

Quitting

—Francesco, I wish you would give up smoking, said Michiko watching Francesco tamp down a pack of Camels on the back of his wrist. I know it gives you enjoyment, but I really don't like the taste of your mouth on my mouth when you smoke.

—You know it gives me great pleasure, said Francesco unwrapping the fresh pack. I've already given up smoking after sex because you don't like the smell of tobacco in the bedroom, and I don't smoke in the bathroom anymore.

—Well, if you can give up those times, why can't you give up all times?

—Easier said than done. You know, when I'm painting, I like to contemplate my work, sitting and enjoying a smoke.

—And a beer.

—Yes, and a beer. You know Michiko, I work hard, don't deny me my well-earned small pleasures.

—Well, I don't like it. I want you to quit.

—After this pack.

Michiko took a sip of her tea. Francesco studied her face. He wondered what was going on: She was on a quit smoking trip again. It's not like they were married, though they had lived together for seven years. Francesco lit his cigarette, tilted his head back and blew the smoke straight up.

—You're not listening to me Francesco.

—I hear you. What about you? If I quit smoking what's in it for me?

—For one, your breath and clothes will smell better. The apartment won't smell like an ashtray and you'll be healthier. You should go back to cycling again, or you'll get fat.

All she said was true, but it meant he would be a monster to live with for a few weeks. He had quit once before, gained twenty pounds and his first wife split.

She left and he started smoking again. Quitting was a game of threes: Three hours, three days, three weeks, three months, and three years. Make it to three years and you were smoke free.

Michiko was one of those Japanese women with a beautiful face, but a young girl's figure; not that she didn't have a bust, but her hips were on the small side. She had probably gained ten or twelve pounds since living with him. The upside was that her bust was noticeably larger, but she had the beginnings of a belly.

—If I quit smoking, what personal improvement program are you going to start?

—Do I need one?

—I didn't mean to imply you needed one, but if I'm making sacrifices, maybe you could do something so we can suffer together.

—Francesco, you are some piece of work. I am the most beautiful woman you have ever had, I am a great cook, one of the busiest concert music pianists in New York City, and I keep the house immaculate.

—I think Katy, the maid, keeps the house immaculate.

—Well, I hire her and I pay her.

—True. You also cover my part of expenses when my painting sales are slow.

—That's because you spend your gallery's entire retainer on supplies and your expensive studio space downtown.

Francesco stubbed out his cigarette, annoyed that they were squabbling.

—I'll bet you can stop right now. Give me the pack.

Francesco saw that she was determined. He wished he had taken another drag on his cigarette before stubbing it out. He handed her the pack.

—And the matches.

He handed over the matches.

She took her teacup and poured enough tea into the cigarette pack to drown the cigarettes. She stuffed the matches into the soggy pack.

—I bet you feel better already.

—Michiko, I just exhaled the last drag. Wait till the nicotine monkey jumps on my back. I'll be a bear to live with.

Michiko put the drowned cigarettes on the saucer of her teacup, carried it into the kitchen, where she tossed the drownings into the trash.

—That's it. Francesco, your smoking life is over. Now take a shower and brush your teeth. Use the body wash I brought from Milan. Then meet me in the bedroom.

Michiko was snuggled close to him. He was getting a serious cigarette jones.

No two ways about it, when she wanted to deliver great sex, she could deliver great sex. But right now he craved a smoke.

—Francesco, do you think I'm getting fat?

—Michiko, you are hardly fat. Maybe you've gained a few pounds, but now you have shapely breasts.

—I saw a picture of myself in the *Times* playing at Miller Theater and I noticed I had the makings of a belly. Esther, the cellist, pointed it out to me. I'd be afraid to wear that sheath dress again.

—You're not pregnant are you?

—Hardly, I just had a period, as you know.

This was the opening Francesco needed.

—Maybe, while I'm suffering from nicotine withdrawal, you can go on a diet. Nothing drastic, maybe you could drop six or eight pounds. I'm going to have to watch my diet or I'll gain big-time.

—I only weigh 120 pounds. When you met me, I weighed 110. I need some of

the extra weight for stamina.

