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Egg and Ghost

Uno

Lazy parents sip on fancy coffees and nibble at toast and the Arts. Lazy parents' toddlers toddle and fidget and yell. Sunday morning at the *Sprinkle of Rocket*, and I'm thinking to myself as I wait by the door: 'Why the *fuck* did you agree to this, *stupid*?'

In my own world again, speaking fractions of my mental incoherencies aloud. I have heard myself blurt out selectively the words "fuck" and "stupid". No, I don't have Tourette's. I hardly ever *think* "fuck", let alone speak it in public.

'*Scusa?*'

A face in my face, I jump and my heart skips a couple of beats. He must have heard me too, the looming chichi waiter, and he's arching his threatening eyebrows at me. They're hideously over-shaped, and he's using them to spell out admonition. Eloquently, I must concede.

That he seems to have taken an instant dislike to me is partly my fault. First he heard me swear. Then I saw him and I stared. I stared and I stared, his face is like a magnet and I can't stop staring. And not just because of the eyebrows. No, it's a veritable double act of eyebrows and mouth, the meagre and malevolent latter aiding and abetting the incitements of the former as though in a conspiracy to dwarf – and if possible erase – the enormity of the features around them.

Huge, waterlogged eyes are partially curtained with overstretched lids, locked in the pretence of a permanent sadness.

Accentuated by the absence of hair – shaved head, smothered in cologne – the fleshy, darkly veined ears resemble a pair of exotic carnivorous leaves.

And at the centre of it all, the most extraordinary Latin nose. As a stand-alone fragment of Classical Art – the nose of Hadrian's lover, the deified young Antinous, perhaps - I should without a second thought have judged it a masterpiece of carving, but even as I hear it inhale and exhale it seems all the same like no more than a futile appendage – the deadened, overstated afterthought of a grossly inadequate sculptor. How I would have longed without pleasure to bring it to life with the hands of the cubist Picasso, to either render it flatly from multiple angles or have it protruding its overlooked grandeur from the heart of a monstrous assemblage. I am suddenly in the grip of an ambivalent nostalgia for those long-ago days. The Master still occasionally haunts me, and the ghost I am meeting for coffee has brought it all back.

At last I succeed in averting my eyes.

'In my own world,' I say. 'Just thinking aloud.' I catch myself gesticulating wildly, rolling idiot eyes to pacify an idiot, another bad habit of mine.

The puppeteer eyebrows eventually pinch, and the tight-lipped mouth obediently goes into spasm.

'Table for *uno*?'

The voice is muscular and deep, and it takes me aback. The thread of the emaciated eyebrows has led me to expect an effete and effeminate greeting. In

my stereotyping habits I am precipitate and prejudiced like every other man. More like any other man I should know better.

'*Due*,' I answer cheerfully, in as masculine a pitch as I can muster.

The eyebrows flit hither and thither over my shoulder.

'I'm expecting a ghost,' I explain.

The eyebrows suddenly furrow. Frozen on the spot I continue to stare. The place is not full, and I wonder why I am not yet being escorted to one of the unoccupied tables for *due*. As is currently the general fashion among similar establishments, the *Sprinkle of Rocket* refuses to take morning reservations.

'You make fun of me, no?'

Make fun of him? How? I'm trying to remember what I said, and all I can remember is *due*. Have I offended him with my Italian? Have I perhaps suggested by my bad imitation that his accent is faked? *Is* his accent faked? Do waiters still fake foreign accents? Have they ever? I've always wondered if it isn't just a myth of the cinema, and a rather condescending one at that. It doesn't sound quite right to me even when actors imitate in English the accent of the nationality they've actually been cast in. It's another kind of stereotyping, isn't it? Think Nazi, Arab terrorist, Zorba the Greek. It is the wont of actors to tend to overdo it...

'You say you expecting a ghost.'

Oh.

'No! No, no. Not ghost, *guest*. Did I really say ghost? Silly me, obviously I meant guest.'

We both affect laughter, all the crowded way to the furthest available table for *due*. I am then left alone to peer at the menu.

Mar-ket-ing

'Buongiorno, signore!'

I hesitate to take any more chances in Italian.

