

*Zero Degrees*

by

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*Partial English translation by Lucy Rand*

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It's seven o'clock on a frosty morning.

I've been here at the station for a while. Waiting on the deserted platform, the one heading towards the sea. Nobody is going to the sea at this time of day, especially not when it's zero degrees.

It's definitely going to rain, unless it finally snows in Rome, as the forecast has been predicting for a month.

"It'll be a good job if it snows, that way we can shut up the whole shebang and cover all the potholes while we're at it!"

I look to where that voice is coming from: a little man in the train company uniform. He's talking to a big fat man with dark skin. They walk across the tracks like it's nothing, and I watch them with concern. The black man smiles at me: "The train is delayed, ma'am, as usual."

Perfect Congo-Roman accent.

I smile, but only slightly: my lips are freezing.

I search for the cocoa butter in my shoulder bag. But my hands are numb. All I find is a pen and a crumpled up paper towel.

I write something mostly just to stretch out the fingers on my purple hands:

"February. Zero degrees outside. Minus twenty inside."

I look at the deserted platform and the early morning fog. I write:

"Where am I going?"

The clattering on the tracks distracts me.

The train arriving from Ostia Lido is overloaded. Commuters enraged by the delay. Resignation.

I learn a lot from standing there on the platform. That that line is the worst in Italy, for example. Maybe in the world, even. Worse than Indian trains, which at least if you stop mid-way you get a nice view. I learn that the people who commute at that absurd hour of the morning are not just immigrants, like you see on TV. They're not just workers going to the few factories that remain open in the suburbs. They're not even half-asleep students. Not at all.

The commuters who get off of that cattle car are mostly women. Of all ages. Alone or with children. Loaded up with bags and worries. They arrive and disperse all over the city, trying to make up, with their already exhausted haste, for the delay that could be fatal.

"They'll fire me sooner or later, I tell you."

“Then you sue the train company.”

“*Seh*, you watch me.”

People running.

Not me. I'm in no hurry. Not today, hardly ever. For over a year now my life has been a slow one.

But I'm cold, and I'd like to sit down somewhere. Eventually, a kind of café opens, I go in and see a newspaper on the bench. I read the date, 4<sup>th</sup> February. I instinctively check my phone. Nothing, good, it's too early. I look on WhatsApp for the icon of a chat called Family: in the circle at the side there's a little photo with three young faces framing my smiling wrinkles.

Family: mine.

A message comes in. I knew it would.

It's a video: the three young faces start singing in chorus:

“Happy Birthday, Mamma!”

I smile. My children are beautiful.

For a moment I think about responding, perhaps even to say where I am, and why.

I leave it. I wouldn't know what to say, and it's too early anyway.

4<sup>th</sup> February. Now it's two degrees. It won't snow today either.

The train for the sea arrives. Completely covered in graffiti. It's practically just me and the little man in the train company uniform that get on. The big man, the black one, has disappeared.

The wagons are deserted. I wander up and down indecisively between all the empty seats. I recall the crowds that got off a little earlier at the Rome station; this evening these now silent carriages will be crowded too.

I sit next to a window, but I don't feel like looking out. The Roman suburbs aren't a nice sight at dawn on a freezing cold morning.

I don't know what my mood is.

Still, I know I've made the right choice.

Or rather, the only one I could make to dig myself out of that tranquil boredom that looked too much like the end.

“Clean run!”

“Unbelievable, ma’am, you’re certainly a lucky one!”

“At cards, yes. It’s not that I’m good, I’m just always lucky.”

The little railway man is called Giuliano, but he likes to be called Gi, because it’s quicker. After a few minutes of the journey we found ourselves alone and bored. He had a pack of cards, and I had a desire to not think.

I try to defog the window with my hand.

“There’s not much to clear, it’s absolutely filthy. It’d be pointless trying to clean it though, the glass is so scratched.”

The train brakes hard and all the cards fall off the table.

Gi gets up. “Let’s hope another tree hasn’t fallen on the tracks, we’ll be here all night!”

He picks up the cards, and looks at me with a satisfied smile, despite having lost.

“Good game, eh?”

We are stationary for a while. My stomach hurts. It must be the train, it stinks. And also I haven’t taken a train in months. Years, even.

I was going to the mountains with the children when they were small. Olivia was three, like a stuffed red onesie that couldn’t move with a cloth black cat that she desperately wanted to take on the sledge. First class sleeper with pleasant smells and toys. And immaculate windows. You could still open and close them with a lever back then. I had opened our window because Massimo said he was going to vomit. But actually he just wanted to get some snow and play a trick on his brother. They had fun. My children have always been very close. The Brothers, they called themselves. They fought like wild bears, but then they would lick each other’s wounds afterwards. They still do it now they’re older, but they’re not as funny anymore.