—I don't know about that, my dear. At 110 pounds you had more than enough stamina to play twenty-two solo concerts in twenty-two cities in less than a month.

—I was younger then.

Francesco laughed.

—My old lady of thirty-two. Should I order up a wheelchair?

Michiko flung a pillow at him.

—You are so bad.

—I love it when you get mad. Makes me hot.

—Everything makes you hot.

—Only you, Michiko.

—Remember Stephanie, the mezzo-soprano who came to our apartment to rehearse *Carmen*? asked Michiko.

—She's a serious love-by-the-pound girl.

—Francesco, be nice, that's just plain mean. She's a very talented singer, just a little heavy to play the gypsy Carmen, but veracity of body type is not what opera is about.

—Well, what about her?

—If you saw her now, you would not recognize her. She is now a perfectly svelte Carmen.

—I don't believe it. You're being generous.

—No, I'll show you her picture in *Opera News* as Carmen at the Lyric Opera in Chicago.

Michiko left the bedroom and returned with a copy of *Opera News*. Ben loved to watch her walk when she was naked. She rocked up on her toes like a young filly, holding her arms and hands gracefully. He painted her nude a dozen times, but never quite captured that elusive gait.

—Look. Can you believe it? This is the same woman six months later.

—Man, she looks great. No more zaftig diva. How did she do that?

—The gossip is that she went to some special *clinique* in Paris and they gave her a tapeworm.

—Yuck! Have you ever seen one? They are these long segmented beasts with a big head called a scolex, said Francesco.

—I guess they only keep it in you for a couple of months, and then they remove it. But while it's in there, it eats most of your food, so you lose weight.

—That sounds gross and unhealthy.

—I think it's one of those old European things, said Michiko. Supposedly, Maria Callas did it.

—Sounds like something you'd read in the National Inquirer. You know: **Weight Loss Secrets of the Stars.**

—Well, if we are going on this weight loss campaign, maybe we should try it.

—I don't think so, he said.

—Francesco, did you keep your doctor's appointment today? I'm worried about you. You look thin and wan. Usually you're the strong healthy one.

—Michiko, I kept my appointment.

—Well? What did he say?

—He took some samples, but he suspects I have a tapeworm or some parasite.

—You're kidding?

—He gave me some pills to take to eliminate it and told me to start taking vitamins.

—How did you get a tapeworm?

—Good question.

—Well?

—He said I either ingested it with some improperly cooked meat, or from not washing my hands after toilet.

—Well, it is a little strange you haven't gained weight in the last three months even though you have quit smoking.

—Well I've had serious diarrhea for a while. That's why I went to the doctor.

Michiko slid the vegetables into the wok.

—Have you had any problems? said Francesco admiring her skill with the wok.

—No, but then I don't eat meat, only fish and then only when the fish market has the best quality fish.

—The doctor knows I live with a Japanese woman, but he said one could only catch a tapeworm from land animals.

They ate in silence for a long while, Francesco still struggled with the chopsticks and Michiko, having grown up using chopsticks, took the best pieces of vegetable and fish from the communal bowl.

—You look like you've lost some weight, said Francesco.

—A little, but I've been watching my diet. I don't need another picture of me in the newspapers with a big belly. If I was pregnant, that would be different, but common ugly fat, that's a problem.

—Do you want to become pregnant?

—Francesco, my agent says my career is about to take off. A baby is not possible.

—I might like a child with you.

—Not now and that's final.

They ate in silence. Francesco slid into a black funk.

—I notice you've not been wearing a bra.

—Well, my breasts are small again. I hate wearing a brassiere. If I didn't have such pronounced nipples I would never wear a bra or undershirt.

—But I like you as you are. Your breasts are very responsive.

—It's table, Francesco, enough sex talk.

Francesco toyed with his food and sulked.

—You know today is three months since I've had a cigarette, he said, trying to steer the conversation toward something positive.

—As you say, it takes three years.

—Jez, don't be so hard on me. It's been tough.

—Francesco, I'm proud of you and appreciate the tobacco-free environment. As you've probably noticed, I'm much more responsive to you.

—I've never complained about our intimacy. You're the best.

—What did the doctor say about the side effects of having a tapeworm?

