

*Santa*

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**My name has my mother's voice**

Since I've been modelling for wedding dresses I feel like I've become everyone's bride, the bride that women look at again and again to pick the right dress, the right hair. I help them pick the right ones. I wear a wedding dress every day, have a wedding hairdo every day, and a portfolio to support a choice that I recommend to everyone but myself.

I often imagined my wedding with Mauro, me in the wedding dress he got for me, and him, well, he looks great in everything. It seems like everything is in his hands. As if he held them bathing in lotion all day, and only pulled them out to caress me.

It was a regular occurrence now that, after the orgasm, he'd just fall asleep inside me and start snoring.

When I'd move a little to shift him he'd wake up and say: 'You're the right place for me'.

Then he'd be silent. The silence between us was everything.

'I'm going to leave Diletta,' he told me one afternoon. We were at my place.

'Why?'

'What do you mean why? How long do you want to keep this up?'

'I don't know, do we have to make a decision?'

'It's been a year and a half, maybe a decision needs to be taken, Santa.'

'Why do you always take a breath before saying my name?'

'What do you mean?'

'You always take a breath. Just now, you just inhaled before saying my name.'

'I don't know. I've never noticed.'

'You've always done this. It's annoying.'

'Are you kidding me?'

'No, it's really annoying. Always has been. I don't get why you need to take a breath before you say my name.'

'I don't know what you're talking about, Santa.'

'Again.'

'What's wrong with you?'

'Nothing, I need to go pick up Tommaso. It's late.'

He touched my right cheek. Top to bottom. The kind of touch that mothers give to their children in the movies, as they look at them tenderly, and making room for the child's face on their hand, run through part of the face from top to bottom.

I didn't need any of the things he told me that afternoon. Hearing that he would've wanted to have met me sooner, that he would've married me if he had met me sooner, that he didn't want to marry and didn't want a child, that she wanted all of that, that he's always cheated on her, that he didn't love her, that he didn't find her attractive, but he'd known her for so long that she seemed like the perfect woman to have a child with because "She's not the type to be fucking annoying about it". So he did. He had a child with Diletta because "She's not fucking annoying."

I'm not right then. I'm not right because I'm fucking annoying. Ask Gianni how fucking annoying I am. Don't rely on me if it's not being fucking annoying that you want.

He smiled, took my head between his hands, and held it tight to his chest. I was once more with my lips against Mauro's sternum, as he told me things he shouldn't have told me. Because I liked him more before, before this, before when I thought he loved his wife, when I thought he would never leave her for me, because that would be a token of love. A man who loves a woman and has no need to go around saying it isn't true. Because then I would've lost my mind about him. But knowing that I won, like he says? "You won," he said. What did I win? Who do you think you are, some kind of world cup?

I don't want the world cup. I want a man who lets me eat off his plate, who stops to watch me as I take off my shoes at the entrance. One shoe on top of the other. The heel of one on the back of the other. I would look at them, if I were my man; I would look at them because my shoes in the entrance are beautiful. Because I'm in those shoes. I leave them at the entrance but I stay with them. I would've wanted a man who took a photo of those shoes. A man who'd notice that if I'm not wearing earrings it's because something's wrong. That the day I don't wear any is a bad day. Gianni would get angry when I'd be late because I couldn't decide which earrings to wear. 'Can't you just go out with no earrings?' he'd say. And I'd do it, in every photo with Gianni, I'm never wearing any earrings.

If I think about a nice thing that a man has done for me, I can't see it, I can't admit it.

If I think about a nice thing that Gianni did, I think of when he'd try smoothing out the wrinkle on my forehead while I slept. I'd often wake up and he was smoothing out the wrinkle. He'd say I'd always go to sleep angry, that the anger never left me even while I slept, and I'd sleep furrowing my brow. He was the reason I was angry.

And if I think about a nice thing that Mauro has done, I think of the wedding dress he bought for me. The wedding dress with the French lace that I was wearing the day I found out you need to be wary of wild boars and I really like sternums. The one with the deep cut on the back, of course, you don't gift someone flat chested a dress with a deep cut on the front. A gorgeous dress with a deep cut on the back that really brought out my arse, as he'd say. Was that a nice thing? When anyone comes to my place and sees the dress in the entrance, on the mannequin, they always say it's gorgeous. No one ever says my life is gorgeous, but everyone says it about the dress.