'Good morning,' I smile at the smile that makes smiling back irresistible.

'Today I am your waiter, Luigi.'

Luigi, bar the joyful excess of his own, bears otherwise a striking resemblance to the eyebrows. Another shaved head... although a rather insignificant nose... livelier eyes... and a mouth that doesn't know how not to be cheerful. But taken in the round, there *is* an unmistakable resemblance.

'Pleased to meet you, Luigi, I'm Leon. I think while I wait...'

'For a ghost, yes?'

'I see your colleague told you,' I say.

'Federico not colleague,' retorts Luigi mournfully. 'Is my big ugly brother. And all my life he drive me crazy.'

'You do look very alike,' I say.

'Uh, Madonna, now I should go kill myself, I think!'

'I didn't mean you're ugly.'

He isn't. His plainer, thinner physiognomy is handsome, his features more chiselled and sharp. Luigi is a fruit knife to his brother's dessertspoon, more elegantly carved, but in the absence of that fragment of Classical Art he is somehow not suited to cubism. In spite of the cheerfulness I imagine him rather in blue, a melancholy figure that puts one in mind of consumption. What he looks

like is Kafka without any hair. I *know* Picasso would have wanted to paint him, and I also know when.

Kafka, my hero; how fervently I have wished for a metamorphosis! In pursuit of this metaphorical fantasy I have gone to exceptional lengths; taken concrete steps. Absurd things do happen. They have happened already; the ghost is the proof.

'So you think Federico is ugly?'

The conversation is becoming surreal, and Federico isn't far from our table, I can see his ears burning.

'Not at all,' I say.

Federico mutters something in Italian and stomps off to the coffee machine. Luigi cackles with genuine affection.

'Maybe a little too much pizza, eh, Federico?'

'I think you've upset him,' I say.

'Uh, is nothing. We from Sicily, we have *big* sense of humour. We say is Sicilian diet, secret for long happy life.'

'Laughter and olive oil.'

'And a little bit mafia, no?' The natural, Kafkaesque eyebrows gambol mischievously. Mine mimic them in awkward camaraderie. 'Si, is good to make joke, but maybe I like to tease Federico too much. So anyway in Sicily we have trattoria, and is not a bad life, but then we decide that we both like to move to big city, so we sell trattoria for good price and we come.' Luigi spreads out his arms and swivels to take in as much of the place as he can. '*Sprinkle of Rocket*, you like it? I decorate myself.'

'It's lovely, just what this neighbourhood needed.' I have never set foot in it before, and Luigi must know it, but Luigi is gracious.

'Grazie, grazie,' he beams. 'But I talk too much, I think. Can I get for you coffee while you wait for ghost? We do excellent espresso.'

'My ghost won't be here for another half hour and I'm actually starving. I think I'll have the egg on toast. And an excellent espresso, of course.'

'How many egg you would like?'

'Just the *uno*,' I say.

'Harboil, sofboil, scramble or fry?'

Hardboiled egg on toast? How would *that* work?

'Or poach, I forget. Always poach I forget.'

'I think scrambled,' I say.

'Ciabatta, focaccia, rye... and is also another one, splet? Is organic.'

'You don't have any bread?'

Luigi shrugs his shoulders, and bends to whisper in my ear conspiratorially:

'I know you tease me, but customer here, he like to be different.'

Does he mean "pretentious"?

'Is, how you say?'

'Marketing,' I whisper back.

'Si, esattamente! Mar-ket-ing. Is clever, no?'

'Luigi, I think you're a genius. I'll have the ciabatta.'

'One scramble-egg-on-toas-ciabatta right away for Signor Leon. With extra big sprinkle of rocket.'

Sputnik

'Why not rucola?' I ask. 'And please call me Leon.'

'We think about rucola, but I decide is maybe too confusing for English. Not good marketing. And rocket, I like it, is very nice word.'

'It is a nice word.'

'Make you think you gonna fly. You know, like Yuri Gagarin.'

'A bit before our time,' I say.

'First man in space is always important, no? *Sputnik* take dog and *Vostok* take Yuri Gagarin. Uncle Sam don't like it at all, is like kick on the ass, so what he do, uh? He make *Apollo* and he travel to the moon. Clever Russian rocket can land, but *Apollo* has to drop in the ocean. Like children, no? But is all good for progress.'

