

The Joanne Harris Website – Online Stories

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Fish

There is a saying in Naples, which goes like this: *Stay a night and you'll hate it; stay a week, and you'll love it; stay longer, and you'll stay forever.* This is a cautionary tale.

Melissa and Jack had been married for just under a week, and already things were not going well. The wedding had been everything the bride had wanted; five hundred guests; white roses and gypsophilia; two carats in yellow gold; a cake designed with rather more architectural expertise than most office buildings and twenty-four cases of (budget) champagne, all paid for by the groom's parents and lavishly photographed by the most expensive photographer in South Kensington.

Even so, three days into their honeymoon, Jack could sense an increasing irritability in his bride. To be sure, it was not his fault that the hotel was so small, or the streets so busy, or that Melissa had had her handbag stolen during their very first outing. It was not even his fault that most Neapolitan restaurants seemed incapable or unwilling to cater for – or even to understand – the importance of Melissa's vegetarian, lactose-intolerant and, above all, wheat-free diet, with the result that although she had eaten almost nothing during the past three days, her stomach had already swollen painfully, and local women (who were friendly to a fault) had got into the habit of patting her bump amicably and inquiring in broken English when the *bambino* was due.

It was, however, Jack who had chosen Naples as their honeymoon destination, being a quarter Neapolitan on his mother's side, in addition to having spent three weeks

there once as a student, and having therefore had plenty of time, (as Melissa pointed out) to get to know the bloody place.

Melissa was twenty-six: pretty with the homogenized prettiness that comes with youth, good tailoring, expensive dentistry and time on one's hands. She herself was not professionally ambitious, but her people knew almost everyone; her father owned a chain of supermarkets; her mother was the daughter of Lord Somebody; and to Jack, a youngish but successful financial adviser in the City, blessed with a silver Lexus, his grandmother's dark and Latin looks and the beginnings of an executive paunch, their union had seemed like the perfect mixture of business and pleasure.

In Naples, however, things were beginning to look different. Melissa hated everything; the streets; the smells; the urchins on their mopeds; the markets; the fishing boats; the thieves; the shops. Jack, on the other hand, had never been happier. Everything delighted him; the narrow streets; the washing strung across the crooked balconies; the people; the street vendors; the cafés; the wines; the food. Especially the food; he had never really known his Italian family apart from his grandmother, who had died when he was a very young boy, and his only lasting memory of her was of a fierce, round little woman with hair scraped back into a black headscarf, who spent most of her life in the kitchen making grilled aubergines and fresh mushroom ravioli and truffled tagliatelle and little anchovy pizzas that smelt of the sea and tasted like concentrated sunshine.

Even so, he had returned to Naples with a sense of relief that even Melissa's incessant complaining failed to diminish: the feeling that, after years in exile, he was at last coming home.

It pained him that Melissa disliked the place; it pained him still more that she said so on every possible occasion. "The fact is," he said, as they dressed glumly for dinner, "the fact is, you never wanted to come here in the first place."

“Too right I didn’t,” said the bride. “Bloody cheapskate. Dizzy Flore-Harrington got a whole Pacific island to herself for *her* honeymoon; India Scott-Parker and her party went on a retreat in the Himalayas and Humphrey Pulitt-Jones took *his* girlfriend to the South Pole. What am I going to tell my friends when we get back from *our* honeymoon? That I went to Naples and had my bag snatched?”

Jack suppressed the urge to shout at her. Instead he said in a reasonable voice: “Come on darling. It isn’t as if you weren’t carrying any money, anyway.”

Melissa glared at him. “That was a Lulu Guinness evening bag,” she said shrilly. “It was a collector’s piece!”

“Right.” There really was no point in arguing. It wasn’t even as if she’d paid for the bag herself - Melissa was like the Queen in that respect, Jack thought bitterly, although at least Her Majesty *had* money of her own, even if she never carried any. He spread his hands in a placating gesture. “We’ll get you another bag,” he said, trying not to think about how much all this was going to cost him in apologies, gifts and shopping sprees. “Try not to shout, darling. The walls are awfully thin in these old -”

“And don’t give me all that about how bloody quaint it is, either,” shouted Melissa, taking no notice. “Beggars and pickpockets on every corner, washing across every street, no nice shops to speak of, and if I even have to *look* at another bloody pizzareia -” At this point there came a pounding against the bedroom wall, as of a blunt object – the heel of a shoe – being tapped against the panels.