While I was plotting how to keep Mauro from leaving Diletta, he set in motion an almost impressive retreat. He was able to bring his marriage to an end in a way that made me sad. He was able to end his life with Diletta without telling her, he stepped back and disappeared without ever picking up weapons to defend himself or attack. In almost no time at all, barely a month to leave a life letting her believe all along – I think – that he'd be back. It seemed as though he had planned everything in advance and all of it was also in that silence, the silence I thought had everything I needed. He retreated into a new home, he gave me the keys, and calls it 'our place'. When he says 'I'll see you at our place' I feel like dumping the keys somewhere and never showing up

again. Who even says ‘I’ll see you at our place’? As far as I know, it’s ‘I’ll see you at home’, with no specification as to who pays the mortgage, whose name is on the lease, or how many people have a set of keys. I feel like all my time has vanished since that house started existing. Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday I’m with Tommaso, Thursday I have to be with Mauro and then one weekend with Mauro and one with Tommaso. I don’t even know where my clothes are any more, I wake up at home and want to wear something and then I realise it’s at ‘our place’.

The final hope Mauro and I had was for him to stay with his wife and keep fucking me on every surface of my place. Because since he started feeling love for me and pity for her, well, I would’ve preferred pity.

This is a mess Santa, this is a real big mess, get out of there. That’s what I told myself as he retreated from Diletta’s life and attached himself to mine. Send him away, so that he can never say he left her for you. Tell him all of this scares you, that you don’t want it, so he goes back to his wife, so she can take him back without being fucking annoying, he will keep cheating on her with everyone else and everything will continue to go on with several issues under the carpet. They worked so well while those issues were under the carpet, almost as much as I worked well with Mauro when we were silent, when it was clear – at least to me – that life doesn’t have to be all or nothing. Life could also be him lifting me up and fucking me everywhere.

But I won’t listen, I can’t listen even to myself, maybe because my name is Santa, saint. Because when I say Santa everything starts spiralling in my mind, everything takes a direction which is not the one I intended. The fact that my name is Santa has only ever made things worse.

‘You’ll never be happy, Santa,’ Gianni used to say, and he was right. Because if my name had been Giulia, if I had been called Giulia, Gianni would’ve said: ‘You’ll never be happy, Giulia,’ and things would’ve been different, because it’s clear that Giulia can be happy sometimes, Giulia laughs about it sometimes. What about Vanessa? You can’t even tell someone called Vanessa that she won’t be happy, Vanessa doesn’t give a fuck.

But Santa? Santa is unhappy, Santa is ruined, Santa was born wrong, Santa is me.

Santa.

A name with no escape. You can’t even shorten my name, it just gets worse – what can you even keep of it? What do you take away? All or nothing, so all it is: Santa.

I keep thinking it would’ve been great to be in someone’s mind with a name that isn’t entirely mine, the good part of my name stuck in there, the one that doesn’t carry the past with it. So that you know what when they think of you, they’re not counting all the times you cried, they only know who you want to be, they baptise you again with a part of your name, the good part. If your mother called you Valeria, they’d call you Vale, and your mother’s no longer in the picture.

And then there’s me, and how that never works, it can’t work. No one can get my mother out of the picture, no one can take her out whenever they call me, because no one has ever called me anything but what she called me, no one gave me the chance to be someone else, something else, just something other.

A name with no possibilities, no opportunities, a name that is the same for everyone, always. A name that – no matter who speaks it, even myself – always has my mother’s voice.

**So sad**

‘Mum do you know what a volley is?’

‘No, I don’t. What’s a volley?’

‘Mauro knows.’

‘How do you know that?’

‘Because he used to play tennis.’

‘Oh, right, yeah he knows everything about tennis.’

‘So can you invite Mauro for dinner, so we can talk about tennis?’

‘Yeah, I’ll call him over.’

