

“Gli scherzi della vita”

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This is how it must have happened: they’d kidnapped him while he was sleeping, taken him to an alpine shelter and put him to bed – the most comfortable Ludovico Spinazzola had ever woken up in. Only that could explain why he wasn’t facing the television that helped him get to sleep every night, but a range of majestic, snow-capped mountains.

He lifted his head off the pillow to get a clearer view. It wasn’t quite enough and he leaned his upper body forward. The thrust was so powerful he nearly tumbled out of bed: it’d been years since his abdominal muscles had responded so quickly. This feeling of lightness wasn’t normal, he thought, not for a heavily overweight sixty-year-old with heart problems. Then again, the sensation wasn’t unpleasant at all. Something else also didn’t add up: against the sheets he could feel his bare skin, as if he were wearing nothing but boxer shorts. Where had his pyjamas gone? To get a better look, he raised the duvet cautiously – and that’s when his heart nearly did give out.

That stomach and those knees weren’t his but someone else’s. And not just anyone’s – someone incomparably fitter than him. Unable to believe his eyes, he lifted his hands to his face, first one, then the other: his beard had vanished and his hair grown back. Perhaps during the night he’d undergone some sort of... sort of what? He hadn’t the foggiest idea. For fear that even his voice – his booming, buttery voice – might also have been transformed, he swallowed the screams that were rising from his throat.

At the risk of feeling even more ridiculous, Ludovico stood up and began hopping about the room. In theory, the springiness of his knees should have thrilled him; in practice, it was crushing. To keep from standing still, he began pacing nervously back and forth. The room was spacious, delightfully warm, and furnished with the impersonal luxury of high-end hotels – the

sort of contemporary opulence Ludovico found distasteful. Perhaps that's why he occasionally glanced outside. The landscape, bathed in the first light of dawn, had a primeval feel to it. He wouldn't have been surprised if a family of cavemen, wearing fur and wielding clubs, had appeared out of nowhere to liven up the scene.

Filling him with an even stranger feeling – between euphoria and shock – was an entirely new perception of his surroundings. It was as if everything were vivid and clear, and the more overwhelming for it.

Panting, sweating, his heart racing, he came to a halt in front of a sliding door. Something told him that if he opened it, he'd understand everything – that was why he hesitated. But once he'd put his new lungs to the test, with an exhilarating intake of oxygen, he slowly slid the door open and found himself in a sort of boudoir – a hallway lined with mirrors separating the bedroom from the bathroom. By now, the only way to escape this new reality was to close his eyes. But what he'd just glimpsed was so monstrous that he forced himself to keep them open.

As aloof as he kept himself from certain things, he wasn't so clueless as to fail to realise that the person he'd turned into – there he was, life-size, naked as an eel save for his boxer shorts, face twisted as if he'd just seen a ghost – was none other than Ethan Kaffee, the Hollywood star.

Not that for Ethan things were much better: he, too, had plenty of reasons to think he was going insane. Starting with the sinister little man who'd popped up in front of him. Vietnamese, Mexican, Inuit – he could have been anything, but that wasn't the point. The point was that he was there and wouldn't stop staring at him. Actually, no – the point was that he, Ethan Kaffee, had woken up somewhere he'd never seen before, in a state of confusion, and in terrible physical shape.

His head was cold, as if in the night someone had shaved off all his hair. His tongue was swollen, his beard thick, his breathing shallow. An alarming tingling sensation was running through his numb limbs. Making things worse, his vision was blurry. He had to calm down, regain control, not let himself be overwhelmed. 'Ethan Kaffee's afraid of nothing and don't you forget it'. The only flaw in his pep talk was that it was when truly terrified that Ethan thought of himself in the third person.

With his heart in his throat, desperately squeezing his eyelids shut, he tried to gather his thoughts.