“Be fair, darling,” said Jack. “I wasn’t to know you’d decided to go vegetarian and wheat-free virtually overnight. If you *must* follow these fad diets -”

“My nutritionist said I had an intolerance!”

“Well, all I can say is you must have developed it very fast. You were eating those things quite happily three weeks ago.”

Melissa glared. “In case you haven’t noticed, wheat makes me bloat. And *civilized* people don’t eat meat. It’s practically murder.”

Jack, who enjoyed the occasional steak (had been looking forward to one, in fact, since their arrival in Naples), felt his face grow hot. “I didn’t notice you turning down that chicken salad you had at the reception,” he said.

“Chicken isn’t meat,” said Melissa with scorn. “It’s poultry.”

“Ah yes, how silly of me. Chicken. The famous vegetable.”

“Stop it, Jack! Just because *you* eat like a savage -”

“What about fish? Is that allowed? Because this is Naples, in case you hadn’t noticed, and there are any number of fish restaurants around -”

“I can *eat* fish,” said Melissa. “I just don’t *like* it much, that’s all.”

“So fish is a vegetable, now? How convenient. It’s an aphrodisiac as well, you know. Perhaps you should try some.”

Melissa was still glaring, but now her eyes were brimming with tears. “Sometimes I think *you* should have been a fish, Jack,” she said, turning away. “You’re perfect for it. Cold-blooded, slimy and stupid.”

It was their first married quarrel. Jack was annoyed at himself for letting it happen – he rarely lost his cool in the boardroom, and it was unlike him to behave in such a confrontational way. Unlike and unworthy, he reflected; after all, marriage was only the first step in his long-term plan, and much would depend upon keeping Melissa and her family sweet. Think of it this way, he told himself; there’s no point in getting your foot in the door if the next thing you do is stick it in your mouth. And what a stupid thing to quarrel about! For God’s sake, what did it matter what Melissa ate? Jack himself was rather fond of his food – a weakness he tried very hard to hide from his colleagues at work, still stuck in the Eighties, living on coffee and filter-tips. But here, for some reason, it was harder to pretend. Perhaps because of his Italian blood. Perhaps the

Naples air, smelling as it did of petrol, ash, sea-salt, oil and fried garlic (so like the smell of sex, he told himself, another appetite Melissa did not appear to share). Still, there was no point in taking it out on her, he thought. And in any case, the sooner they made it up, the sooner they could have dinner.

In spite of his good intentions, however, it took him almost an hour to restore the romantic mood. The Casa Rosa, a small restaurant down by the harbour, was not the Ivy, but on inspection, Melissa grudgingly accepted that there *might* be things on the menu she could eat. Waving aside the anchovy toasts, the *caponata*, the seafood *risotto*, the *calamari fritti* and the pancetta and wild mushroom pizza, she decided at last on a small piece of grilled sea-bass (no oil, no sauces) and a green salad, dressing on the side.

Jack, on the other hand, was feeling hungry. Perhaps the stress; perhaps the sea air. In any case he made short work of a dozen oysters, a vast plate of lobster tagliolini and a pair of red mullet with *salsa verde*. At eight, the restaurant was still almost empty – the evening crowd would begin to arrive at nine or ten – and the plump, cheery woman who brought their meals stood attentively, if somewhat obtrusively by, ready to offer more bread, more wine, if needed. Her round face glowed with approval as she removed Jack's empty dishes.

“Was good, yes?”

“Very good.” He smiled and loosened his belt a couple of notches. “*Buonissimo.*”

“I catch the mullet this morning. All the fish – this morning catch.”

From the corner of his eye, Jack saw Melissa frown. She had hardly touched her meal, he saw; pushing salad leaves from one side of the plate to the other. The plump woman had seen it too; and her face, which had been so vivid when she was speaking to Jack, took on a doughy, expressionless look.

“I thought mine was rather dry,” said Melissa, putting her knife and fork together.

The doughy look wavered a little. The dark head bobbed like a fishing-float. The plump woman – Rosa herself, thought Jack – took the remaining plates in a graceless scramble, head bowed, shoulders hunched.

“You shouldn’t have said that,” said Jack, watching her go. “After all, *you* asked for it to be fat-free.” His own fish had been luscious, swimming in oil and capers, and he had mopped up the remaining sauce with the last of the olive bread.

Melissa shot him a look. “Just because *you* stuff yourself silly, it doesn’t mean I have to. I mean look at you. You must have put on half a stone since we arrived.”

Jack shrugged and poured more wine. Melissa had barely touched that, either. Behind her, Rosa emerged from the kitchen carrying two plates and a covered dish.

