

Never Say Never Again (Mai dire mai più)

By Elena Vestri

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Christmas is over. Done. Closed. Packages, lunches, suppers, cinnamon tea, artisanal panettone, bubble bath wrapped in tissue paper. And for another year I can put the Palestinian sheep and the Virgin Mary and her family back in their box, I can put away the multi-colored LED star I bought at the dollar store that has flickered away on my balcony for almost a month, and get ready, in peace, for the White Sales, the next occasion in the calendar of Periodic Events.

As the owner of a sewing shop, the White Sales is an occasion that involves me. I too, in my little shop, have to set some discounts and promotions, just like the superstores that loom over the highway. From today, the holly wreath and papier-mâché angels are no longer features of my window, and in their place hang white, virginal blouses at half price and heavily engineered bras on special offer. I remove the skeins of red and green wool; they are festive colors, so people won't knit with them again until November. I dress the window and bustle around willingly, meaning that I almost don't realize, when at four o'clock on an already very gloomy afternoon Daniele walks past my shop with "her". It's the first time. Despite the fact that my sewing shop, Marta's Thread, is on our little town's high street, until now I've never seen them pass by like this, beautiful and beaming, pretending not to see me. Daniele, the man who left me three months ago after an even twenty years together, and Deniza, his new girlfriend, you guessed it, Romanian and, *quelle surprise*, thirty years old beside his seventy-one.

I'm seventy-four and just those measly three years I had over Daniele had made me feel like a bit of a cradle snatcher. He, on the contrary, professes to be entirely at ease with Deniza. He says he has found, once again, the passion of the past, or, I imagine, his shriveled up virility has been rehydrated. Was it worth dropping everything for that? Uh, yes! So worth it!

I see them walk by, I observe with interest their patent efforts to NOT look at my window, and experience not even the slightest pang of heartache. With a satisfied sigh, I put into place a cross-stitch kit for embroidering the Lion of Venice, unsure why I've still got it in stock, and do a little hop like an Olympic finalist when a shrill voice behind me exclaims:

"What a nerve! They've got a good set of brass balls to walk past here! Why didn't you skewer them with one of those... what do you call them... knitting needles?"

There is only one woman in the world who at over seventy years of age is unsure of what to call a knitting needle: Federica, my closest friend, a stunner who manages to remain completely untouched not only by the passing years, but also the decades.

"Well done, knitting needle. Do you want a pair? You could make use of the special offer: three balls of red wool for twelve euros."

“Don’t be stupid. I haven’t touched one of those things in my life, and I’m certainly not about to start now. So? Did you see those two?”

Federica was angrier about it than me when Daniele left, but I have the advantage that I’ve already been through it, under worse circumstances. Being left after twenty years by a man who stammers out nonsense about love and the desire for a new life is dismal, but being abandoned in the seventh month of pregnancy by the father of your daughter, due to a desire for adventures in faraway lands is decidedly worse.

“I saw them... I especially noticed Daniele’s jacket. That ape dresses like a teenage boy... he’s delusional.”

“Anyway I heard from Nora that they’re moving to Milan permanently soon. They’re opening a store in Monza, and Daniele jumped at the chance.”

“Jeez. I thought they were up to their eyes in superstores in Monza.”

“Yet they really felt the absence of a Megaprix. It’s for the best. You won’t have to see those delinquents anymore.”

Megaprix, from a needle to an elephant, just like Harrods. Daniele is a big shot on the management team, and in my opinion, not to be spiteful or anything, that fact must have had a positive effect on Deniza: ‘Imagine the discounts at Megaprix!’ she probably thought as she told him: “I love you, I can’t live without you, you’re the man of my dreams.”

“Trust me, it doesn’t bother me either way if I see them or not. Try and believe it: I’m not suffering, I don’t care, I feel happy and blessed.”

And it’s true. I look at the time, I’m about to close up the shop at seven thirty, the established closing time for small shops in the provinces, to go out for dinner with Federica, when Mrs. Fulgenzi enters, or rather, the ex Mrs. Fulgenzi, in a whirlwind of cashmere: she must have at least three scarves on, in varying tones of pink, and a little matching hat that unfortunately suits her terribly.

“Good evening Thank heavens you’re still open I need a pair of peach colored tights second size.”