He'd gone to bed early – no doubt about that. He made it a habit in the weeks leading up to the start of filming – and that year more than ever, when the birthday of Our Lord coincided with the second anniversary of the death of his only son, Joel. That was why he'd cloistered himself in his chalet in the Rocky Mountains, accompanied by his usual, select entourage: housekeeper, chef, personal trainer, and Yael, the bodyguard he'd poached from the Israeli special forces. What he loved most about the Colorado wilderness was the slow way in which the hours flowed into one another: mornings on the slopes, afternoons meditating, nights sound asleep.

That was why what he had seen – not to mention what he continued to feel – couldn't be real. It must be the tail end of a dream, or a nightmare: come to think of it, before he'd closed his eyes, everything had suddenly seemed opaque, as if a veil were covering his pupils.

When he finally brought himself to open them again, his clear-sightedness hadn't returned and the little man was still there, so close Ethan could smell different spices on his breath.

"Did you fall asleep in your armchair again? You really are a moron."

'This is too much!' Ethan growled to himself. Bad enough finding himself in the wrong place, his body in tatters, at the mercy of a hostile stranger; to have to put up with being insulted

in a language – Italian – he didn't speak and yet, by some miracle, seemed to perfectly understand... Well, that really was ridiculous.

"You promised you'd take it easy... And look," the little man snapped at him again, "look what you've done to this place, the home of your poor parents."

Piles of plates, rows of glasses, heaps of cigarette butts and half-smoked cigars in the ashtrays... Allergic as he was to dirt and disorder, Ethan was preparing to defend himself, but dismissing the notion this was all an incredibly vivid and persistent nightmare, he became convinced he'd been kidnapped. Though far-fetched, the theory wasn't impossible: he'd been under police protection for months. They must have drugged him and then, under cover of darkness, brought him there (but where exactly?). If nothing else, the theory explained the nausea, the throbbing in his head, his stiff shoulders. Come to think of it, though, the little man looked nothing like a jailer. And as for the *there* Ethan was unable to recognise, it hardly looked like the kind of place you'd hide a hostage.

He was reminded of a film he'd starred in about ten years earlier, in which he played an American spy on a mission in Nazi-occupied Paris. He recalled the scene in which a French resistance fighter – Marion Cotillard in one of her first roles – hid him in the house of her antiques dealer father. That was the atmosphere of the place he'd woken up in: the stale, stifling air of a nineteenth-century Parisian abode. The ceilings were high, the upholstery luxurious, the walls lined with framed Madonnas and cherubs, the shelves crammed with books, busts and trinkets. The centrepiece was the tapestry covering the entire wall east of his nose. Everything, in other words – absolutely everything – reeked of old Europe. Paris? London? Budapest?

Despite the myriad cities he'd visited and thousands of people he'd met, Ethan found it hard to believe anyone was still willing to live in this kind of wax museum. As the owner of quite a few – rather fetching – properties, he wouldn't have lived in a flat like that for anything in the world!

"Come on, Ludovico, get a move on. Dr Licalzi's expecting us. Have a bath and get changed. I'll get the car from the garage."

'Enough is enough,' he thought, feeling exasperated. The joke had already gone too far. He was Ethan Kaffee, for heaven's sake. Once, on a dangerous expedition in Mali, an entire Tuareg tribe had asked him for a selfie. If his memory served him right, they'd even asked for one with their camels.

Ethan made to get up – or at least he tried to. The last thing he was expecting was for an equal and opposite force to push him back, as a searing pain exploded like a bomb in his pelvis then radiated around his body, so quickly it took his breath away.

“Easy now,” the little man spoke with a strangely solicitous voice, “you’ll hurt yourself. Let me help you.”

For Ethan Kaffee, the body was a temple. That was how it had always been: every choice he’d made in life – spiritual, athletic, dietary – had been shaped by this belief. And now? How to explain this collapse? He hadn’t even had time to ponder the question when a new impulse gripped him. He raised his arms just enough to look at his hands: they were smooth, plump, and adorned with rings.

“Could someone tell me what the fuck is going on?” he whimpered. Realising he was speaking Italian his heart skipped a beat.

