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L'amore è una banana

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0. Barigazzi

Bernardo Barigazzi's name had been Bernardo Barigazzi for so many years that he actually thought it was a great name.

Chalk it up to narcissism.

Bernardo Barigazzi was a bit of a narcissist.

And he didn't mind.

He would tell himself that it was a common trait among people who wrote books.

And what he told nobody was that he really digged his own books.

He had a hard time reading something better than what he wrote, according to him.

But his books didn't sell very well and he couldn't fathom why.

He sold a lot less copies than other authors, "Poor things," he would think, "their writing sucks."

He thought it was the name.

Bernardo Barigazzi.

To others – who, for some unfathomable reason, didn't share the boundless admiration he had for himself – it didn't seem like a writer's name.

Even though he didn't sell a ton of copies, Bernardo Barigazzi was very rich.

Almost filthy rich.

He was fifty-three and, even if he had wanted to, he wouldn't have known how to spend all the money he had in his remaining years.

Which is why Bernardo Barigazzi thought he had time to spare when, one morning in September 2024, he received a message: "I have to see you, it's urgent, are you free this morning?" It was from Vittorio Carrocci, an acquaintance of his; he was a politician and the husband of a coworker, so to speak, an author whose books sold far better than his.

He always had time to spare.

He never had shit to do.

1. Vittorio

Looking at him from a distance, Vittorio Carrocci was tall and slim. He was wearing a black jacket, black trousers, a black tie, a perfectly ironed white shirt, and a pin on his lapel that was

hard to make out clearly from afar. He looked like a soccer referee, a linesman, a former athlete, or a second-rate politician.

He was actually a regional council member from the party with a relative majority in his region, i.e. Emilia-Romagna.

He was forty-nine years old, and he was married to Elena Renzi. She was two years older than him, fifty-one, and she was a prominent writer on the national literary scene and, in a sense, on the European one as well.

They always invited her to the Frankfurt Book Fair.

Vittorio Carrocci often went there as well. When she presented her books in Frankfurt, but also in Italy, his job wasn't being a second-rate politician but the husband of a prominent writer.

They had been married for sixteen years. Early on, his wife was so blonde, so young, so skinny, so frail and yet so strong, and she had that line there, above her eyes, between her eyebrows. He was so happy with his job as Elena Renzi's husband, so proud of how they looked as a couple, and he couldn't wait to take Elena to the Frankfurt Book Fair and to all the other festivals where he gladly accompanied her.

In recent years, however, Elena wasn't as blonde, she wasn't as young, she wasn't as skinny. And the line above her eyes, instead of becoming more defined as the years went by, had disappeared: plastic surgery. Whatever, Vittorio thought, everyone does it, you have to stay young, but maybe they could have done a better job. And if youth was a virtue – and he believed it was – he felt young, after all he was younger than Elena, even if only by two years. In his political speeches, he always talked about young people and youth, refinement and beauty. Recently, however, Vittorio had been looking for them elsewhere. And this meant that, after the regional council meeting (he had a fucking regional council meeting that day), he had to jump on his Vespa right away and rush over to meet Bernardo Barigazzi, that megalomaniac snob, to ask him for a favor, for fuck's sake.

2. Elena

Elena Renzi was in a good mood as she went to see her therapist that morning.

She had received a call from the council member of a small town in the province of Modena. His first name was Jacopo; she didn't remember his last name because, in her phone, he was listed as "Jacopo with a J."

That councilman had called her for the first time the previous year and said something like "We'd be very happy if you could join us at the library. But, dammit, you have to forgive me, we

don't have a dime." She replied, "Don't worry, I'll come anyway, and don't go thinking it's something I do for everyone who calls me. On the contrary, I'm not really sure why, but I tend to go where they pay me, and handsomely so. But when a council member calls me saying 'Dammit, you have to forgive me, we don't have a dime,' I can't say no. Congratulations," she added, "you are a very persuasive person."

