

Aunt Graziella, Trafalgar Square and Saint Jerome

By

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The wind blew harder. I tightened my scarf around my neck, but I was still cold. Parliament Square no longer interested me; Palermo was still hot, I thought, and nostalgia flooded me. I set off in the direction of Trafalgar Square, described so often by my Aunt Graziella, so that I could imagine I was once again in her sitting room in Agrigento.

The subway openings at the top of Whitehall were somehow familiar: railing and entrance archways recalled the Parisian métro. Whitehall was a very wide street with huge pavements, and lined with magnificent government buildings. Everything was big; no, massive, and different. I looked around me as I walked, as if Aunt Graziella were accompanying me with her dainty steps, her arm through mine. “London is different from the rest of Europe,” she would comment, and now I realised she was absolutely right.

In the middle of the road I noticed a column with wreaths of paper flowers resembling poppies. It was the cenotaph for lost soldiers. My mind flashed to the one in Palermo, much grander, at the end of via Libertà, and I asked myself why this nation should commemorate its heroes with such modesty. I continued on my way, perplexed. The English were strange, and they seemed even stranger when I came to Horse Guards Parade on the left, a white building with a courtyard in front of it, closed off by a gate. On each side was a soldier on horseback, in great pomp - helmet, golden sword, boots, red and black uniforms. Next to them, a group of French students, the only shouts in the silence of Whitehall, who stood next to the horses pretending to stroke them and taking photos. It was as though the soldiers neither saw them nor heard them: they remained unperturbed, as did their steeds. The courtyard where the horse guards rode was not closed off at the end: through the archway I could see a great open space and finally the green of a garden. I walked on. Admiral Nelson's column that Aunt Graziella had so often mentioned filled my view. Tall, thin and solitary. Domineering.

Aunt Graziella had died two years earlier, at almost a hundred years of age. She and her husband, Uncle Vincenzo, occupied the first floor of the house in Agrigento, the city I had lived in until I was twelve. They had no children and always stayed at home. My mother, their only niece, still living in the building, very dutifully went downstairs to visit them every afternoon.

“What news is there?” was Aunt Graziella's first question. Very curious and a bit of a gossip, she wanted to know all the ins and outs of what we had done and above all what we had eaten. And, mother, how much had you paid for the fish? And what else had she bought? My aunt was a woman of habit: she always sat on a sofa, as small as herself, placed against the wall opposite the windows that looked out over the Valley of Temples. Mum said with a smile that my aunt had long since lost sight of the line between penny-wise and avarice, and added: “She who is so wealthy! The trouble is she is stubborn: once she has made up her mind, she won't let go, even if she knows she is wrong.” And it was true. After the war, Aunt Graziella had abandoned the house in Palermo, where she spent winter, out of spite, as well as miserliness: her house had been bombed by the allies and she had taken it as a personal insult, a wrongdoing inflicted on her, not just by the Americans but also by the town of Palermo itself, who should have found a way of stopping it from happening. She refused to restore the house or to buy another apartment and, spurned, she withdrew to the province where she was born and lived as a girl.

I hadn't been particularly bothered about my aunt while she was alive. Whereas, from the stories told after her death, a truly fascinating character emerged. My great-grandfather had single-handedly raised four daughters- and my grandfather, the only male - because his wife was ill. The daughters had proved to be quite strong willed and he had gone along with their wishes. They were very wealthy and made their own decisions to marry or stay at home. Aunt Graziella didn't want a husband. She loved classical music and the opera, and she travelled extensively in Italy. In Rome, where grandfather rented an apartment in a large hotel - always the same one, where they spent a month each year – my aunt made friends with opera singers and conductors and spoke of that world with fondness and nostalgia, sometimes using opera language. At the age of forty, she fell head over heels in love with a handsome cavalry officer. Every afternoon she would go out for a ride in the carriage with one of her sisters and the officer would stand at the corner of the main road in Agrigento, viale della Vittoria: he looked at her intensely and watched the carriage as it went past. She didn't even know the name of that dashing officer, but she wanted him. She insisted with her father until he agreed to contact the general of the Agrigento barracks for information about the young man. They learned that he was unmarried, came from a good family of Ragusa and was

penniless. Her father told Aunt Graziella this, who without batting an eyelid, said: "It makes no difference. I have enough money for both of us. I want him."

After trying to dissuade her, her father was forced to return to the general to inform him that he would view favourably a request for the hand of his daughter. It is said that when the officer was informed, he was taken aback with surprise:

"I don't even know her."

The general didn't believe him: "That can't be possible. Has this woman made it all up; how you admire her when she rides out in her carriage?!"

Then my uncle realised, with the same candour that would stay with him all his life, he exclaimed: "I know who it is! I was watching the horses, wonderful creatures, not her."