“Nothing’s going on, Ludovico. You turned sixty yesterday and overdid it a little, as usual, even though you’d promised you wouldn’t. And, as usual, you fell asleep in your armchair. But your Carlito’s here now.”

“Who?” mumbled Ethan.

“And don’t forget these,” the stranger added. “You must’ve dropped them. Here, put them on.” He placed a pair of glasses in his hand.

Only after putting them on was Ethan certain that it wasn’t a dream.

Carlos, known as Carlito, was the product of Ludovico's father's affair with Pilar, the nineteen-year-old from Manila who'd been working for the Spinazzola family since the late 1970s. As teenagers, the two half-brothers had been informed of the true nature of their relationship but hadn't batted an eyelid – as if they already knew, had always known, and it was the natural order of things. As such, Ludovico had continued to behave like the scion of a good family and Carlos like the son of their Filipino maid.

After the death of their father, the estate had been divided equally amongst his heirs. But rather than narrowing, the class divide between Ludovico and Carlos had become unbridgeable. By this point, no one would've believed that Ludovico Spinazzola's assistant, his surly factotum, was also his half-brother. Just as no one could've imagined that, in private, far from prying eyes, the power dynamic between the two was entirely reversed. For Ludovico had never learnt to make his bed, pay his bills, or drive a car. And why should he have, when he'd always relied on his little half-brother for that sort of thing?

This was why, at this particular juncture – facing the mirror reflection of his new self – Ludovico was trying his utmost to utter his brother's name, and why being unable to do so made him feel so lost. But this also explained why, after half a dozen failed attempts, he'd decided to let it go: whatever it was that he was in thrall to – nightmare, delusion, or spell – it was clear that Carlos wasn't part of it; that at least this once he, Ludovico, had to fend for himself.

Needing to urinate he stepped into the bathroom. Pulling it out of his underpants gave him a strange apprehension, but the rest came naturally. The hydraulic efficiency of his bladder was just the first of the surprises his new body had in store. The others were even better. With Carlos not there to run his bath, he opted for a shower, and whether it was due to his astonishing new sensory abilities or the water's warmth and softness, he never would've imagined that rubbing another man's hair, smoothing his pectorals, or touching his private parts could give such sensual pleasure. For the record, our Hollywood star was rather well endowed in that department.

Ludovico couldn't even contemplate the staggering number of people who would've paid to be in his place. If there was nothing he could do to get out of this situation, he was beginning to think that getting out of it wasn't so desirable after all. Unwilling to accept that the hallucination he was experiencing was of supernatural origin, he was reminded of the fellow who, waking from a long coma, had told his sceptical doctors and astonished family that he'd

spent several years living in the body of a Labrador. And why not? These things happen – the sort of tricks your brain might play once you reach a certain age. Given the state of his coronary arteries, a stroke couldn't be ruled out, of course. But as he considered the opportunities of this new, artificial existence, each seemed more tempting than the last. So what, then? What was he afraid of? If this really was the last scrap of life he'd been granted, the mirage of a dying man, he might as well make the most of it and enjoy it.

He'd studied the gods long enough to know that, if you piss them off, they're far less generous, turning you into a hippopotamus or a mare. If they're in a really bad mood, you might even end up a laurel tree. Not with him, though; they'd been so kind, in fact, that they'd turned him into a demigod.

Returning to his room, he found his bed made, breakfast ready (tea, dried fruit, orange juice, a herb omelette), and a navy-blue ski suit draped over the armchair. Probably a coincidence, but of all the sports he'd been forced to do as a boy, skiing was the one Ludovico hated the most. Ah, his father and his daft ideas of making a sportsman out of him!