And so, she had gone. She really enjoyed the presentation, the library was beautiful, it was in an eighteenth-century villa. But she especially liked that council member. At the end of the event, when he asked her to sign his copy of the book, he said "To Jacopo with a 'J.' Do you know how often I've had to say it in my life, 'With a J'? I think that if my name had been Andrea or Luca, I would've picked a different degree. Or I would've learned how to play the harpsichord. Too bad, I would've really enjoyed playing the harpsichord," Jacopo with a "J" told her.

They exchanged phone numbers and Jacopo would call her every now and then. She was the kind of person who didn't answer everyone's phone call, she was an important author and she didn't really have the personality of a blonde, as they say in Bologna. She often didn't even answer the calls from that dumbass husband of hers. But she enjoyed Jacopo's phone calls. And she liked the fact that he was such an unlikely councilman: he was two meters tall and somewhat pear-shaped, his eyes were slightly Asian, and there was a certain composure in his gaze, a calmness, revealing that his "dammits" weren't "dammits" born out of impatience; she didn't quite know how to put it, but it was like the drums or the bass playing the one-two-three of a waltz. And his speeches were like waltzes. To Elena, Jacopo seemed like a postwar era, which she had never witnessed but could imagine: a place where there wasn't a dime to be found, but where unexpected things happened every day and, dammit, who would have ever thought?

He called her early that morning, it might have been around 9:30, to tell her that he was at the office the previous day. It was located in the town council's office (but that wasn't his real job, he wasn't actually a council member, he did something else for a living, but Elena didn't know what it was). He usually worked there for a couple of hours a day, in the evening. When he was there the previous day, he noticed that there was an office document for reimbursement of expenses – the kind they sent to people who came to give speeches in his little town – which required his authentic signature.

He told her over the phone that when he found the document, he cornered the secretary and told her, "Listen, Goddammit," (apparently, when he was mad he said "Goddammit") "how can someone sign with their fake signature? What would they do, use someone else's signature? What's the point of asking for their authentic signature? People are just going to laugh at us."

And Elena replied, "Jacopo, you're right, you're perfectly right. If you fix those forms, you'd be doing humanity a favor. But now, excuse me, I have to talk to my husband – he's been standing in front of me looking like he has something important to tell me, and then I have to go to the

therapist in five minutes. I'm sorry, it sounds like I'm ditching you but, believe me, your phone calls are one of the highlights of my day."

She hung up and listened to what that dumbass husband of hers had to say, which took her by surprise and put her in an even better mood. She didn't expect that, after hanging up on Jacopo, her dumbass husband would improve her spirits further. On her way to see her therapist, she thought of two things: that she was going to be the one who set Barigaskij straight; and that she was going to ask her therapist "Doctor, I have a question. You've known me for so long, please tell me, why on earth am I still with that dumbass husband of mine?"

3. Marzia

Marzia woke up at 6:00 AM that morning and realized that she was alone in the apartment.

Her roommate, Stefania, was gone.

Her boyfriend, assuming they were actually a couple, was Bernardo Barigazzi. The previous day, they had spent a couple of hours at his place, then she went home alone because the daughter was about to arrive.

His daughter.

When Marzia woke up, her legs felt sore. She thought, "It's impossible, I can't go running today."

She returned home an hour later, all sweaty and buzzing with endorphins.

Endorphins are great.

"I feel so good," her body said.

There is just one problem with endorphins.

They don't last long.

After taking a shower and getting dressed, she sat at the kitchen table and asked herself what she could do until 1:00 PM when she had to meet Bernardo Barigazzi, her boyfriend, assuming they were actually a couple.

Four hours with nothing to do and a lot to think about.

Starting with her job as a barista, which she no longer had.

The café where she used to work had been shut down.

It was a historic café, near the stadium. Five years ago, nobody would have ever thought it would close.

Instead.

Closed.

And, in its place, they opened a pay-by-weight restaurant.

Eighty grams of lasagna.