—The scariest thing was blindness.

—Blindness. I never heard of that. Are you sure?

—Well that got my attention. How could I be a painter if I were blind?

—You don't have any symptoms of blindness do you?

—Not yet. One can be a blind musician, but not a painter.

—You know in imperial Japan, all court musicians were blind, so they wouldn't report what they saw in the imperial rooms of state or the imperial bedroom. If they didn't sing, their tongues were cut out so they couldn't speak.

—Sounds pretty draconian.

—Well, there were no record players or radios. Blind and dumb musicians performing behind a screen made the only music in the boudoir.

—Sounds like a pretty miserable life, living only by one's ears.

—Blind people live quite successfully in society, but deaf people really suffer. That's why the deaf are so prone to suicide and mental illness. There is no social interaction. If one can hear, the world is still available. When one is deaf, most of the world is closed to you.

—I never thought of that.

—What would you do if you went blind?

He thought about it for a minute.

—Suicide I guess.

—You would leave me a widow?

—We aren't married you know.

—Well, almost.

—Close only counts in horseshoes.

—Francesco, what the hell does that mean?

—Horseshoes is a game where one throws metal horseshoes at a stake. If a shoe lands within a shoe's width of the stake, but not encircling the stake, one gets points. That's the source of the expression, "close enough for horse shoes."

—Well, Francesco, I love you and I don't want you to go blind or be close to a horseshoe.

Francesco had gathered up the remaining glasses from the previous night's party, put them in the dishwasher, took out the trash and cleaned up as well as he could without running the vacuum cleaner. Last night's gathering was a heady mix of New York City's emerging musicians and artists, their spouses, girlfriends, boyfriends and a few art and music celebrities. There were more than forty people attending the party in their apartment, which was large, but not particularly spacious as there were two grand pianos in the living room.

It was noon when Michiko came into the kitchen and put a kettle of water on the stove for tea.

—Francesco, did you come to bed last night?

—No, I had to put Morty in a cab at five-thirty this morning. He had a seven o'clock flight to LA. I hope we didn't wake you.

—No, I was sleeping soundly. I have a trio concert at the Frick this afternoon at three. I'm going to need the bathroom for the next hour. Can you make sure it is clean? Some of our guests made a mess.

—I already gave it a good cleaning. Morty is a messy guy.

—He's a slob. To tell you the truth, I never want Morty in my apartment again. He's obnoxious, argumentative, messy, smells bad, and has no respect for women. I may be the only woman last night who wasn't groped by that creep. Don't you ever invite him here again.

—He was my painting teacher. I can't just cut him off.

—I don't care. This is my apartment. You stopped living in your downtown loft to live with me in my apartment. I *am* the gatekeeper.

—Michiko, don't be so harsh. Some of your musician friends were hardly saints last night. Actually, you and I were the grown-ups compared to our guests.

—Hard for me to believe you could tell. You were talking pretty loud and had put away an industrial amount of Scotch.

—Don't be so high and mighty. Only you and two of your girlfriends were drinking the champagne. All six bottles were dead soldiers this morning.

—I'm sure we had help from some of your boorish friends.

Francesco had no desire to fight with Michiko. He was too groggy. He could tell a

doozy of a headache was looming. At least he didn't smoke; he would be suffering from cottonmouth and sore throat to go with his headache.

—I'll double-check the bathroom. Do you want me to start a bath for you?

—That would be kind. Use the lavender bath beads. But make sure the tub is really clean.

Francesco polished the bathroom fixtures and disinfected the sink, bathtub and the toilet. While he was cleaning the floor, Michiko practiced a few passages from the music she was playing that afternoon. Francesco loved to hear her play. He was proud of her abilities and her career. She had mixed feelings about his paintings. As Michiko's Caucasian painter boyfriend he did not impress her very traditional Japanese parents. When they read that one of his paintings sold at auction for over \$50,000, they treated them to a week at their second home in Japan. He didn't tell them he only received \$30,000 of that amount. But he did receive a generous monthly stipend from his dealer.

—Francesco, would you please get me a cab. I'm running late. I'll meet you in front in five minutes.