A sudden rattle and we’re off again. Clearly another tree hasn’t fallen on the tracks.

Spots of rain slide down the dirty windows in thick, opaque drops.

It’s now seven degrees outside. Inside, it’s still minus twenty.

At nine, we arrive at Ostia.

Yes, it took us more than two hours to get here!

I get off at Stella Polare station. No not at the Ostia Lido station, like Gi advises, the little train conductor already claiming the role of the poor woman’s knight

in shining armor. The Ostia Lido stop – he says, welding those two words together into one term, “Ostialido” – is the only place I’d be sure of getting a taxi.”

But I don’t need a taxi. I need to go to this address, and I was told to get off at Stella Polare.

Gi looks at the piece of paper I’ve written the address on: Via delle Nereidi 2. He consults with the big black man who has reappeared, goodness knows how or where from. I greet him like an old friend, I don’t know why but today – yes, today of all days! – I’m feeling particularly sociable. The big man tells me his name is Lux, his real name is unpronounceable, but anyway it means something like “light”, so he goes by Lux.

Gi and Lux don’t know where the address is. They insist on the station with the taxis. They’re worried about me, I can tell. Is it possible that two strangers can become worried about me so quickly? I must have it written all over my face: Incapable of Doing Life.

I decide that I have to debunk this myth that has attached itself to me for reasons even I don’t understand. I pull myself together, and exclaim emphatically: “I actually do know where the address is!” Then, as if to justify my false confidence, I add: “I’ve seen it on Google Maps.”

It was obviously a well-told lie, because the two of them calmed down immediately. After all, if I know how to use Google Maps then I can’t be that helpless.

I say goodbye to them politely. I’ll take this same train to Rome many more times; we might have another game of cards some day.

I get off the train and leave Stella Polare’s somewhat futuristic station. A frozen name, too, perfectly coordinated with my interior minus twenty.

The address I’m trying to get to is for an apartment that I’ve rented. The ad that I responded to was not very clear with the street instructions, but did state one very precise figure: just two hundred meters from the station.

Two hundred meters. I can manage that.

Perhaps I’ll ask someone, just to be sure. My suitcase has wheels, but it’s still heavy. I was persuaded to buy a trolley suitcase by my daughter Olivia.

“You absolutely can’t do without it, mamma!” She said she just couldn’t look at my marvelous antique leather case anymore. Sorry, but who looks at suitcases anyway? It’s a phrase, mom. Anyway, trolley suitcases are more convenient. And you won’t break your back pulling it along. But I’m not breaking my back, darling, Tonio carries my case. So stop breaking Tonio’s back. What are you, a slave driver?

So, eventually she won. Olivia took me to a shop where they sold trolley cases: three whole floors of them! Light, heavy, women’s, men’s, young people’s, old people’s and even tiny ones with Candy Candy on for children! In short: a slice of hell. I bought this case just so I could get out of there: discrete, grey, hard plastic. And with turbo wheels. I have to admit: I am pleased to have it with me today. I wouldn’t have been able to drag my marvelous antique leather case down this street full of potholes or on the sporadic weed-covered sidewalks.

I hobble down a straight road, and notice some attractive buildings on one side. Modern and cheerful. It looks like a sports center. And it is: there's a swimming pool, gyms. I read that the boy who was shot in the back because they thought he was someone else used to train here. He was paralyzed. At nineteen.

I stop and peek through the dark windows but not enough to obstruct the view: the pool is Olympic size, wonderful. I can smell the chlorine, which makes me shiver inside.

My childhood comes flooding back to me:

“Are you moving? You look like a duck, Isa!”

The voice of my brother.

Mine: “I'm not a duck, I'm a really good swimmer, but the chlorine is making me itchy.”

“Whiner. Stay here and drown then.”

And with two arms he disappeared up the lane, leaving me alone to drown in the most total desperation, the kind that only an abandoned five-year-old girl knows. Whether it's for a second or a lifetime, it makes no difference.

“Gippi, Gippi, wait for me!”

Gippi was short for Giampiero.

Gippi waited for me at the end of the lane, pretending he wasn't waiting. But I knew that he wouldn't take his eyes off me.

I knew he would always be there.

Always.

Until he wasn't.

