

The Pianoplayers

*A Liana
che conosce tutta la scala
cromatica dell' amore*

One

You can see me any afternoon during the summer months, sitting at one of the tables in the square under the chestnut trees and taking a vanilla ice with a small whisky poured over it. The tables fill this square, which you could call like the social centre of the little town of Callian in the Var, which is in Provence, which is in the South of France. Half the tables belong to Les Marroniers and the other half to Le Petit Vatel, and if you're new to the place you can only get to know which tables belong to which café by sitting down and waiting. If it is fat little Philippe with the curly hair but going a bit bald who comes to ask you what you desire, then you are patronising Les Marroniers. This is a restaurant as well as a café, and some of their tables are set for meals during the summer months. There are three very pretty girls waiting on, and sometimes, it is force of habit, I look at them a bit commercially. There is Philippe's wife Jeanette, there is the German girl Trudi who is engaged to be married to the local butcher, and there is the jolie blonde French girl not yet married nor even engaged, but always kissing and cuddling the very dark boy that works in Bazin's garage, even when she should be waiting on. She is called Mirabelle and always looks half-naked, what with her shoulder-straps slipping down when she carries the dishes and her skirt slit almost up to her bottom. Ah well, she is as God made her.

The square is really a triangle, with the longest side by the main street which is the road to Grasse one way and to Draguignan the other but separated from it by shrubs in tubs and two big chestnut trees, the shortest side being the front of the church with a bench

outside where Monsieur le Curé sits with his collar and tie on to show he is a priest. The other side is the Cascade, with water splashing down all the time through like tangled greenery into a big basin with candy and ice cream wrappers floating on it, then there is the house of Mme Guillemot, who mutters and comes down her front steps backwards, and then the shop which sells cigarettes and newspapers and stationery and sunbathing lotions and espadrilles. It has outside it a couple of revolving stands, one filled with newspapers and the other with magazines like *Paris-Match* and *L'Express* and some very dirty ones, all hot hairy hands and bosoms. A lot of us who sit here use both of these as public libraries, reading the reading matter but not buying it. Monsieur Rue, who runs the place, gets mad at this sometimes but he soon gets over it, human nature being what it is, especially here in the Var. It was while I was looking one day at a copy of a music magazine called *Gamme* that the idea of doing something for the memory of my poor father came into my head. For inside it there was an interview with my grandson the famous pianist and a photograph of him looking very handsome.

I might have let the idea pass, what with the heat and the laziness, if another thing hadn't happened and then another. The first of these was me lying awake in the middle of the night not able to sleep because of the heat and the mosquitoes and a bit of indigestion I'd got from a bottle of Côtés de Provence in Les Marronniers, French wine not being what it used to be. I was listening to the BBC Overseas Service on my little radio, and it was one of these request programmes, with Amazing Grace for Albert Nguzumu of Southern Nigeria, and Thus Spoke Zarathustra for Joseph Zarathustra, as it might be, of North-western Afghanistan. Miss Li Po Chang of Western Sumatra requested The One-armed Fiddler's Waltz, and here it is, Miss Li. This was a record very popular then and it still is, with ten thousand five-year-olds in South-Eastern Tokyo who had just started on the Sukiyaki Violin Method, which was really invented by my poor old dad. And it was my poor old dad who had written this thing, I'll give you a copy later, and he had not made one solitary penny, old or new, out of it. This put me into a sort of hopeless rage, as hearing it nearly always does, and I was just about

ready for the man who lives opposite, our windows all being open because of the heat. This man is Italian I should think, with a name something like Vermicelliano. He is a bricklayer with two cars and a big family, you can see them sitting down at the table of an evening for their dinner, the wife very gross and loud and him even grosser and louder, stripped to the waist for his spaghetti and all boils and hair. This man and his family can play their television screaming all day, but let me put my little radio on in the middle of the night with the insomnia and he wakes up and starts his abuse. I usually turn the radio down, being desirous of being neighbourly so to speak, but this time when he started I let him have it back. I gave him the worst going over in really dirty French that he must ever have had in his life. It shut him up all right, him just mumbling something about denouncing me to the Maire, but then, with my desire of being neighbourly, I turned off my radio and tried to read the latest John le Carré which I'd bought from the Britannia Book Shop in Cannes, a very dull writer who is good for sending you to sleep.

There is a big laugh, only it is a bit bitter, in the name of the street in Callian where I have my little house for the summer. It is called Rue des Muets, which means Street of the Dumb, but it is the noisiest street imaginable, what with Vermicelliano and his wife and kids, and the three homo Algerians always quarrelling, and dirty too what with the big dogs leaving their *crottes* all over people's doorsteps. Well, the dirty language I gave out with this night showed I was as fit for the street as anybody there, including the filthy old widower who lives next door to me with his filthy hairy great dog that shares a bed with him and pees all over it, or so they say in the talk at Madame Durand's the boulangère. Looking at me, though, you would never think me capable of such a thing. I am a nice slim elderly lady, a bit scrawny round the neck as is only natural, but with her white hair nicely blued at the best hairdresser's in Cannes, which is where I spend the winter, and nails nicely looked after and tinted cinnamon and a little bit of lipstick and eyeshadow, and usually to be seen in a nicely tailored blue or grey or off-white linen trouser suit. I pride myself on being very English and even try to speak French with an English accent, but old habits die hard as they say, and I find this

very hard to do. I have been called La Belle Hélène in my time, but I was born Ellen Henshaw and I stick to my maiden name.

