

*Se una notte a Parigi ...
(or ... Volevo sposare una francese)*

by
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Pages: 256

Size: 14 x 21.5 cm

Binding: hardcover with jacket

Price: € 18,00

Series: A

Publication Date: March 4, 2020

First print run: 12,000 copies

Imprint: Giunti Editore

- *What it means to be a man, a house-husband, and a father today: the story of a generation plagued with performance anxiety*

What can a young unemployed person do, one who is a bit unlucky and very much a hypochondriac, and who has a passion for French literature ... other than emigrate to Paris?

After years of internships in Milan, Federico decides to take a leap of faith and, in no time at all, finds himself a job as editor at a Parisian magazine. He also finds something else: Julia is blonde, tall, German, and she also happens to be his boss.

But as soon as the two fall in love, she fires him (to avoid any conflicts of interest!) and they move in together. Months go by and, while everything is quiet on the work front, Julia's biological clock is ticking, loud and clear. The process is short: from house-husband to father in just nine months! Wouldn't it just be easier to clear our minds of all stereotypes so that we can live in peace?

A novel that is young, funny, fresh and full of irony.

Federico Iarlori (Ortona, Abruzzo, 1983) graduated in Modern Literature from the Catholic University of Milan, and then moved to Paris where he has been living for the past eight years. He is currently a freelance journalist, translator and producer. Father of an Italo-French-German child, he founded the blog “Il Mammo” (“The Father-Mom”) to tell the story of a desperate house-husband in Paris. He also successfully acted for four years in the web tv series entitled “Ritals” about the life of Italian immigrants in France.



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A Hymn to Happiness (#ItaliansDoItBetter)

Everyone likes Italians. Except for Italians, that is. It took me a while to understand this, but even the least cool person in the room, if he or she is Italian, is never the absolute bottom rung. Salvation is always at hand. All one needs to do to attain this status is to leave Italy.

Take me, for example. I've always had a hard time with women. My mother tells me that my face is asymmetrical, my hairline is abnormal, my butt is flat, my hands are too small and my voice too high, but that despite all of this I've got a certain 'something' – do you think she said that so I wouldn't feel bad? For someone like me who has always been a bit of a nerd and not extremely athletic (I am still convinced that the pool was not filled with chlorine but with the tears I shed during nine long years of swimming lessons) there was only one way to escape from small-town Abruzzo, the undisputed kingdom of testosterone-graced basketball players: instead of paying for self-esteem courses, or making a ton of money, or escaping to a big Italian city, I could simply leave the country. I know this is the best solution because I have tried all of the others. Almost.

So after five expensive years of study, three annoying years of part-time work in Milan, and a total of eight surreal years of romantic delusions from every corner of Italy, I decided to move to Paris. Because it was my only chance for salvation. The only way I could make a new life for myself.

Before going to live in Paris permanently, in my mind there were two versions of the city. The first one was the mythical one, dreamt of in books and through the lives of writers and artists, intellectuals and designers, *chansonnier* and revolutions and *nouvelle vague* films. The second one was the Erasmus version, which in my case, strangely enough, looked a lot like the first version.

It was a unique and unexpected slice of bohème lifestyle and romantic interludes. I was twenty years old with long, shaggy hair, unkempt nails, and wrinkled shirts partially buttoned over my chest. I rode my bike the wrong way down one-way streets with a flask of cognac tucked inside my jacket pocket and I smoked *Gauloises blu*. I pretended I was an artist although I produced nothing of artistic merit. At that age you are allowed to lie, even to yourself, without losing credibility in the eyes of others.

I kissed one girl on the Champ-de-Mars as the first rays of the sun warmed the iron of the Tour Eiffel, and another one in front of the Cardinal Lemoine metro stop, and another one on a grand piano in a student residence in Stalingrad, and another one in a loft in Vaugirard amidst a pile of books on psychoanalysis, and another one on a fold-out couch in Notre- Dame des Champs while listening to Ray Charles, and another one on Boulevard de Rochechouart just minutes before jumping onto the train that would take me back to Milan.

With another girl I couldn't get it up, from another I received a pie in the face, and yet another didn't show up for our date when we were supposed to meet under the clock at the Palais du Luxembourg. At various times, I strutted down Boulevard Raspail with my chest out like a superhero, or I apologized, or I wanted to cry. I laughed, I suffered, I drank. A lot.

Did my old Paris still exist? Or was it only a city inside my soul, an illusory mirror of my youth? *Je reviendrai*, I had written with a marking pen on the wall of a building near Adolphe Chérioux square. *I'll be back*.