All in one breath, no punctuation, balancing on the block heels of some designer court shoes, even if I have no idea who designed them because unfortunately famous shoes aren’t really my thing. But I know they’re designer because everything Valentina Fulgenzi wears is.

“Good evening, ma’am. Twenty denier?”

“You decide. Extremely soft. Peach.”

Peach. What kind of color is that, for tights? I turn around to get a pair that might vaguely correspond to the idea of “peach” and observe with substantial surprise that Federica has disappeared. A second ago she was there, behind me, at least seventy-five kilos for a meter and seventy-two, not a tiny woman. Disappeared. Vanished. Hmm.

I take a pair of “face powder” tights, and congratulate myself on the fact that peach and face powder are of more or less the same nuance. Mrs. Fulgenzi doesn’t protest, and looking around like a fawn in a lion’s cage, whispers:

“Could I ask you a huge favor? Could I change into them? You see, I’m going to a dinner, and look what an ugly ladder I have.”

She sticks her leg out and her tights are certainly laddered, a tear from the knee to the ankle. You wouldn’t want to go to a dinner in that state. Perhaps at the house of the Lawyer, or the Mayor, or the Professor. The sorts of people that Mrs. Fulgenzi dines with are never, ever laddered.

“Of course, come this way... here is the bathroom.”

However the door is locked with a key, and there’s no reaction even when I rattle the handle. So I turn and lead her to the even tinier backroom, from which a few minutes later Mrs. Fulgenzi emerges with impeccable legs. She pays, leaves in a flutter of thanks, and I knock energetically on the bathroom door.

“Fede! Are you ok?”

“Has she gone?”

“Mrs. Fulgenzi? Yes, she’s gone. And so? What’s happened?”

“I’ll tell you at dinner.” She comes out of the bathroom looking rather disheveled. “This is why I wanted to see you this evening.”

Federica refuses to give me any explanation until we are sat at our table with a sea view at The Lame Goat, our favorite pizzeria, and in the meantime asks after Beatrice, my daughter, who went back to London three days ago after an extremely brief Christmas vacation.

“Yes, yes, she got back OK, she’s started work again, and she’s signed up for a tap dancing class.”

“Very useful,” is my friend’s grave comment. She took this event harder than I did, too. When Bea dropped out of university to go to London to be a waitress, I took it badly, but I didn’t rend my clothes, while Fede made herself ill over it. It makes sense: she doesn’t have any children, I had mine at the age of forty-one, by which point I didn’t believe it would happen anymore, and so Bea has always been a little bit hers too: loved, spoiled and pushed to do great things with her life.

“And there she’ll be serving croquettes dressed as a chicken at the Chicken Club!” she had sighed when the reckless girl had abandoned the Faculty of Business and Economics that I had wishfully enrolled her in.

“Maybe she’ll meet a Lord who will marry her...” I had tried to console her, but Federica got even angrier.

“What are we, in a Harmony novel now? Bea needs to grow up proud, independent, autonomous, never, ever dependent on a man, and she certainly shouldn’t be dreaming of Prince Charming! Ugh!”

“Good heavens, how idealistic can you be?”

Personally I’d have absolutely no problem with Bea marrying a lord. I wouldn’t mind spending long months of the year in an English country house, with some maids serving me tea with my scones. I mean, why would I rather my daughter were single, working and struggling to put food on the table? The lord would be just fine. Wonderful, in fact.

But now is not the time to talk about Bea. It's time to discover why, when Federica saw the ex Mrs. Fulgenzi, she shut herself in the bathroom. And I fear, very much, that I have intuited the reason.

"Federica, please tell me you haven't got yourself involved with Dr. Fulgenzi."

It's the first thing that came to my mind, because Dr. Fulgenzi, the ex husband of Valentina, has been involved with almost all of the attractive women in Borgo Marino, and Federica is one of the few that, perhaps until now, has escaped him. But getting together with him is so obvious, so predictable and so useless that if Fede had fallen into that trap I would be really disappointed.

And indeed Federica's Rouge Allure Chanel lips curved up contemptuously. "Who? That old man? Are you joking?" Then she leaned closer to me and whispered, with a sparkle in her eyes: "I got engaged to Emanuele. That's why I bolted earlier. I wanted to prevent Valentina from devastating your shop."