You know, when you come to Callian as a stranger, when you're sitting in the part of the square that is looked after by Le Petit Vatel because it is a woman of about thirty-five called Claudine who crosses the road, sometimes having to wait till big refrigerated trucks pass, from where Le Petit Vatel is to ask you what it is you desire. She wears a dress with a bit of string round where her waist used to be and she looks like a picture by Picasso, one of those where there is a profile but you can see both the eyes. I knew Picasso for about half an hour because he came once in Paris for the use of my services but could not do anything, but that's part of another story. Le Petit Vatel used to be an auberge with a restaurant, but now all the rooms are shut up and it is only a café full of old men with caps on playing cards and dropping caporal ash over them. But some people think it is still a hotel and they go there looking for a room. This is what happened to the young man who is helping me with this story.

I felt really sorry for him when he trudged into the town from the Montauroux direction with his dirty shorts and his hairy legs all bitten by mosquitoes and his big pack on his back, and his face all streaming with sweat and his glasses all misted up. He asked Claudine in very bad French for a room for the night and perhaps longer, but all she did was shake her head at him very grim, so he sat down at the table next to mine in the shade of the biggest chestnut tree in the square and ordered a small bottle of Perrier. I know he doesn't mind me mentioning these things. After all, he's taking it all down off the cassette recorder. His name is Rolf Marcus and he says he comes from a place called Angostura or something in New Mexico.

'You looking for somewhere to stay, love?' I said, and he said:

'Thank Christ there's somebody here who speaks English. In that other place down the road, Monty Roo or whatever the shit they call it, they said they were all full up and I'd find a great big empty hotel here in this shit of a place.'

'I'll thank you,' I said, 'not to say shit to a lady of my age and appearance. And a great big empty hotel is just what you've come here and found. And they want it empty so it stays empty.' I couldn't

help feeling a bit sorry for him, he had the look of my own son as he so often was, sort of frustrated. 'A lad of your age,' I said, 'should be sleeping under the stars. It's not even as if you shave.' Because he had this ginger beard. He looked in his late twenties but now I know he was thirty-one.

'I need a table and chair and a smidgen of tranquillity,' he said. 'In this pack on my back there's my typewriter, and I've come to France to break the block. You know what a block is?'

'A block is a word with several meanings,' I said, 'and one of them is a dirty meaning.'

'Would I be talking dirt to an old lady? I got this advance for a book and I can't write it, that's what block means. I want a nice cheap room so I can break the block. Where could I find such a place? What's the next town down the road?'

It was then that the idea started coming to me, him coming here being the third of the three things. 'What kind of a writer are you,' I said, 'besides being what is known as a book writer?'

'I did this thing on beachboy culture,' he said. 'Interviews all written up. Surf and Scurf it's called, they didn't take it in Europe. You French?' he then said.

'Why would I be French?' I said.

'You speak English with kind of a funny accent.'

'It is you that has the funny accent. My way of speaking is called a Lancashire accent,' I said. And then I said: 'In my little house there is what is known as a grenier. It is very long and has a very low ceiling, so you would have to watch your head.'

'Come again?' he said. 'You offering me a room? No kidding? How much?'

'Nothing,' I said. 'One condition is no use of the kitchen though you can use the bathroom and lavatory if you leave them tidy. The other condition is that you write down this book about my father.'

'But I don't know your father. Didn't know him is what I mean. You putting me on?'

'You will get all the facts from me,' I said. 'All you have to do is to write them down. I am not very good at writing, me having followed a different kind of trade.'

Now, at this moment a car pulled up across the road and a man and his family of wife and three kids got out, the kids clamouring for cokes and ice cream. He was a man of about fifty, bald and with a belly on him and a bit jowly, his wife a good deal younger, one of these washed out French blondes, and the kids young enough to show he'd left it a bit late getting married, or perhaps this was his second or third. The car was a big Mercedes, so you could see he was doing all right. Anyway, he suddenly caught sight of me, at first didn't believe it, then gulped, then his eyes popped, then he believed it, then started packing the kids back into the car, saying this place was too crowded and they'd go on to Montauroux. Oh, papa, non. Si, get on in. I didn't know him from Adam, but he knew me. A former client, many years back. It happens quite a lot, famous men too, ministers of education and economic planning, that sort of thing. I don't remember them, but they remember me.

My young man, Rolf Marcus, didn't catch on to what I might have meant by saying a different kind of trade. He knows better now, but he was innocent then and still part of a generation that thinks that older people not only do not have a sex life but have never had one. Each generation invents sex for the first time. He was thinking and drawing a little circle with his finger and some spilt Perrier on the Formica table top. Then he looked up and said: 'Okay, it might help break the block at that. Mornings only and afternoons I do my own thing.'

'Mornings,' I said, 'you do what you call your own thing. I consider myself to be what is called a lady of leisure, which is only right at my age, and I am not available until midday.'

So that was why, for one of the summer months that year, you could see me any afternoon at one of the tables, taking a vanilla ice cream with whisky poured on to it and talking to this young man's cassette recorder until two cassettes were full and he went back to the grenier to type it all out. It is his work, but the story is all mine. Meaning my father's story and mine.