One hundred and fifty grams of radicchio.

Thirty grams of cherry tomatoes from Pachino.

Thirty grams of Parmigiano.

She went there once, partly out of curiosity, partly out of nostalgia. She darted out of there in sheer despair.

She told her boyfriend, assuming they were actually a couple, and he started rambling unbearably about two things.

The first rant was about nostalgia.

“When you worked at Bulgarelli Café,” Barigazzi asked her, “did you actually enjoy working there?”

“Not at all,” Marzia replied.

“So how can you feel nostalgic about it?” he asked.

As if you couldn’t feel nostalgic about places that made you feel bad.

Then, when he started his second rant about despair, Barigazzi asked her, “Don’t you enjoy despair?”

“No,” Marzia replied. Then she added, “Why? Do you enjoy it?”

“Yes,” said Barigazzi.

“Huh,” said Marzia. “And do you think you’re normal?” she then asked him.

“Are you familiar with Beckett?” he said.

“The writer?”

“The writer. The Nobel laureate. Do you know him?”

“Sure. Gorgeous face. So?”

“Well, Beckett – the writer, the Nobel laureate, the gorgeous face – once wrote that hope is just a charlatan, that the only thing it does is deceive us, and that he started feeling well only after he had lost it. And the sign that Dante placed over the Gates of Hell, ‘Abandon all hope, ye who enter,’ Beckett – the writer, the Nobel laureate, the gorgeous face – would put it on the Gates of Heaven instead.”

That is what her asshole boyfriend told her when she dared to confess that, after nearly five years of not working, she was feeling a little desperate.

They went to Paris together for a weekend when his daughter was staying with a friend at the beach. It was late Saturday afternoon, they were in front of the entrance of a Uniqlo clothing store in the Marais neighborhood, when they saw an overweight guy with a head of curly brown hair. He was kneeling on the ground, with a hat in front of him and a sign beside him that said “*Trop moche pour la prostitution*,” “Too ugly for prostitution.”

He laughed, the boyfriend. She didn’t laugh and told him, “I could do that in Bologna too.”

“You’re not *moche*,” he said.

“I’ll change the sign,” she replied, “I’ll write ‘Too shy for prostitution.’”

He didn’t say anything.

The boyfriend.

And now he was talking about Beckett, this asshole boyfriend of hers.

Besides, she wasn’t even sure if the two of them were actually a couple.

They had been together for almost six years, and he still hadn’t introduced her to his daughter.

And there he goes, rambling about Beckett.

Beckett Schmeckett.

What does Beckett even have to do with it?

Introduce me to your daughter, you moron. Introduce her to the woman you have been fucking for almost six years.

She was really pissed off.

4. The Grand Canal

Barigazzi had arranged to meet Carrocci at the café right below his apartment. Outside, above the entrance, there was a sign that said “Ristobar” (a restaurant/café combination). Inside, there was a poster of Venice’s Grand Canal on the wall, three-legged tables, saffron-yellow tablecloths, paper napkins, and plastic cups. It was set up in such a way that Barigazzi, who was a very congenial person, called it “Tristobar” (i.e. “Bummer-bar”). Whenever he went there, he would sit outside, if possible. On that September morning on Via Irma Bandiera in Bologna, it was twenty-five degrees, and it was absolutely lovely outside.

Barigazzi ordered a coffee and a bottle of water. He sat outside and pulled out his phone. He read an email that he had just received and thought, “What the hell are you talking about?”

5. Tinder

Carrocci got off his Vespa. He was dressed like a second-rate politician: black jacket, black pants, black tie, and a snow-white shirt. He took off his black helmet and smoothed out his jet-

black hair. He was nearly fifty. He smiled, smoothed out his hair again, and walked up to Barigazzi saying “Barigaskij, hey, how are you?”

“You know, it’s been so long since the last time I saw you that I almost forgot how nice you were?” Barigazzi said, inviting him to sit down at his table with a gesture.

