

The Italian Afternoon

by Edward Hamlin

She lay in the valley between two rose pillows, a cheek poured into one hand, eyes drowsy with late-afternoon melancholy. A book of Goethe lay open on the bed, ignored now for several long minutes. The *Italian Journals* did not interest her--had never interested her--except to the degree that the cover reminded her of home. The frontispiece was a reproduction of a Renaissance landscape, supposedly of the Holy Land but more likely of northern Italy. She hadn't bothered to check the name of the painter. It looked vaguely like a famous work, but she didn't care about that. What mattered was the tiny couple in the frothy green hills, the man and the girl who seemed on the verge of making love.

There were hayricks all around them, miniscule as tufts of a child's hair. The girl's swinging white skirts were nearly brushing one of them. In the ravine above them the sun was lighting up a rivulet, a cool stream that trickled down through the hills in the most calming way: they could follow that stream to a private place (she knew this) and never be disturbed again. The man, if you looked at him in a certain way, with a certain idea in your head, seemed to have realized this: his sure step was beginning to yaw to the right, toward a hidden place behind the cypress trees. He hadn't told the girl yet, of course, since it would be necessary to surprise her. But you could see what was about to happen, you could feel how he'd just gripped her hard little hand a little tighter in anticipation, how his voice had gone a little quieter, more confidential--and how she felt a surge rising in her legs, how the fabric of her smock suddenly felt rough against her breasts, the sea of green things blurring in front of her.

All this you could see at a glance, though the figures were no bigger than a face glimpsed in a lover's eye.



Now she's stumbled on the rock jutting from the hillside, leaning into his body to keep her balance: a reflex mistaken by both of them as a surrender. She surrenders to his plan though it is still under wraps. Her body quickly feels for his when off-balance, in danger. . . a development neither has missed. An advance in their relations.

Her bonnet is that of a child. His cap and red hands are those of a workman. Sleeves rolled like rope over his ropery muscles, he has a scent, a masculine stamp that she knows from home, from her brothers drinking and belching around the hearth, from her own father dressing before the morning fire. It is a scent as familiar as woodsmoke, and partly composed of it. Domestic; familiar. The scent of the other half, the torn half. The sex of men.

They work on the docks, her men. They lug trunks and roll barrels and shout from dawn until dusk. There are no women around them, though a few whores are said to lurk in the taverns behind the wharf. In the evening the women descend upon them and wonder at the matted curly hair on the backs of their necks, at their capacity for violence. As a girl she's been slapped, whipped, fondled, teased, all to prepare her for this moment, this instant of being led behind the light to a hidden place, alone except for a man, a familiar stranger.



There is a bear cub on a chain in the lower corner of the painting: it hardly makes sense, but there it is. The painting is full of such little oddities. She wishes she knew what they meant. Even in the tiny reproduction, for example, the little bear's pizzle is prominent: why? She is too tired to sort it out. The bear has a dimstore look about him, as if he is stuffed with foam.



Outside a car horn blares petulantly. The sour mood of it makes her fall back against one of the rose pillows and push the Goethe to the floor. She is so tired, so bored, so lonely she can barely put the feeling into words. And what would be the point? Giancarlo is back in Bari, in the Mediterranean sun, not here in the grip of a frigid Chicago winter. More than likely he has his shirt off. His nipples are sensitive like a woman's, large and fig-colored. He may be sleeping with other women, even with other men. Down there, at home in the olive warmth, it is hard to begrudge him his pleasures. Here in Chicago they live alone, they work, they're too tired at night to dream. In the alleys the men crush you to the ground. This is the miserable American life he's sick of. Back there, one has time. In America time runs out of control, consuming itself like a deadly fire.

Basta! Soon this loneliness must end.



In the seven months since his departure she's managed to read only two chapters of the Goethe. The cover, the painting, seems to conceal the text. About the dead writer's trip to Italy we know little; about the workman, the girl and the bear cub, much.

Today, snow lies on the face of the house next door like a scabrous growth.
Let us make the bear cub into Giancarlo.



He is soft, dangerous, a study in sepias. The glowing sepia of his eyes, the richer brown of his hair, his body. Chained up like a family pet, he watches the workman lead the girl up the hill to her fate. Creature of scent, he catches a whiff of the young man's musk, of the girl's moisture at the moment they pass. The two are already making love, he more consciously than she, though no clothes have been shucked, no secrets disturbed. The air is a medium connecting them, a membrane of desire. The little bear, bathed in the same atmosphere, senses the excitement, his pinkish-grey nose twitching as each nuance registers. His is an agony of total perception, the agony of the child overhearing his parents in the next bedroom.

It is extremely quiet inside the painting: only a lark, a hush of water. The smallest sigh reverberates.

The bear would like to fight for the girl, but cannot. His chain is moored to an iron pike driven into solid rock. And so the girl passes, her lover pulling her along, the day's light hovering like static fish in a pool.

We know the bear cub's melancholy from the way he lolls against a nearby hayrick, exhausted by jealousy and desire. Hateful man!

His legs are powerful, loose, spirited. Magical to watch while making love, hairless, sweet to glimpse in a mirror. . . .



So, spring him loose!

Let him gnaw through his chain, let him burst free in a rage. Let him scamper up the hill and crush the workman under his weight, the silver collar bright and cold against the usurper's terrified face, the air full of sweat and groaning. Glory! Watch him

take back what is his, rollick with her, race her down the hill with gravity thumbing their backs, her skirts flying like pennants on the air, the sun pealing high above. . . .

It has taken so long to read the book exactly because this never happens.

On the street below, the car blows its stinging horn again and again. For two weeks now the snow has been a dirty slurry. And when she begins to cry, her tears come out in English.