appreciated the tragic spectacle of this man of culture being baited, like some great white stag personifying the Italian rococo, by a pack of London builders who seemed to have been disgorge by Tolkien's subterranean regions. Some were dwarves, others impossibly gaunt; some had warts, others long hair the color of pigsty straw; some spoke not at all, others were full of palaver; but the one thing all these barbarians had in common was the kind of sylvan, northern, autistic stupidity that is now the chief distinguishing characteristic of the socially displaced and the ethically disenfranchised.

A pupil of the legendary maximalist Renzo Mongiardino, Celeste went on to design yacht, airplane, and helicopter interiors for the Agustas, for the Aga Khan, and for the king of Spain. But this was his first job in England. Long used to reconciling the conflicting demands of space, personality, and skill, he valiantly tried to suppress the dawning realization that he was no longer in St. Moritz, that none of his fancy footwork now mattered, and that this time round, in the suitably rustic idiom of the Russian proverb, the scythe had hit a stone. The technical sketches he executed in brown chalk on the stripped yet evermore grimy walls of Victorian hallways and cloakrooms looked more plausible than Renaissance inventions, and each possessed the charm of a museum Watteau; but the ulotrichous workmen either ignored them, to make time for their off-track bets and their electric tea kettles, or plastered them over with copies of the *Sun*, their window on the enchanted Thule of bestially guiltless leisure where the woman's breast was always a size larger than the footballer's

head.

In the evenings, I drank with Celeste, who had come to accept that alcohol was less unaesthetic than anesthetic, and while at times a symptom of barbarism, always an antidote to some of its more unsettling effects. When thus tranquilized, Celeste would invariably try to persuade me to write a book about the experiences we were living, advice I could have done worse than followed. He insisted that I should entitle it *The End of the Day*, as this was the phrase, beloved of every stratum of the proletariat in Britain, that he had come to loathe and fear most. To him, *Workers of all nations, unite!* or *Avanti, popolo, alla riscossa!* were history's dusty abstractions, but whenever he heard an unwashed plumber tell him that "A' th' end o' the dai, Mr. Delfini, it won' maik much o' a diff'rins if the wa'ah mine *does* run down, 'cos iss *beige* innit, same's the wall gonna buy," he would tremble in incomprehension and terror like a French nobleman in view of the scaffold. And when, at the end of the day, his own workmen from Bergamo finally arrived to finish the decoration and I saw their thoughtful faces, their identical, crisply pressed blue overalls, and their tools neatly arranged in mahogany cases, I too felt ennobled and ever so slightly guillotined. They worked like Sisyphus, chivalrously insensible of the truth that imposing their precious superstructure on the rude base left behind by the troglodytes of the north was as inutile as raising a marble bust on a plinth of cardboard.

Years have passed. I have become godfather to Celeste's son. London is now only a gambler's memory, selective, capricious, and blind to the ruinous distinction between last week's big loss and last year's big win. The other night, we drank together again, this time at his studio in Milan, and as I regaled him with my stories of apartment hunting in Venice and house restoration in Palermo, he again chided me for not having written about our London experiences. He wanted to know what sort of book I might be thinking of these days, now that I had come to live in his country. I joked that the bestseller the world really craves at the moment is *How to Live Well on \$1 Million a Year*, for the simple reason that those with the means to make themselves

manifestly unhappy are so bad at mastering them. But then it occurred to me that there was, in fact, a variant of *The End of the Day* that was relevant to my present condition.

This would be called *The Book of Italian Excuses and Lies*. Neither Celeste nor I ever supposed that *The End of the Day* would become some sort of diatribe against the national character of the inhabitants of Britain, and we accepted that no treatise on hygiene, no diachronic study of climate, and no history of education could ever explain the shocking fact that British workmen wear no underwear. Similarly, in this book, I would not tackle the larger generalities—such as the really shocking fact that just about every Italian, of whatever age, believes that his country fought on the winning side in World War II—concentrating instead on the quotidian of small evasions and white lies, the fibbing, mercurial, hypochondriacal continuum of men's private lives in which the Italian character comes to the fore.

A few days ago, I went into a shop to ask if they had any pickled gherkins, and I want to give the owner's reply verbatim. "Pickled gherkins *as such* I do not have at the moment," he said with the dignified deliberation that one always finds so becoming in a shopkeeper, "but I do have pickled capers, which is a kind of gherkin, only a little smaller and rounder." My laughter offended him: "You will not find the *other kind* in any shop, sir," he said haughtily, "but if you insist I can always ask the wholesaler if we can have that"—I was sure he had something rude like "*porcheria*" on the tip of his tongue—"specially ordered for you." For the morality of much Italian lying is predicated on the ready offense to be taken at the slightest suggestion that one is not telling the truth, an attitude that, at least to the Russian Orthodox eye of my housekeeper, makes even ordinary law-abiding Italians akin to horse-thieving Gypsies.