Francesco knew five minutes meant fifteen, so he put on his second-hand thick wool overcoat, heavy boots and took the elevator to the street. The doorman was nowhere to be seen.

Their apartment was on West 81st across from the American Museum of Natural History. He flagged a cab. He had just finished telling the driver it would be a few minutes for his wife to arrive when Michiko came up behind him. She was dressed in a dark crimson suit and had on her full-length mink coat. Her dress shoes and music were in a small leather bag.

—There is a reception after the concert. I'll probably be home around seven.

—You look beautiful. How about a kiss?

—No, you'll muss my lipstick. I'm late. I'll see you later, sweetheart. Get some sleep.

The driver made a U-turn and headed across Central Park on the 79th Street Traverse.

Francesco woke when Michiko unlocked the apartment door.

—Francesco, why are all the lights off?

—Sorry, I fell asleep on the couch. How was the concert?

—Mostly excellent. I don't think I ever want to play with Mandy again. She is such a vainglorious bitch. She thinks she is God's gift to music.

—Didn't she win some big violin competition?

—Yes, but there are rumors.

—Can't you girls get along? You're always bickering with each other.

Michiko went into the bedroom and closed the door. Francesco waited for fifteen

minutes. Michiko didn't come out. Sometimes after a concert she was in a foul mood and wanted to be left alone. Other times she wanted ravenous sex. He couldn't tell which way things would play out today. He tapped his fingers on the bedroom door.

—Come in, Francesco.

She was under the covers. Her dress and underwear were thrown over the chair at her dressing table. She had lit a candle next to the bed.

—Take off your clothes.

Francesco usually liked to make sure Michiko was well satisfied before he took his full pleasure of her. Tonight, she only wanted to give him as many pleasures and stimulations as she could. She was very skilled. Ultimately, she took some pleasures, but she left him totally spent.

They lay on the bed. He pulled the covers over them.

—Francesco, I have something to tell you.

He couldn't imagine what it would be. Even though it was over six months since he quit smoking, he had worked especially hard at keeping a good disposition. He avoided conflict, cheerfully performed annoying chores and errands she demanded when she was under stress, or suffered performance anxiety.

—Good news or bad?

—I want you to move out.

It was as if a professional boxer had punched him in the solar plexus. He lay on his back with his hands behind his head. Michiko moved an inch away so they were not touching.

—Is there some reason? Did I do something to hurt you?

—I don't want to discuss it. When I'm ready to talk to you about it, I'll call you. I'm leaving Tuesday for Chicago. I will be gone until Sunday night. I want you completely moved out when I return.

—Can you tell me why? Don't I at least deserve that?

—Maybe in a few weeks. I don't want to speak about it.

—Should I leave now?

—There's a guest coming. He's the cellist who played the Beethoven trio with us this afternoon. I must get dressed and prepare dinner.

—I don't think I could eat. I'm devastated. I'll leave.

—Please leave your painting of me playing the piano.

—I guess that's my legacy.

He left the bed and dressed. He could hear Michiko quietly weeping. He took one of his backpacks and stuffed it with toiletries and clothes. He gently closed and locked the apartment door when he left.

When he arrived on the first floor, the doorman was talking to a man with a cello

case. He was a tall handsome man who spoke with a heavy Italian accent.

—Armando, said Francesco to the doorman, I'm going away for a few days. I'll be back on Thursday.

—OK, Francesco, said Armando. You're a brave man to leave Michiko alone with this handsome gentleman.

—Hello, said the man with the cello, I'm Sylvester Angonelli. Michiko invited me for dinner tonight.

—Yes, said Francesco. I have another engagement. I'm sorry. She is a splendid cook.

Francesco took the C train to Columbus Circle where he changed to the downtown local 1 train. At Times Square he switched to the Broadway local. He exited at Prince Street. His studio was on Greene Street. The slush on the narrow sidewalks was starting to freeze. He walked in the street.

The neighborhood was changing. The artists who had moved into the nearly abandoned buildings ten years before were afraid they would lose their lofts. The real estate marketers were calling the neighborhood SOHO, for "South of Houston." Once the area became fashionable, none of them would be able to afford to live and work here.