“Speciality,” she said, with a taut smile, and set them down on the table.

“But we didn’t order anything else,” said Melissa.

“Speciality,” repeated the plump woman, and removed the cover from the earthenware dish. A spicy, delicious smell emerged. Inside, Jack could see pieces of fish nestling alongside whole tiger prawns, mussels, scallops and fat brown Sicilian anchovies. There was white wine, bay, olive oil, fresh parsley; there was garlic; there was chilli; and in the rising steam he could see Rosa’s face, plain, pleasant, slightly pink now with hope and anticipation, the hesitant smile just wavering on her lips.

“But we didn’t *order* -” Melissa began again.

Jack interrupted her. “Fabulous,” he said loudly. “I’ll definitely try some.”

Melissa watched as Rosa heaped food onto Jack’s plate.

“More bread, yes?” said Rosa. “We have olive, walnut, anchovy -”

“Perfect,” said Jack.

As Rosa disappeared once more into the kitchen, Melissa turned on her beloved. “What *do* you think you’re doing?”

“You made a complaint,” said Jack.

“So?”

“So she’s a Neapolitan. Her sense of hospitality obliges her to make it up to you.”

“How ridiculous,” said Melissa. “*I* certainly shan’t eat any of it.”

“Then I shall eat it all,” said Jack. “I can’t and won’t refuse her hospitality.” To refuse the food, he knew from his grandmother, would be the worst kind of insult; already Rosa had been shaken by Melissa’s casual complaint; to turn down her apology would be inexcusable.

“Don’t give me that,” said Melissa with scorn. “You just want another excuse to pig out. We’ll end up paying for it, you’ll see; you don’t think she’s going to let us have all that for free, do you?”

Jack took a mouthful of fish, silken with oil, wine and spices. “Delicious,” he said provocatively, and Rosa, arriving just at that moment with the bread, flushed with pleasure. She really was large, he thought, but now he saw that she was far from unattractive: her café-latte skin was perfectly unblemished; her glossy black hair tied back in a loose chignon, so that small tendrils fell damply around the sides of her face. Beneath the neat white apron her breasts were like feather pillows, and as she bent to ladle more stew into his plate, he caught a scent of vanilla and ozone and baking bread from her smooth brown arms.

“You should just see yourself,” said Melissa in a low voice, as he scooped sauce into his mouth using one of the empty mussel shells. “Anyone would think you hadn’t eaten in a week.”

Jack shrugged and broke the head off a prawn. The flesh was pink and succulent, steeped in wine and spiced oil.

“That’s disgusting,” said Melissa, as he sucked the juice from inside the prawn head, leaving the shell on the side of his plate. “You’re disgusting and I want to go back to the hotel.”

“I haven’t finished. If you want to go, then go.”

Melissa did not reply. Jack knew perfectly well that she would not leave without him; Naples by day made her uneasy; but by night it terrified her. She put her lips together – one of her most unappealing expressions, thought Jack as he started on a piece of monkfish, it made her look just like her mother – and sat in martyred silence for a couple of minutes, deliberately not looking at him, which was fine by Jack.

In the corner of the restaurant, Rosa stood re-arranging some fruit in a large earthen dish. The heat of the kitchen had flushed her cheeks, and against her café-latte skin, the effect was sweetly exotic, like the bloom on a ripe nectarine. She smiled at him as she turned around (not before he had had time to appreciate the sweeping curve of her buttocks under the tight-fitting uniform), and he was struck by her youth. He had assumed she was a middle-aged woman; now he could see quite clearly that she was Melissa’s age, maybe younger. In fact now he came to think of it, Melissa herself was looking rather tired; her skin was dry and slightly sunburnt, and there was an unpleasant double-crease between her plucked eyebrows. It made her look older than she was; stringy rather than slender, like overcooked roast chicken. She had lost weight in the weeks before the wedding, he knew; the dress had been a size eight to her usual ten, and its scooped neckline had revealed an unappealing expanse of corrugated flesh, through which the ribs were clearly visible. Later he had discovered that she wore gel pads in her bra to give herself some cleavage - chicken fillets, they called them, he reflected sourly – recalling the moment of discovery. It had been rather a shock; Jack liked busty women. But he had made a joke of it – a joke, as it happened, that Melissa had not appreciated. Jack wondered vaguely whether chicken fillets counted as poultry, and as he poured

himself another glass of wine he noticed, with some surprise, that he had finished the bottle.

He had finished the stew, too, and most of the bread; and when Rosa came up to clear the plates her face shone with delight.