"Emanuele? Who? Emanuele Fulgenzi?"

"Of course."

Is she crazy? That's the son, and he's at most...

"Excuse me, Fede... Emanuele is... How old? Thirty?"

"Thirty-one. Don't start lecturing me about numbers, Mart. You were with a younger man for twenty years."

"Yes, but he was three years younger, not thirty-three!"

She shrugs her shoulders.

"Details."

"Mrs. Fulgenzi must be in shock. I mean she's even younger than we are. Wasn't she in first grade when we were in third?"

"And so? This thing has sprung up between me and Emanuele, and we don't care what his mother thinks."

"But *what* has sprung up? And *when*?"

"On New Year's Eve. You know I went to the Mocenigos' party in Venice. And he was there too. Alone. Beautiful. He emanated a sort of splendor that lit up the entire Grand Canal."

Federica has never been the poetic type, and this touch of lyricism really highlights how grave the situation is.

"Were you not there with the mouse guy though?"

I can never remember his name, the writer Federica was going out with before Christmas, the author of a best-selling series of children's books whose protagonist is a mouse with superpowers. He was also younger, naturally: Federica considers her contemporaries "little old men", but the mouse author was an acceptable one, around fifty but his age didn't suit him.

"Oh him? He got drunk in ten minutes and started drooling after a washed-out blond, nineteen tops, so I stamped on his foot with my five-inch heel and as he squealed I turned around and saw Ema, radiant, lost."

"Let me guess: the washed-out blond was with Emanuele?"

"She was with him, that wedgied little tart. And when he saw her slutting around with Efidio..."

Ah, Efidio, that's his name. That must be why I try to forget it.

“When he saw her slutting around with Efidio, his face looked so desolate, Mart, that it broke my heart. I looked into his eyes, he looked into mine, and the two of them disappeared, vanished, faded into the distance. It was just he, I and the moon over the Grand Canal. I took him home and we've been together ever since. Isn't it wonderful?”

And the response comes straight from my heart, simple and sincere: “No.”

9th January, 8 am

My house is on the edge of Borgo Marino, between the railway line that carves along the coastline and the sea. It's a typical early twentieth century town house, it was my parents', and I have managed to keep it through the highs and lows of my life. I have a small garden, and from the terrace I can see the sea. I like it here, I wouldn't want to live anywhere else; I've never had much desire for adventure or surprise. If Marcello had stayed with Bea and me, and had loved us, I would have been a perfectly happy woman. House, job, family. Books from the library, Sky, the odd excursion to the city to see a show or a concert, two trips a year to one of the big European capitals to see museums and monuments. I have everything I need here. And every day there's the sea: flat and blue or tempestuous, cold or scorching hot, choppy or tense, the sea is my metronome, it gives my life rhythm. Here, without Marcello, first alone and then with Daniele, I have been "reasonably" happy. Almost the same thing, but not quite. No.

Whatever. There's no point dwelling on it on this freezing January morning; unusually cold for a seaside town, yet that's what it is, freezing. I can tell from looking out of the kitchen window: everything is covered in frost, and the appreciative little birds are feasting on the crumbs of the stale *pandoro* that I put out last night. I make a coffee, take out the *pain croute* biscuits and jam, and keep one eye on the street, because I know that he'll go past soon. He. Doctor Giacomo Fulgenzi, Head of Orthopedics at the Santa Anastasia Hospital, which is just outside Borgo Marino but serves the whole region. Every morning, except from national holidays or when he's attending conferences in Italy or Europe, Doctor Fulgenzi cycles to work and passes by the front of my house. Upright, elegant, if I had to guess he should be retired by now, but perhaps head physicians don't do that, and he continues to show up for the broken bones that arrive at the Santa Anastasia. And also for the nurses, colleagues and patients, so it's said. Despite the passing of the years, he doesn't quit, and he continues to cash in on the tribute of adoring residents, as well as various other ladies and young women who pass through the hospital. I had some dealings with him briefly when a large piece of wood fell on my hand (stacking the fireplace is not indeed as easy as it looks) and I broke a couple of fingers. He didn't operate on me, God forbid, but he passed by to check on me a couple of times. Zero chemistry. He is very seductive, but seeing as I was invisible to him, as is any woman over the age of forty-five, he didn't bother seducing me. Just polite indifference and he was gone, no sparks flew. His son, however, I remember as a boy. He is rather older than Bea, so they didn't hang around together much, but they would sometimes be at the same beach parties, as they had some friends in common. I mean, Borgo Marino has 4951 inhabitants, so it's pretty difficult for your path not to cross with everybody's at some point or other. A good-looking boy, completely dense, if I remember correctly. I know that after dropping out of school before finishing his studies he became an actor, with very little success: just one derisory bit part in a RAI series.