The whole of Agrigento laughed at the story and when it finally reached aunt's ears, rather than being humiliated, she was pleased: "I want him even more," she told her father. "He will have all the horses he desires."

The marriage between Aunt Graziella and Uncle Vincenzo was a happy one. My aunt introduced her husband to travelling, music and to any pleasure he desired, and although word had it that my uncle had never given her any reason to be jealous of him, she said so herself, even in old age - she always was. "I must beware of women, horses and everything that moves. You can never be too sure with men." They travelled in Germany and in France, they even adventured to Spain and once only to England: when the Ritz opened in London, as a devoted customer of the Ritz in Paris, my aunt decided to take her husband there. It was an adventurous journey: the Channel was nothing like the straits of Messina; it was a great sea, with strong currents.

At the beginning of the 1900s, London was the largest and most modern capital of Europe. Although horses were still popular, automobiles, as a means of transport, were beginning to outnumber them: together, animal and motorised vehicles created chaos. Aunt Graziella was offended by London because of its dimensions and confusion. One day, in Trafalgar Square, where I was going at that precise moment, my aunt had an awful experience that marked the end of her expeditions to England. She wanted to cross the square: "Not round, not square and of no geometric shape; a battlefield onto which spewed side streets and avenues, main roads and alleyways. There was lots of traffic: not just carriages, omnibuses and motorcars, but people too ... even popping up from below ground! They were passengers from the underground railway stations and they were like ants." My Aunt's anxiety built as she described that hellish situation. In addition to the hither

and thither, she explained what went on in the square under Nelson's column. There were actors and acrobats; stalls selling all nature of goods; dogs with no leashes; children chasing each other; adults feeding the pigeons and a toing and froing populace that paused to shop or chat.

My aunt didn't have the nerve to cross Trafalgar Square to return to the hotel. She was confused, which was not something that happened to her often. She had to take a carriage. Once in the hotel, she declared: "I will leave here solely to return to Paris." And so it was. London was not her cup of tea. And whenever she told this story, she was so convincing that she dissuaded a couple of generations of the Giudice family from visiting England.

I stopped at the traffic light. When it turned green I carefully stepped out, it felt as though Aunt Graziella was saying to me: "Be careful, cars come from the right; traffic lights change rapidly; people run. Careful Simonetta, Trafalgar Square is not a place for us!" I crossed the crowded square and went towards a majestic marble building with a stately colonnaded entrance: The National Gallery.

I knew this was the home to works I was not familiar with: paintings by the Dutch and Spanish masters, whom professor Bellafigliore had spoken to us about in class, despite their absence from the school curricular. "They are great masterpieces, as great as our own, and should be studied," he said, and added that the gallery also possessed Leonard's most beautiful drawing, the one illustrating *The Virgin and Child with St Anne*. I was going to the museum to see it. I climbed the steps one by one, looking about me. A sense of peace embraced me. I had forgotten Aunt Graziella's fears and didn't feel one bit alone. Everything was grand - the floor mosaics, the staircase, the large skylights, the lofty ceilings. At the entrance were two identical urns containing enormous bouquets that were taller than me. Contrary to the Louvre and the Uffizi, former royal residences, the National Gallery had been conceived to hold paintings. Among these an astounding number of masterpieces; I let myself be shuffled along by the crowd, like an insect, turning my head first to one side then to the other, observing what the others were observing. Visitors came from the whole world: I heard languages I wasn't able to identify and for the first time I saw Indian women wrapped in beautiful brightly-coloured saris.

I wandered from room to room under the stern eyes of the custodians, unable to register everything I saw. Without realising, I found myself in the Early Italian Renaissance section and was suddenly attracted to a small painting near a door. It was a domestic painting, perhaps Dutch, I thought, one of the paintings that Prof Bellafigliore had spoken to us about. But it looked familiar. I

learned that it was an Antonello da Messina, *Saint Jerome in his study* – the saint was peaceful, intent, in the company of his books and a lion flicking its tail. A Sicilian in London! The English had wanted that painting by Antonello; they had wanted to honour a fellow citizen of mine. I liked this attention of the English towards us; it made me feel a little like a Londoner.

Since then, I have never felt out of place or unwelcome in London. On the rare occasions I have vaguely felt nostalgia, a trip to the National Gallery to look at *Saint Jerome in his Study* is enough for me to see how, in London, nostalgia is out of place, how I am not alone: there is at least one other Sicilian-Londoner in town, and we keep each other company well enough. He always waits for me, even though sometimes he changes room.

(Currently *Saint Jerome in his Study* is in room 62 of the Sainsbury Wing, with three other paintings by Antonello da Messina.)