It was a bet I'd made with myself. I'd decided to run the risk of ruining everything.

Why We Like Sushi

The experience that I have gathered over the course of the years has had a bad effect on my brain: it causes it to elaborate theories, even if they make no sense. I apply the experimental scientific method to the unpredictability of the facts of life. I, unlike Pasteur, who did this and rightly so, with *Bacillus anthracis*, have my own method. I am convinced, for example, that there exists an essential variable necessary in order to be attractive to a modern, metropolitan woman: exoticism. Not estoterism, we should understand, even if a profound knowledge of horoscopes and tarot cards are still very helpful. Exoticism works for all men, except perhaps for the Chinese; which makes no sense, because the principle holds that the more different you are, the less competition you have, and you can play more of your top cards even before the game has begun.

When I was a kid I wondered the tall, beautiful, blonde woman was doing in Tonino's model Panda car. Tonino was the old farmer that lived near my grandfather's property in the country, just a few kilometers from the center of the town I lived in. My grandfather told me she came from Poland and I thought Tonino must have had something very special about him to have convinced her to do something so completely crazy. He was neither handsome nor rich. Maybe he was simply different than other men she knew. At the time, this probably convinced me that maybe money was not everything in life. In almost every case, it was, but not always. Georges Brassens sang, "A woman is above all sentimental", and in the end, I think I agree with him.

Unfortunately, however, according to one of my other wonderful theories which derives from the previous one, the cultural difference -and there certainly is one- between Italians and French is not wide enough. Our cousins from beyond the Alps know our Latin storytelling ways only too well, and they are convinced, as we are, that we live in the most beautiful country in the world. They are no strangers to our concepts of art, history, and beauty. In addition, there are some problems, too: they don't eat much when at the table and they favor form over substance, and they drink a lot, and they have the nerve to insist that their wines are better than ours. But above all, they are fixated on independence. And Italian men, for all they might pretend to be worldly, often have a dangerous amount of chauvinism in their veins. Italian

men may think that yes, the French man is more modern, but underneath it all, they also believe he is just a bit foolish.

For example, if you are in the kitchen, standing over the stove with your apron on and your girlfriend, with her irresistible sulk and black-and-white existential air lights a cigarette, looks at you indifferently and admits to having cheated on you, it's not like you can reply, "OK, calm down, let's try to understand what's wrong with our relationship." No. At the very minimum you turn the pot of spaghetti with ragù upside-down on her head. And if she complains of domestic violence, you come back with charges of psychological torture.

I've met many French girls over time and lots of them have said they have 'tried' to go out with Italians. After which they would add, "... never again!" They must have repeated those words many times over, or at least every time they would inevitably end up with an Italian guy, yet again.

It is never wise to be so categorical, otherwise the exceptions that confirm the rules would never have the chance to exist. Still, it seems to me that for some reason, in love, Italians and French are simply not very compatible. I would explain it in this way: for the French, we are too immature, impossibly immature. And maybe they are right.

In France, young men mature early. They fall ripe from the tree and land with their feet planted firmly on the ground. Often they are not yet thirty and they already have a good job, a nice apartment, and their first child, or in many cases, more than one. They begin right away to dress in beige, wear a trench coat, and they are peerless at answering the usual 'aperitivo' questions without a hitch: what do you do, where do you live, and where will you go on vacation next summer. Their beards are scarce and yet they refer to each other using the formal *vous* and call each other *Monsieur*, which makes me think immediately of wrinkles, retirement, and the end of one's life. The 'bad fruits', so to speak, tend to assume the air of the aged loafer, drooling at every mini-skirt they see, letting their beards grow out and smelling of alcohol and eau de cologne from morning to evening. They go into analysis or take lots of psychiatric drugs, or in the best case, Bach flower remedies. All this I learned from the confessions of a national health doctor I met once at a bar in Montmartre at about 1.00 am, someone who I will probably never see again in my life.

The doctor, whose name was Christophe, was about forty and had an intense passion for Scottish whisky. He also told me that the French thirty-year old woman who does not yet have a family is easy to recognize. You see them sometimes laughing all by themselves on the street, even though there is nothing to laugh at. Maybe they just received a message from the guy they slept with the night before, hoping he'll be the one, when all his message says is, "I left my iPhone charger at your place, when can I come by and pick it up?" Other times, if they are a little bit older, you see them insulting other passersby, the walls or other inanimate objects, like the grey-haired woman I met in front of my house who wanted to press charges against a lamp post. Yet others, especially in more recent years, opt for Jihad. "Another Laphroig, *s'il vous plait*."