'Competition,' I say.

'Si, si, competition!' Luigi agrees. 'Is like me and my brother. Federico one year older, and in school he study a lot because he like it. Is easy for him, he's very clever boy. But for me is not so easy, so I study just little bit harder, and I manage to come second in my class. Is true every year Federico come first, but is okay. Now together we have business in London, is not bad, uh?'

Luigi's passion for progress and rockets has pushed up his voice a decibel or two, and mine has followed suit. So by now we have an audience of many: sexless middle-aged youths with their laptops (whom Luigi has shrewdly confined to a long wooden table at the back) make middle-aged expressions with their teenager faces while they contemplate the dregs of their all-day cappuccinos; toffee-nosed couples whom I've barely seen exchanging a word now revel in exchanging mocking looks while pricking up their ears for dinner party gems – any wisdom in Luigi's postulations has escaped them completely; and as for any pseudo-anthropologists among them, a peasant boy from Sicily with something to say may be less of an object of outright derision, but as fascinating as they fancy they find him, an object he remains all the same. On this day of all days I know very well that outside the periphery of their own narrow lives, as a rule men are interested in each other only as stories. And yet today in the *Sprinkle of Rocket* we have all shared in a privileged encounter: with that simplicity of happiness the French call *joie de vivre*.

'Her name was Laika.'

Smiling broadly, the man with the Dali moustache sitting alone at the opposite table has thunderously broken the hush. The boom of his voice has the charisma of a prolonged kiss of life. Yet if it is intended as an open invitation to be social, his contribution is admittedly a little esoteric. *Whose* name was Laika?

'She wasn't the first to go into space, but she *was* the first to orbit the earth. Animal, I mean.'

The dog was apparently a bitch.

'1957, November 3,' Luigi puts in.

'Went up in *Sputnik 2*.'

'*Sputnik 1* is more beautiful design but is empty.'

'Poor thing never made it back alive, died of overheating early on in the flight, as a matter of fact, but they kept that a secret for years. And so began the space age, and not long afterwards the Superpower space race. Our friend - our *host*, I should say - is absolutely...'

Luigi takes a bow as he darts coy acknowledgments in every direction.

'I am Luigi and I welcome you today. And every day, I hope. With my brother Federico...'

'Daddy, when did uncle Tham go to the moon? Mummy thed he went to live in Brighton.'

The man with the Dali moustache may have broken the hush, but the girl with golden braids and a temporary (toothless) lisp has sliced through the tension. Everyone is in hysterics.

But business is business.

'Now I go back to work.'

And people go back into their shells and carry on with their morning.

'Leon,' Luigi suddenly remembers. 'Si, is better. Is silly, Signor Leon. Very formal, very ole-fashion. So Leon and Luigi, yes? And maybe Federico, what you think?'

'Of course,' I say.

'And ghost, does he have name?'

I tap the side of my nose with my finger.

'Is ghost, not spy. Or maybe is both,' Luigi laughs. Nothing ever fails to entertain him.

I shrug my shoulders stubbornly.

'Okay, okay, so I better go and mind my own business, uh?'

The man with the Dali moustache

The man with the Dali moustache introduces himself. I remember the name and I know who he is: thinker, philosopher, intelligent man about town; Arts, popular culture, theoretical analysis of scandal and gossip - often on the box, and if my memory serves me correctly (which it generally does), quite a spate of him recently in the press. I want to tell him he should feature Federico and Luigi in one of his projects, but I don't want to let on that I know who he is. It might get us involved in a deep conversation, and I don't have the time.

'I'm Leon,' I say. 'Leon Cheam.'

'Haven't we met before?' he asks. 'You seem very familiar. I mean *very* familiar. Leon Cheam, Leon Cheam... But I think it's the face I remember, not the name. Yes, I must've seen you in something... Television? Theatre? Cinema? Or perhaps you're a journalist...'

Who are you? How do I know you? I can *see* these questions embedded in the deepening intensity of his gaze, but he's not addressing them to me; it's his own, considerable brain he's wracking for the answers, and chances are that if they're there he'll soon dig them up. My past is intent on catching up with me today. But a voluntary ghost is one thing. This stranger's monologizing cross-examination is harassment.