“Thank you,” said Melissa in a cold voice.

“You like?”

“Very much,” said Jack.

“Maybe a dessert, yes? And café?”

“The bill, please,” said Melissa clearly.

Rosa looked slightly hurt. “No dessert? We have *tiramisu*, and *torta della nonna*, and _”

“No thank you. Just the bill.”

That was so like her, thought Jack, feeling his face grow warm. No thought for anyone but herself; no understanding of the needs of those around her. It wasn't as if she were paying the bill, either; the question of a shared bank account had come up once, but had caused so much distress and indignation that Jack had wisely retreated, hoping to pursue it at some less sensitive moment.

“I'll have dessert, please,” he said in a loud voice. “And *grappa*, and espresso.”

Melissa's face was a white knuckle of disapproval. Behind her, Rosa's cheeks glowed like summer wallflowers. “The menu?” she inquired.

He shook his head. “Surprise me.”

Over coffee, which she would not drink, Melissa eyed him in pale and glassy fury. “You're doing this on purpose,” she hissed.

“What makes you say that?” said Jack, between mouthfuls of *grappa*.

“Damn you, Jack, you knew I wanted to leave!”

He shrugged. “I'm hungry.”

“You’re a pig.”

Her voice was shaking. In a moment she would cry. Why was he doing this? Jack asked himself in sudden confusion. He’d worked so hard to win Melissa; why was he doing this to her, and to himself? The realization was like a nugget of ice in the centre of a soft and melting *crème brûlée*, and he put down his glass, wondering vaguely whether he could have been drugged. Melissa was watching him with hate in her blue eyes, her mouth thinned almost to invisibility.

“Okay. We’ll go.” It was astonishing how ugly she really was, he thought. The teased and processed hair. The capped teeth. The scrawny neck, strung out like a long rope-ladder to the chicken fillets in her expensive La Perla bra. From out of the kitchen came Rosa, soft and bright and glowing, with a tray between her hands. Her chocolate-amber eyes were shining, and Jack found himself saying, almost without meaning to: “After dessert.”

Beside him, Melissa went rigid. But Jack was hardly aware of it as he watched Rosa with the tray. She had brought him, he realized, not one dessert, but many: tiny portions of everything on Rosa’s special menu. There was tiramisu, dusted with chocolate and lusciously, meltingly moist; there was lemon polenta and chocolate risotto; there were lace-thin almond tiles and coconut macaroons and pear tartlets and apricot ice-cream and spiced vanilla brûlée with almond flakes and honey.

“You have *got* to be kidding me,” whispered Melissa furiously. But Jack barely heard her in the face of these new wonders: testing this, tasting that with a growing sense of exhilaration and abandon. Rosa watched him with that half-maternal smile and her hands folded like angels’ wings across her breasts. Astonishing, that he should ever have thought her plain: she was stunning, he realized now; ripe as summer strawberries; sensual as a bath of cream. He looked at the woman sitting opposite, with her sour expression and tried to remember why she was there; something about money, he

seemed to recall; something about business and prospects. It didn't seem important though, and he soon forgot it again as he immersed himself in the tastes and the textures of this strange and darkly gorgeous Neapolitan woman's confectionery.

Opposite him, Rosa seemed to share in his delight. Her mouth was slightly open, her eyes sparkling, her cheeks faintly flushed. She nodded to him, first in approval, then with a suppressed excitement. She was trembling, he saw; her hands clenching and unclenching against the white of her apron. He took a mouthful of hazelnut cream; his eyes closed for a moment, and as they did he felt sure that her eyes, too, had closed in rapture; heard a gasp of pleasure as he reached once more for the spoon.

"Good! Yes!" It was almost inaudible, and yet he heard it; the sigh of release; the tiny moan of delight. Once more, he reached; once more, she sighed; fingers splayed into the musky air. He was gluttoned; and yet he wanted more, if only to see her face as he fed and fed. Dimly he recalled himself telling someone – who was it now? – that fish was an aphrodisiac; for a second he thought he might almost have remembered who, but then the thought slipped quietly away.

He was still eating when the woman with the sour face stood up, her mouth like barbed wire, and left the table. He did not look up - though she slammed the door quite rudely as she left - until Rosa returned with the coffee, amaretti and little glacé-fruit pastries; and then she was sitting beside him, her hands over his; she was unfastening his belt to give his taut belly space to expand, and, nibbling gently at his ear she whispered in a voice like musk and blood and dark honey: "Now, *Carissimo*. Now for my turn."

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