He walked into Fanelli's, his neighborhood bar. He ordered a shot and a beer, bought a pack of Camels, tapped down the pack and lit his first cigarette in over six months. It tasted wonderful. It even gave him a slight buzz.

The rising sun was hidden from his eyes by the hips of the woman next to him in the bed. She was on her side facing him with both her hands tucked between her thighs. Her breathing had a slight purr to it as she slept. Her lustrous auburn hair covered her shoulders and breasts.

It had rained during the night and he had pulled the curtains back to open the French doors and listen to the October rain. This was his last day in Venice. It was also the woman's birthday. He would have to rise and pack to begin the journey back to New York City. They had celebrated her birthday last night and spent most of the night entwined.

Francesco didn't know what he was going to do with the woman. Oriana had insinuated herself into his life during his residency at the museum where she was a curator. They had flirted for over a month before she invited him to her apartment for dinner. She lived on the top floor of her family's Castello home. After her parents died she rented the lower floors to a local Venetian family.

The Venice Biennale had been a great success for him. All his paintings had sold for high prices, and he had received excellent reviews both in Europe, Asia, and in the North American press.

The dawn light grazed the top of Oriana's hip, backlighting the subtle small

contours in her flesh. If he squinted his eyes, crepuscular rays formed from the light passing through small slats of the shutters. The pale light dappled the white flesh of her hip with small burnished pools of slowly changing pastel pinks, blues and greens.

—What are you thinking Francesco?

—Nothing. I was enjoying the dawn light on your hip and thinking I couldn't ever capture that in paint. The light changes too quickly.

—But you don't paint figures.

—Sometimes. If I did paint your hip in this light, it would be a difficult task.

He turned his head and looked into her eyes.

—You have such big eyes, said Francesco turning on his side to face her directly. And the whites are so white and clear.

—Your eyes are so intense. I always think you can see through my clothes into my soul.

—Well, it's easy now, you're nude.

—Nude? Not naked?

He looked into her eyes.

—Oriana, your nude body makes a statement. Naked is children and old people.

He wanted to make love to her one last time, but he was afraid she would make a scene afterward, begging him to take her with him to New York. She was weary of the parochial attitudes and politics of Venice, a small city trying to keep Rome at bay, but trapped, like Greece, by a glorious history that was its only commercial coin.

—When do you have to leave for the plane?

—After lunch. I have a lunch date with your boss.

—May I come with you?

He didn't answer. It would be embarrassing if she made a scene. She had broken down last night at dinner and again when they were lying in the bed listening to the rain on the canal.

—You're not answering me.

He had said those very words to Michiko more than a year ago. They were sitting in Shun Lee West on 65th Street in Manhattan. Michiko wore a stunning jade green sheath dress that flattered her figure and flesh tones. Her waist-length hair was piled high on her head. She was in high feather. Her most recent solo recital received rave reviews and she landed a new recording contract.

—Would you care for a cocktail? asked the waiter, a middle-aged Asian man.

—I'll have a Glenlivet, said Francesco. Michiko?

—I'll have a glass of the house Chardonnay, she said to the waiter.

He knew she would not drink the wine. She would drink Champagne because her mother had said that if her drunken uncle had stuck with Champagne he would never have become an alcoholic. He would have gone broke first. Her father and mother never drank. Like many Asians, they were allergic to alcohol.

—Michiko, wouldn't you prefer Champagne? My treat.

Michiko consulted the wine list.

—Bring me a split of the Dom Pérignon.

—Very well Madame, a Glenlivet and a split of Dom Pérignon.

Michiko took her napkin, carefully unfolded it, and placed it on her lap.

—I wish you would dress more appropriately for this restaurant.

—I don't make as much money as you do. I've had to give up my SOHO studio and have moved to Red Hook, Brooklyn.

—Have you lost your dealer?

—They've cut my monthly stipend.

—But I read a good review of your drawings in the *Times*.

—Drawings don't make money. The gallery people have decided I was a flash in the pan. As they say, I'm dead to them.

—I don't believe that.

—Well, I've lost you, and you were the best thing in my life.

—Francesco, your art comes first and always has. I was a passenger in your life.

—I don't think you appreciated how much I cared for you.