Even today, decades later, he was convinced his real life had begun the day he'd managed to rebel against his old man's despotic rule. Quitting all sports and achieving early academic success had made a necessary, if not decisive, contribution. Back then, young as he was, all he needed was a lecture theatre full of students and a microphone. Nothing thrilled him quite like introducing students to the marvels of Antonello da Messina and Piero della Francesca, or his beloved Lorenzo Lotto and Dosso Dossi. Still under thirty, as a fledgling researcher, it'd taken just one semester for him to turn his lectures into happenings, and even less to realise that the monastic life of a scholar wasn't enough; that to be happy, he had to drastically expand his audience. When university lecture theatres proved too small, Ludovico turned to theatres; when theatres began to feel too cramped, he accepted his first offers to appear on television; and when even television started to look worn-out, he'd turned to social media. At first, he'd talk only about Italian art, but by now there was no topic on which he didn't feel entitled to have a say. Alongside this, his notoriety had continued to grow, as did the hostility of the intellectual world. Even his more benevolent colleagues – those who had no qualms in admitting that Ludovico Spinazzola was the most brilliant art historian of his generation – couldn't help but scorn his excesses. Some mocked his waistcoats and neckerchiefs; others railed against the museum into which he'd turned his home; some questioned his integrity as a scholar and citizen; others deplored his high-society acquaintances, or his increasingly chaotic, delusional, and unacceptable political views. On one thing all

seemed to agree: despite his intellectual vigour and unrivalled eloquence, he couldn't be trusted.

Now, in any case, he couldn't care less what other people thought, assuming he ever had. His main concern was the condition of his heart, heavily damaged by his hedonistic and reckless lifestyle. His cardiologist had given Ludovico a stark choice: either he got his act together and completely changed his habits or he was done for. The warnings from the surgeon who'd fitted his first bypass had been even more detailed: he had to cut out saturated fats, cigars and spirits, and stop turning night into day.

'Ah, if only you could see me now!' he thought, running his hand over his chiselled abs. 'How I'd love to tell you all to bugger off!'

At least, he was proud to note, the insolence and insubordination of the Ludovico Spinazzola of old remained intact. In this spirit, he wolfed down the eggs, put on the ski-suit and threw open the door separating him from his new world.

From another room came a grunting sound – more suitable for a barn than a celebrity's chalet, a nightmare than a dream. The further he ventured into the depths of the house, the more menacing it became, until he found himself face to face with a pig. Not the kind Ludovico was familiar with – which he found quite repulsive, unless served up in a delectable dish – but a smaller specimen, with black fur and faint reddish streaks on its back and snout. It glared at him, grunting angrily and incessantly. Lacking familiarity with untamed nature, which he hated from the depths of his heart, Ludovico froze. With his new athletic build, he could easily have made a run for it, but he thought he'd read somewhere that you should never turn your back on a pig. Or was it bears? As he toiled with the doubt, the strange creature drew closer. It was just a few steps away when a voice cried out: "What on earth are you doing, Freddy? Have you gone mad? Can't you see it's Ethan?"

Veering suddenly off course, the piglet scuttled into the next room.

For Ethan – at least this new version of Ethan – getting dressed, leaving the house, and getting to the analyst’s office had proven quite an ordeal. Just putting on his socks had taken about ten minutes, and he’d nearly dislocated his collarbone in the process. Choosing which clothes to wear had felt even more grotesque than when he’d played Louis XIV in the eponymous Hollywood blockbuster. At least then he’d had to walk the tree-lined boulevards of Versailles, amongst hundreds of extras dressed just as ridiculously. Now he’d had to venture out into the streets of an ancient Italian city, mingling with real people busy with last-minute Christmas shopping, while dressed as a spruced-up clown.

The man who opened the door looked about his age. Smiling warmly and helping him with his coat, he asked cordially how the party had gone the night before, whether he’d enjoyed himself. Ethan thought back to the chaos of plates and glasses he’d woken up to. So there really had been a party at his house. But he knew nothing about it and gave a vague reply.

“What’s the matter, Professor?” pressed the doctor, stepping into the study. “You usually love to sing the praises of Carlos’s cooking.”