'No, that's not it. But it'll come to me in a minute, don't you say a word! Aha, finally I've got it, I think! You're a writer, aren't you? I'd say literary fiction - you

certainly have that look, of *oozing* with *je ne sais quoi*... Oh dear, that's not it either, is it? No, I'm making a fool of myself. I'm usually good with faces. Hmm...'

He probably isn't as good as he imagines with faces that have aged by more than ten years. My face was everywhere then, in the spell I had with fame – my notorious fifteen minutes, some would say.

It's ten to eleven. The ghost will be arriving any minute. I must cover my tracks.

'I'm really not anyone at all,' I say. 'I live locally, you've probably just seen me around.'

'But I don't. Live locally, I mean. As a matter of fact, I'm here quite by chance. Last night, in a *very* unlikely place – but that's another story, and I'm not going to be tempted to gossip – I... now how shall I put it? Let's just say that when I literally *stumbled* on a Food Critic friend of mine, he was in such a state of shock that it was all he could think of to say that t-t-t-tomorrow I must t-t-t-try the *S-s-s-sprinkle of-f-f-f Rocket f-f-f-for* breakfast. He needn't have worried of course; I've always been extremely discreet. He's married with two children, you know.'

I have absolutely no idea what he's talking about.

'The most fortunate unfortunate coincidence, from my point of view, and I really am grateful to him, my *naughty* Food Critic friend. Because the scrambled eggs here are amazing, and definitely well worth the trip, so this may be my first but it absolutely won't be my last time in Tufnell Park.'

Innocent words, but to me they sound like a warning: 'I've got my eyes on you, face from the past. Oh yes, it *will* come back to me who you are, and I *will* know why you're keeping it a secret.'

'Perhaps we'll meet here again some time.'

It *is* a warning. Probably he has already remembered. But why should I care? If the ghost has her way, and she did seem insistent – have I mentioned that the ghost is a woman? – I may soon be meeting again with the man with the Dali moustache, in an altogether different context than a scrambled egg breakfast at the *Sprinkle of Rocket* - for an in-depth scrutiny of my past, for example. And it *would* be in-depth. The man with the Dali moustache has an indefatigable penchant for wheedling out minutiae, and I have a terrible dread of minutiae. I have told far too many different stories. I know that if we come to an agreement, I'll soon be forced to choose one for the ghost, or perhaps we can choose one together. 'We'll tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth,' she said when she called, as though this should have made me feel better. 'The truth is all very well if you actually know it,' I said, 'and some of the lies are now part of the truth.'

'Yes,' the man with the Dali moustache soon hastens to add to his too vague suggestion, 'I'd like that.'

Another, more frightening thought has just occurred to me: that I've been flattering myself, or rather not flattering myself enough: might the peacocky man with the Dali moustache be trying to pick me up?

My lack of a reciprocal enthusiasm has lasted too long, and middle-aged lust, as it must for the sake of decorum, reluctantly gives way to middle-aged pride. (Take all my speculations with a pinch of salt: I admit I may be imagining all this. It's not impossible that in the manner he is accustomed to the man with the Dali moustache is simply being friendly.)

'Anyway, I must be off. Oh dear, you look a little flustered; I do hope I haven't annoyed you. But like I said, I hardly ever forget a face.'

'You haven't annoyed me,' I lie. 'Not at all.'

'Then I'll say *au revoir*. And I wish you a *very* pleasant time with the ghost!'

'Pardon?'

The man with the Dali moustache is guffawing like a horse. His theatrical familiarity has been grating on me for some time, but I manage to keep my cool. And I'm not too bad either at thinking on my feet.

'Ah, you must've overheard Luigi. That was just a silly mix-up at the door.'

Bush

I am staring at a plateful of garden.

The signature sprinkle is not just decoration. It's more like a deliberately obfuscating bush. In front of me is a verdant unintelligible dish.

'Is not okay?' The eyebrows are rotating in reproof.

'It's beautiful,' I say. 'And very very green.'

But platitudes won't do for Federico.

'Luigi make it specially, you not enjoy the egg?'