—No, I knew. But your mood swings sent mixed signals. I hated your dark moods.

—Do you think I intentionally brought them on?

—No, but it was difficult when you were down.

The waiter brought them their drinks and with great ceremony opened the split and poured Michiko's drink.

—Thank you, said Michiko.

They sat quietly for some time.

—Isn't that Peter Jennings at the table over there? said Michiko.

—I don't watch TV. It probably is. ABC is around the corner.

Francesco looked at Michiko and his heart broke. He was still in love with her. It wasn't clear that she had a beau. When she wore her hair up like that, she was regal. She said it gave her power.

—You look fantastic, Michiko.

—Don't try to romance me, Francesco.

—I'm not. You are one beautiful woman, and an amazing talent. I heard your solo recital at the Metropolitan Museum last month.

—Why didn't you congratulate me afterward?

—I was afraid I would upset you. The Ives *Concord Sonata* was astounding.

—Francesco, that's what I mean about you. One minute you are the finest man I could want, the next minute you are so insecure and depressed I don't want to be near you. What's wrong with you?

—As you know, my ex-wife said the same thing. She said I was a bipolar-schizoid-drunk. When I quit smoking she left me. When I quit smoking you kicked me out.

—Well, are you smoking now?

—Of course.

The waiter took their order. Michiko chose the menu with authority. Since she was an Asian music celebrity, the staff was attentive and solicitous. It also meant that he would have to control his emotions. A raised voice could be a scandal for Michiko.

—You always choose the best dishes.

—I dine here frequently and they know I will return a dish to the kitchen if it is not perfect. My choices are their best plates. I hope you appreciate what you have been missing.

—I haven't eaten a good meal since you kicked me out.

They sat looking at each other.

—Francesco, don't look at me like that. And why are you so thin? Do you still have that tapeworm?

—No, it's long gone. I have been working hard and I don't have a lot of money for food. Without the monthly stipend from the gallery, it's tough to buy materials, food, and even beer and cigarettes.

—You will enjoy this meal. Trust me.

He could feel himself sliding into depression.

—So why did you kick me out? Because I quit smoking, or I have mood swings.

Michiko swirled the champagne in her glass, touched it to her lips and then returned it to the table without tasting the champagne.

—You know I love your paintings. Not only the portraits of me, but I especially like the big abstracts. They are so musical. The one that was in the living room, *Big Wave*, I have improvised to it. I love it.

—I painted it listening to you practice; it has nothing to do with the sea.

Michiko looked around the room. She could sense the miasma of depression enveloping Francesco.

—Michiko, you're not answering me. Why did you kick me out?

—I have to use the ladies' room.

—Of course.

The wait staff stood off to the side with the meal. They were waiting for Michiko to return. The service captain spoke into the ear of the waiter. The staff removed the plates.

—I'm so sorry sir, but your companion has taken ill and left the restaurant. She has paid the bill.

Francesco turned on his back and stared at the plaster moldings on the ceiling.

—It's difficult to say, he said. I have mood swings. Women don't like that. They become upset. My ex-wife and Michiko left me because of my bipolar behavior. My first wife even said I was schizoid because I didn't like to be around people.

Oriana turned so her back was to him. He could see her shoulders shake.

—Please don't. It is difficult enough leaving you without you weeping.

He lay there counting the roses in the ornate plaster rose around the chandelier.

How could he take her to New York City? She didn't have enough pedigree to land a job at one of the big museums, galleries or auction houses. No college would take her on the faculty with her Italian degrees and limited English. Venice was an anachronism; New York was in your face commerce and wealth. When he was down on his luck and had applied for a job at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, he lost out to Caroline Kennedy. Family and money are requirements in those lofty realms. He lived in a cold-water loft in Red Hook, Brooklyn. He slept on the floor in a sleeping bag on a futon he found on the streets of Park Slope. Oriana's home was a palazzo. His was an abandoned propeller repair shop that had been a sail loft in the age of sail.

—I should make you some coffee, she said.

—That would be wonderful. Or do you want me to do it?

—No, I need to clean up. I'll put the coffee on. Listen for it.