Barigazzi ordered another coffee, Carrocci asked for a spritz.

“So,” Barigazzi asked, “what do you want?”

“You know,” replied Carrocci, “I also forgot how nice *you* were?”

“Great. Now that we’ve remembered, tell me: what do you want?”

“I made a mess.”

“That doesn’t surprise me.”

“Elena has written a novel.”

“It’s her job.”

“She made me read it.”

“That’s surprising.”

“She always makes me read them,” Carrocci said with a grimace. “I’m her first reader.”

“Kudos.”

“And this time I really liked it, it’s a great book. And I think I might’ve also been helpful this time because I found a mistake.”

“What mistake?”

“This chick, the protagonist, has a sort of boyfriend, and she suspects him of cheating on her. So, she goes on Tinder and searches for his name, and she realizes that he’s actually on it, on Tinder.”

Barigazzi tensed up.

“Uh-huh,” he said.

“What do you mean, ‘uh-huh’?” asked Carrocci.

“I don’t get it,” said Barigazzi.

“Let me explain. I told Elena that I thought the novel was great, but there was a mistake.”

“Uh-huh.”

“What do you mean, ‘uh-huh’?”

“I still don’t get it.”

“She asked me, ‘What mistake?’”

“Uh-huh.”

“And I told her that you can’t search for people’s names on Tinder. If you want to know if your boyfriend is on Tinder, you can’t just look him up.”

“Uh-huh,” said Barigazzi.

“And Elena asked me ‘How would you know?’”

“Uh-huh,” said Barigazzi.

“I didn’t know how to answer, so I said ‘Barigazzi told me.’”

“Oh,” replied Barigazzi.

He grabbed his phone, put it in his pocket, and said, “So, if I’m getting it right, to keep your wife from finding out that you’re on Tinder, you told her that I’m on it.”

“You’re the first name that came to mind. I’m sorry. Can you forgive me?”

Barigazzi sighed and said, “Of course.”

“Now,” he added, “excuse me, but I have a deadline tonight, I have a novel to finish. Drinks are on me, don’t worry. Tell your wife I say hello.”

“And you give my best to Marzia,” said Carrocci.

6. I’ll give him an earful today

A few minutes earlier, something happened to Marzia that hadn’t happened to her in a long time.

She had been a barista and bartender for years and yet, a few days ago, she cut her finger while she was slicing a lemon to squeeze on her salad (she liked lemon juice on her salad, not vinegar).

It was a fairly deep cut. She would medicate it and bandage it every day after returning from her morning run. That morning, she realized that she really enjoyed it, that moment when it was just her, her wound, the smell of rubbing alcohol, and her cat Hope (she had a cat called Hope). Marzia realized that morning that it was her favorite moment of the day.

The way she took care of herself every morning seemed precious to her. “This isn’t right,” she thought that day. “I’ll give him an earful today,” she then thought, “that asshole boyfriend of mine.”

And, at that very moment, her phone rang.

She saw Elena Renzi’s name flashing on the screen.

“Elena Renzi?” she thought, “What does she want?”

7. Leaving the therapist’s office

Elena Renzi was leaving her therapist's office when she realized that, in her forty-five-minute session, she hadn't asked the one thing she intended to ask her: why was she still with her dumbass husband? Instead, she talked the entire time about Barigaskij.

"Why am I so concerned with Barigaskij? What does Barigaskij want from me? Why does Barigaskij even matter in my life? And how dare Barigaskij critique my books? You can't search for people on Tinder... Why did we even go out to dinner with Barigaskij? And how..."

She was about to ask herself another question when she remembered that she knew Barigazzi's girlfriend, Marzia. She also had her phone number.

She even liked her, Barigazzi's girlfriend.

Poor thing, she didn't deserve to be with a guy who created unnecessary complications.

She called Marzia, who answered on the fourth ring.