After the sports building there were others, all modern and well looked after. A plaque on the gate of the first, the biggest, catches my attention: ROME TRE UNIVERSITY – FACULTY OF ENGINEERING: MARINE BIOTECHNOLOGY.

I don't know what it means, but it's an attractive plaque. I would like to find out more, but I don't have time. I need to get to the apartment before eleven, according to the email from the owner of the “Charming Sea View Apartment”, as it was described in the ad. He, the owner, signed off with just a first name: Luca. To which he had added, private user. And he highlighted in yellow:

“To get the keys to the apartment, go to the porter's lodge of building number 4 before 11 o'clock. Please be punctual.”

Assertive tone. Who knows, maybe this Luca guy is short of time, or maybe he's just mean. I opt for the former, I prefer to imagine him being really busy than misanthropic.

I look at the time: ten to eleven! I must hurry. Ahead of me is a narrow street that runs alongside a canal. I imagine the sea is at the end, both because the water is running in that direction, and because the light is stronger down there, more intense.

Boats come and go on the canal. Not boats like the ones docked in the port in Sardinia, near our waterfront villa; motorboats sailing ships catamarans foreign flags names like *Azure* or *Orchidea*. The ones I see going past now are real boats, fishing boats, with tangled up nets, rusting sterns, bows adorned with saint figurines or gaudy colors. Simple names, names you'd expect. *My Anna*, *Joy of the Sea*, *The Sad Mermaid*. Names that tell stories.

I'm fascinated by a tiny little pink and white fishing boat that is going up stream. On the bow there are two little girls with curly black hair singing and playing. At the stern their old grandfather is singing with them. The name on the keel has been recently repainted: *Agatha*.

Agatha, like my mother.

Yes, I made the right choice, I know it.

It's warmer now.

I shake myself and look for the shortest route to get to a group of buildings that I've spotted on the other side of the canal. The charming apartment must be there. A little in front there's an iron bridge. It looks like the most direct route, and I head in that direction, passing over a verge of unkempt grass.

I can do it. Yes, I can do it.

No, I can't do it.

The turbo wheels of my case have got caught in a tangle of roots and dry leaves. No, they're thorns. I try pulling but it doesn't work. I pull harder and the handle of the super-guaranteed trolley case comes off.

Noooo. Oliviaaaaa, do you see this? My antique leather case was better, indestructible!

I look around hoping to make eye contact with somebody, anybody, even if they're unfriendly. For someone to ask for help, giving in to my incapacity to get by on my own.

Deserted.

There aren't even any boats passing by now.

And it's three minutes to eleven.

I search for the telephone number of the Luca guy on my phone, but as soon as I switch it on there are ten bleeps: nine calls from my daughter and one from Massimo. If he has tried looking for me, it means his sister is worn out. I postpone the family problem for later.

332 5467001. I wait. Nothing: the Luca guy isn't answering.

Perfect.

I bend down over the brambles careful to bend my knees, mindful of the terrifying last time I threw my back out, and I manage somehow to extract my case from the leaves. But I scratch my hand. With the case between my arms like a child who has grown up too quickly, I face the steep steps of the bridge.

I thank Olli who dragged me to the pilates class.

"Your legs will get stronger, mamma, it's better than pre-ski-season training."

“I’ve never skied in my life, Olivia.”

“It means you’ll be able to run up the stairs.”

Here we go, I can do it.

No, no I can’t.

I stop at the top of the extremely steep and rusty stepladder.

My light wheezing fortunately merges with the sound of the wind.

Heavy suitcase, it must be the books. I should have accepted the present Massimo wanted to give me for Christmas, the Kindle or whatever it’s called, thousands of books in one box. But do they put the smell of the paper in there? And the frontispiece? And the jacket?

Under me, the canal now seems less like a fairy-tale, and certainly less crowded.

I look down, hoping to meet the gaze of the singing grandpa, but he’s no longer there. However a boat is passing through now. It’s strangely dark and extremely clean. It doesn’t have a name, at least not an obvious one.

“Hey!” I shout waving downwards. “Hey, excuse me, you in the boat!”

The bow is out of the shade of the bridge. I can see a pair of trainers that were perhaps once white. I see some rolled up jeans. I see a blue ribbed woolen cap.

“Hey, listen! Sir on the fishing boat!”

Finally the ribbed woolen beret turns towards me.

They’re blue. Blue eyes. A deep blue.

It must be the reflection of the light on the sea.

“Listen, excuse me, could you help me? I know you’re down there, essentially in the water, and I’m on this bridge. But I have a problem with my suitcase, well with the wheelie case, and I’ll be, well I am, late...”