'I haven't found it yet,' I quip, and already my tentative smile dissolves as it falls on deaf eyebrows. 'But I'm sure that when I do it'll be perfect. Please say thank you to Luigi for me.'

'You can say yourself, is not a big place.'

When I summon up the courage to dig into the greenery at last, a translucent deliciousness erupts that defies absolutely table manners (which in any case I lack). I use knife-fork-and-fingers in an equal tripartite alliance. I carve out helter-skelter the crusty ciabatta; I layer it inversely with rocket and *then* scrambled egg; I semi-successfully manoeuvre it into my mouth. While occasionally licking knife-fork-fingers-and-lips, I am torn between the fear, on the one hand, that the ghost might arrive at any moment and catch me dirty-handed, and on the other hand a burning desire to savour this one *luscious* "scramble-egg-on-toas-ciabatta" for as long as I can...

'So what you think, you like my scramble egg?'

Surely a rhetorical question. It must be obvious that the licking has included and concluded with the plate.

'Luigi, what can I say? I mean, look!'

When I hold up the plate for Luigi to see - any trace of self-consciousness has evaporated with my food - the sparkle of china seems to hold him transfixed, washing all expression off his face.

'Hey, Luigi, what's up? You look like you've seen a ghost.'

'Is beautiful. You see what you do?'

'What? What have I done?'

'You make Sicilian man cry.'

Literally. Luigi clutches at his face with both hands, gaping at the plate, which I'm still holding up, and tears no sooner have welled in his eyes than they roll in a stream down his cheeks. Has the coruscating crockery seduced him with his own reflection? Has some distant echo from his past reverberated on the glimmer of its surface and struck poor Luigi with heart-rending homesickness pangs?

'Mio dio, what you do to my brother?'

'Federico, is so beautiful, look!'

'Is not beautiful, is just empty plate.'

'Is *love*, Federico, not just empty plate. My friend Leon, I like to kiss you. You give love to Luigi, and Luigi want to give love to you.'

'It's really not necessary,' I say.

'Is necessary for Luigi,' Luigi insists.

My abated self-consciousness is making a comeback, but the sooner this is over the better, so I'm standing up limply while Luigi plants several explosions on each of my reddening cheeks.

'Luigi love *everyone* today, I like to kiss you all!'

The mar-*ket*-ing has gone a little haywire, and with typical English reserve the breakfast clientele scrunch themselves more tightly around their tables. A stray toddler obviously stumbles towards us, and deftly Federico sweeps him up into the air off his faltering feet. The little boy howls with satisfaction at discovering the Latin nose, which evidently he mistakes for a lump of plasticine, and with eager tiny hands he sets about attempting to remould it, into something more familiar perhaps. It's uncanny: spontaneously the double act has burst into raptures, and Federico has regressed into gaga childhood. His head rocks from side to side, and he's twittering sweet-sounding gurgling noises.

It seems to take an age for the mother to discover she's missing a child. When she does, with her latest offspring asleep in a makeshift contraption hanging over her unfortunate breast (exactly how unfortunate I am not yet aware), sheepishly she hobbles to her son. But trying to detach him from his malleable plaything is not an easy task, and her gasping effort wakes the baby up. The woman is all fingers and thumbs, and eventually she yells at her husband to come over and help. He gets up from where he's sitting, cradling *two* more children in his arms, plants them both willy-nilly on his chair, instructs them with threats that reduce them to sobs to stay put, and then he bounces over to the other scene of mayhem, where everyone is wailing too, including Federico and the mother.

Notwithstanding the sublime scrambled egg and the permanent theatre, I wonder why the ghost has not yet arrived - it's now twenty minutes past. It was the ghost who made contact with me, and punctuality is the least I should be entitled to expect. Unless the ghost is not a ghost after all: the terrible thought has just occurred to me that I may have fallen prey to a sinister practical joke.

'Leon?'

I jump.

'Anna?'

I get up and we're shaking hands.

'I'm sorry I'm late, but I bumped into someone I know outside the station, and he was impossible to get away from...'

'No, no, it really doesn't matter at all,' I say. 'Honestly, I've had a lovely time waiting.'

The ghost that has arrived is a true apparition.