"Hi Marzia, is this a good moment? How are you?" Elena Renzi asked. "I'm okay, a bit nervous because my novel's about to come out. You know how it is, you've seen it with Bernardo. Even though we've been in this business for years, when one of our novels is about to get published, we feel completely exposed. It's an incredibly vulnerable state, we always need other people at our side at a time like this. So, I took advantage of Bernardo's friendship and asked him to read my novel. He was very kind, he told me that he really liked it, but he said there was a mistake. There's a very nice girl in my book, I have to say that she somewhat reminds me of you: she has a boyfriend, but she's not really sure of their relationship, she suspects that he might be cheating on her. So, she joins Tinder to see if her boyfriend is on it, searching for him by first and last name, and she finds him. Bernardo said that you can't do that kind of search on Tinder. So, I thanked him, he was very kind, and I corrected the mistake. Then I thought to myself, 'I had no idea Bernardo was on Tinder.' Later, I thought that maybe that's where the two of you met. You didn't meet on Tinder? Really? Go figure."

As Elena was saying that, she heard the notification of an incoming call. "Hold on a second," she said and glanced at the screen to see who was calling. "No, sorry, the councilman of a small town near Modena is calling me. His name is Jacopo with a 'J.' It's a long story, I'll tell you some other time, I have to pick up the call. Sorry, thank you for chatting, take care."

8. What the hell are you doing there?

Marzia didn't put her phone away. Instead, she opened her email and wrote to Bernardo: "So, you're on Tinder now? What the hell are you doing there?" She wanted to add "asshole," but she refrained.

She told herself that, before insulting him, she would wait for an answer from her asshole boyfriend.

9. Her asshole boyfriend

Bernardo Barigazzi, her asshole boyfriend, was walking up the stairs of his apartment building in Via Irma Bandiera. He was thinking that he used it too often, the excuse of finishing a novel, that it was time to update his repertoire.

Then, when he got home, he stopped recording and listened to the voice memo.

He heard his voice, fairly clearly, saying: “So, if I’m getting it right, to keep your wife from finding out that you’re on Tinder, you told her that I’m on it.”

“You’re the first name that came to mind. I’m sorry. Can you forgive me?” said Carrocci’s voice.

There was a moment of silence, then he said “Of course.”

“Now,” he later added, “excuse me, but I have a deadline tonight, I have a novel to finish. Drinks are on me, don’t worry. Tell your wife I say hello.”

“And you give my best to Marzia,” said Carrocci.

That is when he stopped the recording, saved the file, and said to himself, “Marzia will be so disappointed when she hears this voice memo.”

Then he asked himself what were they doing together, Marzia and he.

What was he doing with a woman who believed the first person who spoke ill of him?

When he was a kid, Barigazzi wondered what was this love thing that everyone talked about, that was the subject of every movie, every song? Love, love, love. Then he wondered if it was sort of like Santa Claus.

Later, as an adult, he read the story about Russia and bananas.

10. The banana story

After World War I, after the revolution, after the civil war, due to a complicated issue regarding international trade, import-export, or something like that, there were no bananas in Russia for

decades. Which meant that there was an entire generation of people born around 1915 who grew up without ever seeing a banana.

The only information those Russian boys and girls had about bananas came from their older brothers and sisters who often talked about them: they were a yellow fruit, very sweet, with a very strange shape (banana-shaped); they were one of the best things those older siblings had ever eaten.

The younger siblings – who, like all younger siblings, lived in a state of conflict with their older brothers and sisters – convinced themselves that their older siblings had invented this delicious fruit, with its strange and unique shape, taste, and color, just to make fun of them.

According to the generation of Russian boys and girls who were around nine or ten years old in 1924, bananas were bullshit.

They were actually such major bullshit, and blatantly so, that bananas had become synonymous with bullshit for the generation that grew up in Russia in those years.

All bullshit was bananas for Russian boys and girls a hundred years ago. And, a hundred years later, under the kitchen light of his apartment building in Via Irma Bandiera 16/3, an astonishing truth manifested itself to Barigazzi: “Love is a banana.”