Blue Eyes looks completely uninterested.

“No, because I’m supposed to be over there at eleven, you see, those buildings, I know they’re not far away, but my suitcase got broken in a hedge, worse, brambles, and something also pricked me, is it dangerous? No, it’s just I was thinking, you wouldn’t be able to, seeing as nobody seems to be passing by here and I really...”

The bow slips away. Away from the bridge. Away from me.

Blue Eyes was strange. I don’t want to believe he was really like that, I don’t see any reason for it, but yes, I would say that it wasn’t just a feeling: Blue Eyes mocked me.

Staring at me, rather, staring at the me that he is evidently evaluating as: “ridiculous old lady in a ridiculous situation.” And so: Interest nil.

But what a boor! I’m about to shout it after him, but I stop myself, as it would only confirm: ridiculous old lady, plus “hysterical.”

I shut up. I’m pleased with myself.

I hug my useful wheelie suitcase and march down the rusty steps.

I don’t turn back, proud.

But I know that the blue eyes are following me amused.

Suddenly I hear a ringing very close, almost like an alarm.



I turn around looking for a bell: there isn't one. Or at least, I can't see one.  
I continue to walk quickly, unconcerned by potholes and weeds.  
The temperature outside is now at least fifteen degrees.  
It's hard to believe, but I'm almost warm.

In the end I manage.

After the train delay, the trek with the suitcase, the encounter with Blue Eyes that discombobulated me for some unknown reason, I arrive in front of building number 4.

But it's too late! It's ten past eleven; the porter's lodge is closed. No bell. Not a soul in sight. Finally a woman with shopping bags and a pushchair with a child goes past.

"Excuse me, the porter?"

There isn't one, it closes at eleven. Yes, I know, but do you know where I could find him? She looks at me with no pity and says nothing, but her thoughts are clear: what's it got to do with me, I don't know what the porter does when he's not working.

I sigh and miss my Germano, the 24-hour porter, with his little limp but wonderful efficiency. If Germano were to see me so sweaty, with a broken suitcase in my arms, he might even faint: "Mrs. Girardiello! What are you doing? Give it to me, I beg you."

I catch the bitterness on my lips. Today's motto is: "No complaining!" Because yes, it was me who chose to give all that up. For a challenge? A test? An escape?

I don't know, but in this moment I coin motto number two "There is no question without an answer".

Exhausted but determined, I'm about to call the Luca guy's mobile again, when a miracle happens.

"Can I help you?"

I turn around suddenly. A woman around my age, with beautiful white hair, slightly overweight and trapped in a sticky red dress, looks at me from behind the metal grill on a window, surrounded by a steam that smells of ragú, reminding me of my fast.

"Oh, thank goodness you're there, ma'am"

*Why thank goodness?* Her eyes seem to ask, not understanding what's going on.

"I was looking for the porter of building number 4, but I got here late, I know, even if only by ten minutes, however here I am, and I really need the porter of building number 4, you see, because he has my keys, well, he has the keys for the apartment in building number 2 that is temporarily mine now and..."

While I'm talking the woman disappears.

Is it possible that she's just gone like that? I understand if she doesn't care in the slightest about the rigmarole I'm describing, but come on, show a little decency!

“The long one is for the main gate.”

She has reappeared and puts a set of keys joined together by a scobie key ring into my hand. Indeed, a scoubidou! Yellow and blue – I don’t know it yet but those will be the colors of my new life. The memory the relic inspires immediately makes everything more bearable. Even the lady’s fat and decidedly hostile face.

“Thank you! Truly, you’ve saved my life!”

She looks me up and down. I’m not sure if it’s my defense mechanism against people I don’t know, but that expression reminds me of Blue Eyes. Derisive. Taking the piss, basically.

I thank her, not letting myself ask her anything else. I don’t ask her, for example, if she is the porter of building number 4. If she responded positively I would give her my compliments, I’d ask her if it is a boring, satisfying, frustrating job, ah, I’d ask her why on earth they close at eleven on the dot, perhaps she has another job, or perhaps a grandchild to go and collect from kindergarten.

I also don’t ask her whether that wonderful smell of ragú is her creation, I would love to taste that smell, seeing as I’m alone and hungry amidst hostile people on the day of my sixty-fifth birthday, with a broken and heavy suitcase. And I obviously don’t ask her how she has found the courage to not dye that fantastic white head of hair, whether she’s happy with her decision, if perhaps she would’ve rethought it if people had kept saying: “But why don’t you dye it, dear? You’d look ten years younger!”