Mauro, Tommaso, and I, sitting around the table, looked like a family. Tommaso sat on Mauro’s lap and beamed at me. A male presence in the house was a present for him, and so was having someone else to talk to other than me. Mattia was the only one missing, because Diletta – once she realised that Mauro was never going home, once she realised it wasn’t just a whim, that months had gone by and we were becoming a family – wasn’t one to miss an opportunity to be petty. She left Mattia with Mauro on Thursdays and weekends, when I didn’t have Tommaso with me. She made sure that Mauro and I were never alone, but also that we were never all together. She probably thought she could control how and when we fucked, who knows, maybe she thought that if we were never alone we would never be able to fuck. She acted like she had a remote, an actual remote to control our lives on the armrest in her living room. She made Mauro angry but he never admitted to it, he kept up this veneer of fake respect, concealing the same pity reserved for the terminally ill.

Diletta’s phone calls were really sad, just so sad:

‘Mauro, hello, no nothing, I just found another bug in the spiral staircase to the bedrooms.’

‘Really? Was it small?’

‘No, a real big bug.’

‘A big one?’

‘Yeah, a real big one.’

‘And you took care of it?’

‘Yeah, yeah I did.’

‘You could’ve called me, if you needed help to take care of it.’

‘If I hadn’t, I would’ve called, but I managed...’

‘Nice, well done!’

‘Thank you.’

‘So... have a good evening then.’

‘Same to you, speak tomorrow.’

‘Yeah, bye.’

I never had that complicity they shared about bugs with Gianni. About anything, but specifically about bugs. If I had I wouldn’t have left that kind of Gianni, I would’ve kept him home to take care of bugs for the rest of our lives. Two people who leave each other but still get along, two people who don’t understand that if you get along and you have a kid you don’t leave each other.

‘Why did you leave her?’

‘Because I love you.’

‘No, Mauro, that’s the wrong answer, that’s no good. You don’t leave her because you love me, you leave her because you don’t love her any more, otherwise she’ll start wishing me dead, she’s certain that if I die you’ll go back to her. You can’t make the love you feel for me a problem between the two of you.’

‘She knows that I feel nothing for her, I like her, I’ve always liked and cared for her, but I never loved her.’

‘Don’t you realise she calls you just to hear your voice, she calls you what? Seven? Eight months? After you left to tell you she killed a bug. I’d text her, tell her that if she says I want to hear your voice it’s much better, it’s much nicer to say, much nicer to hear, it’s just nicer. Or maybe you had a clause in your wedding certificate which claims ‘I promise to tell honesty to fuck out of here and to live in hypocrisy until death do us part?’ Not as long as it lasts, no, because only death can separate people, sure, not the fact that you can come to your senses and realise that things aren’t working and admit it, no – only death, of fucking course. You cheated on her with everyone else, and she never left you. Everyone, Mauro. And there she is, waiting for death to do you part, finding an alliance with a bug.’

‘But that won’t happen with you.’

‘An alliance with a bug? You’re right about that.’

‘No, silly, I mean the cheating. And we’ll get married, because that’s what I want.’

‘But I don’t. I don’t want that. I will never give death that much importance, Mauro. If I choose to leave you, I want to be free to do so without waiting for death to come to my aid.’

‘You won’t even marry me if we promise we’ll never make a bug alliance?’

‘I can’t get married, I promised my grandmother.’

‘That’s a fucking weird promise.’

‘It’s a promise, and it’s none of your business.’

‘I’ll talk to your grandmother. I’ll offer her a dress with a deep cut towards her arse.’

‘She has boobs, you can give her the front cut instead.’

‘Really? What about your mother?’

‘Same. My sister too. Everyone has boobs.’

‘So what happened to you?’

‘I got the ones reserved for the boy I was supposed to be instead.’

He burst out laughing and hugged me.

‘I really like you Santa, I really really like you. And if you also had boobs...’

‘You can always go back to Diletta, she has a nice pair, and bugs, and I’m pretty sure she prays to the Virgin Mary for you to go back to her.’

‘She was only the right woman to have a child with, I’ve never wanted her as much as I want you.’

‘Do you realise how horrible the things you’re saying are, Mauro? The right woman to... what kind of woman am I, then?’

‘You’re Santa.’

*English translation by Alex Valente*