Giving in to the usual moment of soft-heartedness that arrives after a few drinks, after his excessive cynicism Christophe confessed to me that some of them are actually very happy. But he never

sees them, of course, as patients, because as we all know happiness seems to go unnoticed. As does kindness.

At the age of thirty-four, I feel as if I am still in college. It is understandable, then, that I have not done so well with French women. Probably because, in the end, I always come off as the classic Latin seducer, the king of the one night stand. It's strange that they never figured out that I love trench coats and tranquilizers, that I've always wanted to have children, that I talk to my mother less than once a month – and I never fail to ask her if she likes my new haircut- and that I never complain if the pasta is overcooked. Even if it does bother me. Really. It bothers me a lot.

So, even if I moved to Paris, the city of my artistic and erotic dreams, I've given up forever on marrying a French girl. Continuing to apply my theory of exotic-ness, I ended up meeting Julia, a German, *aus Jena, Thuringen*, a region famous for its green hills, its sausages, and its neo-nazis.

Come to think of it, not so very different from Northern Italy.

Do You Like an Easy Victory?

Julia was the editor-in-chief of a magazine where I worked for about seven months. It was the website for an association that was financed by the European Commission. When I was still in Milan, I sent my curriculum for a paid internship, I had an interview, and I was hired. About one week after my arrival in Paris I was in the newsroom.

In no time at all I had nicknamed her 'the general' for her decisive and even stride, and her tendency to wear a pair of military boots that made an unmistakable sound as she walked around the office. Seeing as she sat next to me, that she spoke French, and that above all she was my boss, we were forced to discuss all kinds of topics, from the elections in Bielorussia to the status of our respective sex lives.

The situation was delicate and we were often on the verge of fighting: once, if I remember well, she ended up throwing a chair at my head. It was your classic office chair, with a padded seat and wheels and all. But my exotic appeal -there was no other explanation- was too strong for her to resist.

For German girls, Italy is a kind of promised land. It is the dream of an authentic and transgressive virility. With its sunny beaches and tables groaning under the weight of food, trips on the back of a Vespa, and bodies covered by dark hair. All one has to do is say, "Ciao!", and give your name and you feel immediately like Raoul Bova in front of Diane Lane in that American film that was full of clichés and phony sunsets. "It's not always like this," a German girl would probably say, the one with round tortoiseshell glasses and a copy of an Alice Schwarzer novel in her hand. But it never hurts to dream.

Many years ago my first girlfriend, Francesca, invited me to her grandfather's beautiful villa near Lazise, on Lake Garda. Lazy and in love, we were always at home or hanging around by the pool and we never went into town. As a result I knew nothing about the people who lived there.

One night we went out for a beer with a few of her friends, however, and after introducing themselves they very casually began talking about their latest conquests. Marco Rovereto did get a few unplanned smacks across the face but he did manage to take a German girl to bed the weekend before. Giovanni Gallarani, instead, was doing very well with an average of one per day. Also for him they were German girls, always blonde, with pony tails, and pink cheeks: the latter was the fault of something that they were not very familiar with, which was sunshine.

Actually, all one had to do was look around to realize that the streets of Lazise were brimming with foreign girls -with or without parents in tow- who were looking for their Raoul Bova. I had never paid any attention to this before. Marco and Giovanni's stories stayed with me, buzzing around in my brain for some time to come.

Annika, a friend of Julia's, once told me that a German, if he is not heavily drunk or high on drugs like in the Berghain in Berlin, for example, takes more or less one year to declare himself to a woman, whether his feelings are true or not. This is true for the females he meets at school, at the university, at work, or at the gym. Twelve months. The length of two temporary work contracts. One entire soccer championship season. Maybe after having waiting for the right moment for so long, the girl then replies, "No, look, I'm sorry, I'm dating someone from Palermo." Which should be understood as: you are completely out of luck.

Human relationships between Germans are like an Audi or a Volkwerk vacuum cleaner: they are solid. That is, until some foreign competition arrives: something a bit more agile, but without any guarantees. This is why the Germans sometimes put us down. Because they fear us. And maybe they envy us, just a bit.

Julia knew that I didn't have a house in Tuscany and, without having to ask my mother, she realized I wasn't built like Raoul Bova. I even told her I had never ridden a motorbike in my life and once, when my father had me take a drive on his Moto Guzzi I had a fever of over 100° the next day. But she looked at me like Diane Lane would have.

After dating for under a month – twenty days, more or less – I told her I wanted to have children. She confessed to me that she preferred to wait, because she knew that Italians were like a Ferrari motor encased in a Fiat body. But in the end, after about a year and a half, she took me seriously.