The attitude goes well with the ubiquitous persona that may be called the *cavaliere servente*—it is not for nothing, after all, that Italy is famous for her lovers—who first woos and swoons, then yawns and switches off his portable. Ubiquitous, I say, because the spirit of the distracted lover holds sway over the behavior

of the architect and the lawyer, the hospitable host and the polite guest, the promising politician and the enthusiastic voter. In the morning, the man of the moment is full of exquisite dreams, and it seems he can think of nothing besides his new mistress, his new vocation, or his new plan; come afternoon, neither inviting this nor aware that it contravenes his earlier state of mind, he suddenly feels himself drawn to some other object of interest glistening in the middle distance, be it a splendid racecar in a magazine advertisement or a jeweled collar round the neck of a passing poodle; come evening, he feels weary of it all, and besides he has a chest cold coming on, or else the clams have disagreed with him. *Lascia perdere*, he mutters ruefully, to hell with all those women, plans, and dogs; I am going to call my mother and then have myself a nice cup of camomile tea.

Hence the malingering for which the nation is famous. Walk into any Italian pharmacy, and you will find yourself in the town's most fashionable salon, where everyone is a grandee (though some are grander than the rest) and where the social competition turns on the issue of just whose diseases are more evanescent. The butcher's daughter feels that she has a sore on her cheek that could lead to complications, and the beauty of it is that the sore is *invisible*; five minutes of discussion. Not to be bested by a mere butcher's daughter, the chartered accountant's brother complains of a *constriction* in his lungs, one that, moreover, he experiences only at Carnival time; five minutes of animated discussion, followed by the purchase of vitamin capsules. Then an unknown lady in a voluminous fur coat, holding her own against all comers, announces that she simply has not been *well*; ten minutes of highly animated discussion, with the pharmacist coming out from behind the counter to make more elbow space for philosophical expostulation. By lunchtime closing, everyone who matters in society—that is to say, everyone who is truly delicate—has been gravely ill and miraculously cured.

This, after all, is the aboriginal Catholic country, where the wind blows where it list. Here, cause and effect are not linked with that scientific rigor or that banal literalism that has made Northern Europe what it is at the end of the day, namely, honest yet ugly, straight yet plain, educated yet stupid, rational yet credulous, efficient yet shoddy, heated

yet cold, consistent yet discontented. And the funny thing is that, of course, you *can* be in two places at the same time, if you are an Italian lover, saint, or plumber; and if, like the sweet little *bambino* you were born, you are the apple of your mother's eye, you can easily be at once sick and well; while to any lawyer your case is both A and not-A, and *lasciamo perdere* the excluded middle; and besides, who is to say that you cannot be a talented painter one day and decide to grow *radicchio di Treviso* the next?

For the freedom to sin, which presupposes the telling of lies, and to repent, which condones the invention of excuses, is the supernatural, perennial, adamant fabric that lines the motley and threadbare robe that is the Italian character. I am quite sure that the book I could write on the subject, *The Book of Italian Excuses and Lies*, would make that character even more of a laughingstock than it already is the world over. But the memory of Celeste's art and his workmen from Bergamo chastens the incorrigible mocker, the faint outline of the cathedral on the far side of the cynic's wineglass makes him lose heart, and the trusting approach of barefooted Mediterranean spring makes the satyr's harp fall soundless to the ground.

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Letter From Chile

by Mary Kohler

A Road Too Far?



I awoke again this morning to an entirely clear sky. It is cold early in the morning in late summer in the mountains of South Chile, about 45 degrees. We are suffering through a very long dry spell. There has been no significant rain for over two months, and the clear sky is mostly obliterated by heavy smoke.

The two forest fires, *incendios*, are fortunately on the other side of the Puelo, a wide, fast river flowing right in front of our cabin door. We would never be allowed to build here, so close to the river, at home. This might be a wise restriction, because some year, before too long,

the river is going to take the land, cabin and all, in a spring flood.

With the government budget for the helicopter with the water bucket having been exceeded and a neighbor endangered by one of the fires, the firefighters, axes, pumps, shovels, sleeping bags, potatoes, flour, and a watermelon arrived at our airstrip by Twin Otter and were ferried nearer the fire by my husband and the neighbor, who own the only two motorboats on this part of the river.

Downstream from us lies a canyon, not navigable; upstream, another canyon, even more wild; beyond that, Argentina. The "road" behind our house leads past a few farms, the nearest a 25-minute walk, to a rowboat ferry across the river and on to another airstrip, a school, a few houses, and a radio-phone. By foot, it is perhaps five or six hours; by horse much less to Llanada Grande, this "town."

This year, it is still a three-day trip by horse, more or less, to the auto road. But progress is coming. They are working on the road all the way to Llanada Grande and have built the bridge over the Rio Manso. The ferry's in place to cross Lago Tagua Tagua, five miles long and impossible to walk around, where the mountains come down directly to the deep, turquoise-colored lake.

I suppose this is one of the last, mostly isolated, remaining farmed areas. The cash crop is beef, shipped on the hoof most of the way to market. That happened some weeks ago this year, when the lower pastures dried up. The hill pastures are small, and even they are barely green. The clear skies and sun raise the afternoon temperatures into the 80's—sometimes into the 90's, in a *puelche* when the hot, dry wind comes from the pampas of Argentina.

Most of the farmers are self-subsisting, needing only flour and oil from the city. From their farms come sheep and goats, apples, plums, and cherries, potatoes—wonderful potatoes—and a few vegetables. They can the cherries and make the apples and plums into *chiche*, a very hard version of hard cider. When they tire of the menu, the kids go to the river with a lure and a monofilament wound around a can.

Everyone can obtain running water by placing a hose in a nearby mountain stream—in our case, a quarter-mile away—and presto, cold, clear water runs all day, sometimes into the bucket of laundry. We have other handy amenities; they mostly do not.