Licalzi didn’t ask him to lie on the couch. Clearly, Ethan thought with relief, he wasn’t that sort of analyst. Not that he knew many, mind you. The few he did know were Jews from West Hollywood, with ‘Only with Mama’s permission!’ written all over their faces. Which explained why they were so feeble and pretentious. Nothing like this gentleman with a candid smile, courteous manners and, judging by his next remark (“What’s the matter, Professor? You look as if you’ve just come down from Mars...”), a razor-sharp intuition.

For all the many difficulties he faced, he could be proud of one thing. Anyone else in his position would’ve already lost their mind. Not him; he’d kept his nerve. He knew how important it was to carry on acting as if what had happened was just one of those things. The worst had come in the bathroom: the brutish way Carlos had helped him out of the bath was the most humiliating thing Ethan had ever experienced.

How can anyone sink so low?, he’d wondered, as Carlos had scrubbed his breasts roughly – far too saggy and hairless to belong to a man. How could anyone hate themselves so much?, he’d piled it on, as inside him grew an irresistible urge to end it all.

A few years earlier, Ethan had agreed to be the face of President Obama’s campaign to raise awareness about the dangers of junk food. On that occasion, setting aside his usual paranoid reserve, he’d opened the doors of his Malibu villa to a small army of obese people, and let himself be filmed teaching them a few basic exercises in his fully equipped private gym. Smiling, pretending to be kind and sympathetic towards those wretched, depraved people, had

been the finest performance of his career. What really made him uncomfortable wasn't the aesthetic side, but the ethical implications: if there was one thing Ethan couldn't stand – in others and in himself – it was a lack of discipline and self-respect.

And now that spiteful fate had trapped him in the body of one of those awful fatties, to keep from going mad he had to draw on all his reserves of dignity and courage. That didn't mean the composure he needed for the daredevil feats so many in his circle looked down on – climbing mountains, braving rapids, throwing himself off cliffs – but the stoicism his Mormon parents had instilled in him.

To think that for years he'd pretended that whole dreadful period of his life had never happened – only to cling to it at the eleventh hour, just after Joel's death. The truth was that nothing could soothe the excruciating guilt of his son's passing quite like the memory (he'd repressed for years) of the words his father always repeated: "Our Lord can reveal himself anytime and anywhere, even in suffering. It's not a gift, as the Papists believe, but an opportunity: suffering is how the Lord shows us the path to lift ourselves. Bear that in mind, son."

Was that how to take this terrifying transformation? As the ultimate test by the spiteful God of his childhood? However painful, that was the only thought that could give meaning to the absurdity. Or perhaps not the only one. Of the little he knew about Ludovico Spinazzola, the most striking detail was also the most unsettling: the day before had been his birthday, the same day his Joel had taken his own life. Like all simple-minded people, Ethan Kaffee didn't believe in coincidences.

"How could you tell, Doctor? The truth is I really do feel like I woke up in the wrong place." He blurted it out, with a frankness that surprised even him. "In fact, it's worse than that," he continued. "Not just the wrong place, but in someone else's shoes."

Whether it was the warmth of his new voice, his mastery of a language – Italian – he didn't speak until the day before, or the affable nature of his interlocutor, Ethan came very close to giving in to the impulse to open his heart to the analyst.

Fortunately, he came to his senses just in time. How would such a level-headed doctor react if, out of the blue, this elderly patient started to claim he wasn't who he appeared to be, but Ethan Kaffee, none other than the famous actor himself? It was the sort of thing that would land you in a straitjacket. No, all he could do was stick to the plan. Grin and bear it, while gradually getting to grips with his new life. Which, in this case, meant getting as much information as possible from the doctor about his avatar, while revealing nothing about himself.

But then another, terrible doubt struck him. Who was to say he really wasn't just another overweight nutcase who one day starts believing he's a Hollywood star? Why not? Mental asylums are packed with people who think they're Elvis!

He could try as hard as he liked to recall memories only the real Ethan Kaffee could. However clear they might seem, he couldn't rule out the possibility that they, too, were the product of a twisted imagination, and that the real Ethan Kaffee was real only to him.

"Well, Professor, don't you think that's something worth exploring?"