No, I don’t ask her anything. And she disappears into her kitchen-scented basement. I remain alone and hungry.

But I have the keys and the scobie.

And I’m home.

Here I am, on the third floor with a sea view.

One promise upheld. The others not so much.

The ad said: “Charming sunny apartment, third floor, sea view, a short walk from the town center and the beach, spacious, elegant furnishings. Dry cellar.”

Charming is not really the right adjective. I could define those two bedrooms, bathroom and kitchen plus terrace livable, or what do I know: functional. Perhaps even bright. But definitely not charming. Partly because of the color of the wallpaper – the same as the scoubidou key ring – no, mostly because of the wallpaper. Who still uses wallpaper? Because, and this is the strangest thing, those decorations don’t date back to the original owners, who died goodness knows when, or are perhaps parked up in a care home somewhere. No, the wallpaper that lines the whole – no really, the whole! – charming sea view apartment in Ostia Lido, was hung with great care only a short time ago. Brand new. This means that someone, and I imagine the current owner who I’ve met only over email – the Luca guy - has gone to the trouble of going to a wallpaper shop to chose this dubious wallpaper with alternating yellow flowers and blue diamonds, then blue flowers and yellow diamonds! Enough to give you a headache. However, wanting to look at the glass half full – something I’ve been trying to do since getting on the train for Ostia Lido – I have to admit that this terrible assortment of colors has a virtue that any interior decorator would note immediately: it absorbs the light, swallows it, and then throws it back out, stronger but less blinding.

Standing in front of the “sea view” on the “livable” terrace kitted out with wicker furniture (Wicker! So wicker furniture still exists!), I re-read the confirmation email from the Luca guy for the rental of the “charming apartment”: “five hundred euros per month, condominium community included.” I look down trying to identity the territory of the condominium: a parking area that seems unauthorized, a bare, yellowing flower bed, a metal rod that perhaps once marked out someone’s property, but is now upright and rusty. But the car park isn’t of much interest to me, seeing as I don’t have a car and I haven’t driven for at least thirty years. And even less the shriveled up flowerbed: my black fingers make even basil on a caprese salad wither.

However I must admit that it had been the word “included” that convinced me to rent the charming apartment for six months. I always like anything that is “included” in the price, it makes me feel like I’ve got a bargain.

And it reminds me a bit of my mother, with her hair “salon” where every day a new poster appeared outside “Perm included in the price”. Or: “Try a new cut from Japan, manicure included in the price!”

My mother always said that people loved saving money, especially on “luxury” goods, as she defined hair and beauty services.

I saw the ad in a magazine when Clarissa was massaging my legs. Clarissa is tiny and skinny, but has hands as strong as two pincers. She grabs the fat on your thighs and crushes it. A crazy pain, but it works. And the soothing gel she puts on your sore blubber at the end is included in the price.

I went back and forth on this project for a while. A different home. My own home. A far away home. An anonymous home. A home by the sea.

Why not our marvelous waterfront villa in Sardinia?

Because no.

I wanted a place of my own. Just mine.

And the most important thing was that I wanted it to be in a secret place.

One that nobody knew about, not even me.

A place to discover. To invent.

A place with a different landscape, different people, different sounds.

I went without saying anything to anyone.

I left the house yesterday afternoon, so that Lucia wouldn't suspect anything. I got Tonio to accompany me to the metro station, very unusual for me, but he didn't ask any questions. Then I slept in a hotel near the Pyramid of Cestius; I couldn't arrive at the apartment in the evening, the Luca guy didn't permit it. And so at dawn I was ready to take the eight o'clock train to "Ostialido".

So: a "premeditated" runaway by all accounts. In reality it isn't really a runaway, just an escape, a break.

From my beautiful children.

Who will be very angry with me by now.

Well, they're always very angry with me.

It's ok, I'll do it soon, send a message on the Family chat. It's fair, I don't want them to worry for no reason, that's not my purpose, I don't want to draw attention to myself, rather, I'd like to draw attention away from me, for them to let me do, speak, perhaps even make a mistake for once. But on my own.

Ciao Family! I'm fine, don't worry, really fine. I've gone off on a holiday, a last-minute deal. In the sense that I decided last-minute. I'll call you some time in the next few days, but my phone will be off most of the time. Oh, and don't throw out my present, OK? Speak soon. LOL.

Will that be enough? I don't think so. Olivia will be the most worked up, I imagine. I can see her, in this exact moment, having just arrived at my house, with the fabled surprise present for my birthday.

She'll probably take it out on poor Lucia, I know her too well, I can visualize perfectly what will happen...