When he heard the stovetop espresso pot espress, he rose and went into the kitchen. He turned off the flame. He could hear her singing in the bath. He walked into the shower and took her into his arms.

They sat on the bed wrapped in bath sheets drinking their coffee. Oriana's hair was piled on top of her head and wrapped in a towel.

—Oriana, you know how I feel about you, but I can't see you living in my hovel. Yours is a beautiful home. My home is a dirty abandoned factory in Brooklyn with no hot water and no heat.

—But you've sold all those paintings and there will be many more commissions. There is a future. Is this your dark side?

—Practical side, hardly morbid. How can I ask a beautiful, cultured, smart woman like you to share my life in a violent slum?

—Francesco, I believe in you. We will find better lodgings. You are going to be famous. You already are. Wait until you return to New York, people will be clamoring for your work. Everything will work out. I want to share your success with you. Find us a good home in New York.

He tried to picture her in twenty-five years, a proud mother and international art doyen. But then in twenty-five years he would be sixty, if his depression didn't slip the leash. What would Michiko think when she saw the sophisticated, voluptuous, and vivacious Oriana? What would Oriana think when she heard the raw emotional power of Michiko's performances? The contrast was daunting. He should keep to his solitary life.

Michiko was gone from his life. How long would it take Oriana to leave? Would she ask him to quit smoking? Would he do it?

Oriana put her arms around him.

—Francesco, love me one more time, slowly, she said, pulling off the bath sheet and lying back on the bed

When he entered his loft the first thing he noticed was that his answering machine tape was full. After he had unpacked, he dutifully played back the tape and took notes in his tattered Moleskine notebook. Most of the messages were congratulatory, a few were potential sales and one was from his landlord asking for rent. The last message was from Michiko.

—Francesco. I'm sorry about the scene at Shun Lee, but I just didn't want to talk about our relationship. I saw the picture of you with the gorgeous *Italiana* in the *Arts* section of the *Times*. Call me.

It was six in the evening. He walked to Carroll Gardens and dined in an Italian restaurant. Compared to Venice, the food was dreadful. Compared to American Italian restaurant fare, it was cuisine.

When he returned to his loft, there was a message on his machine.

—Francesco, why are you not answering your phone? Are you with that Japanese *musica*? Call me as soon as you receive this message. Kisses, Francesco. I love you. Ciao, ciao.

Francesco looked at his watch. It was eight at night, two in the morning in Venice.

He found his address book and dialed Oriana. She answered on the first ring.

—Francesco?

—Yes, Oriana, it's me. How are you?

- Missing you.
- Me too. It's 4 degrees Celsius here. You would be sneezing and freezing.
- But you would keep me warm.
- All I have is a smelly sleeping bag and a few old sweaters. This time of the year I wear a knit watch cap all the time to keep warm. When it's very cold I sleep in my overcoat.
- Now I worry about you.
- Don't. I've survived almost two years here. I haven't died yet and I made some of my best paintings.
- It is warm in my bed and I miss you.
- Well, don't go Dido on me and throw the bed into the canal. We will need it when I visit.
- Francesco, are you really going to visit me?
- Of course, my dear. For me it was a long sad flight to New York from Venice.
- I love you Francesco.
- I love you, too, but I have to hang up. My phone will disconnect in a few seconds.

He pressed the switch hook and ended the call. Oriana was a desirable problem. He wanted Oriana, but he was leery of someone so emotional and possessive. He loved the voluptuousness of her body and her positive spirit. It would be exciting to have a beautiful woman and an upturn in his art fortunes at the same time. Michiko was familiar ground of good and bad memories. Michiko was emotionally stable, but she could bring on his black moods with her overbearing Oriental superiority. Tomorrow he would call Michiko, or maybe not.

He put on a knit cap, removed his shoes, jeans, and shirt before crawling into his sleeping bag. He could hear the rats scurrying in the walls.

He lit a Camel and lay smoking in the dark. The horns and whistles in the harbor punctuated the continuous drone of traffic on the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway. A dark cloud flittered in the periphery of his vision. When he closed his eyes he saw the Venetian sun rising over Oriana's hip. He prayed this new dawn would cauterize his wound of darkness.