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

"What you've just told me. I mean, this feeling of being a stranger to oneself. You'll agree that it's another telling symptom."

Ethan didn't know whether the persistent neausea he felt was down to his inability to get used to his new body or whether it was simply to be expected for an organism like that. Either way, he had no idea what to do. He tried the "sacred square of control", a breathing exercise he'd learnt decades earlier – after his first divorce – during his retreat at the ashram of the venerable master Sri Karuna, at the foot of the Himalayas. He knew no better antidote to anxiety. Not only did it fail to work; it nearly made him choke.

Feeling new needs – which would've been deemed highly inappropriate in his world – he asked the doctor for a cigar. Was he really doing this? Without batting an eyelid, Licalzi pulled an orange leather case from the inside pocket of his jacket and took out a couple of Toscanello cigars. He put one in his mouth and offered Ethan the other. This was clearly a well-established habit, Ethan thought in surprise. Only in Italy could things like this happen; in California, they would've arrested them both in a single raid for far less. Ethan brought the thing to his lips and tried to light it as casually as possible. Apart from a few joints in his secondary school days and three or four scenes he'd filmed early on in his career, he'd never smoked in his life. That was why he was so taken aback by the feeling of well-being that, after a couple of puffs, spread through his body. Unbelievably, even the nausea subsided.

"Better?" asked Licalzi with a wink.

"Much better."

Shifting the cigar from one corner of his mouth to the other, like Groucho Marx, the doctor picked up the conversation where he'd left off, asking him whether what was giving him the feeling of being – how had he put it? – "in someone else's shoes" was perhaps the meeting that lay ahead. Without the faintest idea what the doctor was alluding to, Ethan merely smiled.

“If you’d rather not talk about it, we don’t have to. In fact, if you’d prefer, we can just sit in silence.”

Licalzi’s words had no trace of resentment.

“No, that’s not it,” muttered Ethan, looking increasingly flustered. “I’d just like you to explain things a bit better... I really can’t... I don’t grasp...”

“What’s there to grasp? I’m talking about your daughter. You told me you’d finally decided to meet her.”

“Really?”

“Of course, you’re the one who told me. We’ve spent quite a few sessions on it.”

Ethan’s lips parted just enough for his cigar to fall onto his waistcoat. To keep it from falling on the floor, he grabbed it by the wrong end, burning his finger. Without giving it a second thought, he straightened it out and shoved it back into his mouth.

A daughter, then: he had a daughter. Ethan could hardly believe men this fat could have sex, let alone procreate.

“Don’t worry,” the doctor continued. “The first meeting is always the most difficult, but then...”

“I’m sorry, the first meeting with whom?”

“With Giulia, your daughter. Professor, what’s got into you? You really are out of sorts today.”

Giulia. So that was her name. But why was the doctor talking about a first meeting? Could it really be that they’d never met? What sort of man has never seen his own daughter?

“Apologies for losing my temper, Professor,” Licalzi regained his composure, seeming sincere.

“Don’t mention it.”

“It’s just that... I must confess, this attitude of yours takes me rather by surprise. I’m not saying it’s deliberate, but it’s not like you. If there’s one thing you’re not lacking, it’s clarity of thought and resolve. Sometimes even to a fault. That’s why I don’t understand why, today of all days, just a few days before meeting your daughter, you’re so confused, so reticent.”

Sticking to his conviction that the best course of action was to gather as much information as possible, Ethan simply repeated that he felt a bit out of sorts, promising to be more cooperative.

“Perhaps we should pick up where we left off last time,” continued Licalzi, in a more conciliatory tone.

If only I knew, thought Ethan. He simply said, “That seems like a reasonable suggestion.”

“You were worried your resentment towards the mother might carry over onto your daughter. That’s what you told me last week. Well, I hope you’ve had time to think it over.”

“I have indeed,” lied Ethan.

“So?”

“I think it’s wrong.”

“What is?”

“That children should pay for their parents’ mistakes.”