How, how has the beautiful, brilliant, capable Federica Teodori ended up engaged to him? “Engaged”! Just the word by itself makes no sense. Engaged to a thirty-one year old. Come on, Fede!

“I thought it was just a little pick-me-up.”

I replay her words again, the ardent tone with which she pronounced them last night, staring mournfully at my slice of Black Forest gâteau. The last time Federica ate a slice of cake, as opposed to staring at it mournfully, was a couple of months before the menopause. After that, desserts were transformed into flakes of hell that have to be kept far away from her.

“What was it, then? He’s the love of your life?” I asked her, despite knowing that it’s too far-gone for sarcasm.

“It’s a time machine, Ari. He’s shaven thirty years off my life. When I’m with him I become the girl that everyone fell in love with again. Come on, wouldn’t you like that?”

“I have never been the girl everyone fell in love with. A few guys, at most.”

“Yes, and even they don’t even exist anymore. Does it seem fair to you?”

“What do you know? There’s one customer who comes in every Friday to buy six handkerchiefs. I don’t think he gets through six in a week...”

“Age?”

“I don't know... eighty-ish...”

I rinse out my cup while I think about Federica’s derisive laugh, and her consequent ramblings about how “fresh” (a nice way of saying “stupid”) Emanuele is, and about how his parents are horrid and detestable.

“They treat him like a cretin. They dote on his perfect specimen of a sister, and hardly even see him, Ari, hardly at all. He refused to become a doctor like his father, grandfather, great-grandfather and beyond, all the way to the doctor of Carlo Magno. And after enrolling in another faculty, he dropped out of that too. Shock horror! Tragedy! Can you imagine, they didn’t watch even one episode of *Lowlife Cops*.”

“And why should they have? He plays an officer who appears for thirty seconds when he brings a coffee to the commissioner...”

“In the first series! Now they’re filming the second and he’s going to have a story with a kleptomaniac.”

To be honest, it seems like the Fulgenzis are devastated because Emanuele hasn’t hidden his relationship with my friend in the slightest. He even invited her to a dinner at their house and introduced her to everyone as “my girlfriend.”

“Can you believe it?”

Federica glowed with pride as she walked me home last night. She lives in Palazzo Teodori, perched over the ocean, when she’s not in London, New York, Dubai or the Turks and Caicos islands, her latest passion.

“There were so many people there, some of his father’s colleagues, the Soroptimist women, all of their eyes popping out of their heads. He was so brave. You should have seen the face on that dry sardine of a mother of his!”

“Brave or naive?”

“That’s enough, let it go. Get it that I truly love him.”

I shut up then. I’m old enough to know that one day Federica and I will laugh about this story, but I remind myself, I try to remind myself, what she’s like when she’s in love. She loses her sense of the ridiculous, of honesty, of what’s appropriate, what’s healthy. She loses everything, apart from that whirlpool at the pit of her stomach.

“Imagine, that air-head Valentina phoned me the next day telling me to ‘leave her son alone otherwise the lawyers are coming.’ I laughed in her face, well, laughed down the phone. Lawyers... what for?”

“Exploitation of a vulnerable person?”

“Marta! I forbid it!”

“Okay then, Fede, enjoy it while it lasts.”

“It will last, it will,” she affirmed with the certainty of a woman who has always been beautiful, and I didn’t respond, because there was no point in arguing.

And so, I watch Dr. Fulgenzi pass by, pedaling fast, wearing an elegant black K-way, and then I think no more of it, and go and open up Marta’s Thread. The Liabel wholesaler is coming today, so I need to concentrate.