WHAT WE MAKE OF LOVE

A novel

Massimo Maugeri

To Paul, and to all those who love him and love the Beatles

To the friends of the legendary Rome concert

To all the victims of racism

Translator's Note

This English edition is a translation of the original Italian text, rendered in British English. Accordingly, dates are given according to British convention, with the day preceding the month (for example, 11 May 2023).
Every effort has been made to preserve the author's voice, tone, imagery, narrative rhythm, and cultural references while producing natural and fluent English. Where a literal rendering would have sounded unnatural or misleading to an English-speaking reader, the wording has occasionally been adapted to convey the intended meaning and emotional nuance of the original.
The translation has been carefully reviewed with the valuable assistance of G.J.P., a bilingual native English-speaking translator, whose expertise and suggestions have contributed to the final version.
Our aim throughout has been to remain faithful not only to the words of the original, but above all to its voice and spirit.

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PART I

1
The Legendary Rome Concert

The most beautiful concert I have ever attended took place on a Roman evening more than twenty years ago. At the time, I could not have imagined it, but that event would mark the beginning of a profound change in my life.
It was in that setting that I met Martha, her husband David, and their daughter Jodie. In a sense, it was also the first time I "encountered" Paul; though, to be honest, it was not a meeting in any conventional sense. I did not speak to him, nor did I get close. Yet I had the privilege of being part of the collective entity that shared the unique experience of that concert. In that regard, it is not inaccurate to say that our lives — mine and Paul's — came spatially close, if only for that historic evening of 11 May 2003. Beyond that, like millions of others, I could claim to have known him since I was a boy.
In those days of May 2003, I was temporarily in Rome (at the time I was still living in Sicily) to meet the editor of a publishing house who had expressed interest in what would become my first successful novel. Up to that point, I had a couple of publications to my name, which, to be frank, had received little attention. I had arranged the meeting to coincide roughly with the date of the concert, hoping to achieve the proverbial two birds with one stone. I had booked accommodation on Via Cavour, roughly halfway between Termini station and the Imperial Fora. To enjoy the concert to the fullest, I devised a sort of strategy that, at the time, seemed infallible. I would set off well in advance, just after lunch, and secure a spot right in front of the stage, from which I would not budge until the show ended.
Of course, this meant enduring a long wait, sitting on the ground under the blazing sun, since the concert would not begin before nine in the evening, and the day was quite warm. But it did not matter. From my point of view, I was ready to make sacrifices. After all, this was the first time I would see Paul live; it was only natural that I wanted the closest possible vantage point.
Before setting out, I packed a small rucksack with everything I might need to survive the wait: a foam cushion, a couple of newspapers, a mozzarella and tomato sandwich, a bottle of water, and a good book.
On the street, I found others walking in the same direction, towards the Imperial Fora. It was clear that I was not the only one to have had the brilliant idea of arriving early to secure a good position. I quickened my pace, but when I reached the Colosseum area, I discovered that the spaces closest to the stage were already taken. Several groups of young people had spent the night in sleeping bags, right by the barriers. And at dawn, as I would come to learn, more people had joined them, forming a substantial crowd from the early morning. Once the barriers were opened, a river of people poured towards the stage, and at that point, the game was up.
Nearby, I noticed various coaches parked, ambulances, and more people arriving from Piazza Venezia and the surrounding streets. As I chose the best possible spot, although already quite far from the stage, I had to reassess my sense of sacrifice and come to terms with my own naivety. I should have known: this was no ordinary event.
I settled in a spot I deemed acceptable under the circumstances and began leafing through the newspapers. The entertainment sections provided detailed accounts of the event held the previous evening inside the Flavian Amphitheatre, better known as the Colosseum, attended by only a few hundred privileged spectators. Unlike the free concert that was to take place that evening outside the Colosseum, those three hundred people had been selected through a charity auction, the proceeds of

which were to be partly donated to the Superintendence for Cultural Heritage in Rome and partly to Adopt-a-Minefield, an organisation dedicated to clearing landmines. Those few hundred spectators had experienced a unique and unforgettable event within one of the most important monuments in human history, which, for the occasion, had been transformed into the acoustic stage of one of the greatest songwriters of all time—a living legend whose songs have shaped the history of music.
The articles also reported on the concert I was about to attend. Outside the Colosseum—which this time would serve as a magnificent backdrop—a stage eighteen metres high and covering three hundred and ten square metres had been erected, accompanied by twelve giant screens and sixteen sound bridges. There would be a festive interplay of lights, music, and even fireworks during *Live and Let Die*, with organisers estimating around half a million people filling Via dei Fori Imperiali all the way to Piazza Venezia.
The setlist included over thirty songs, preceded by performances from mimes, extras, and dancers, after which he would appear: Paul McCartney.
I sat down, trying to claim as much space as possible to avoid being crushed like a sardine, and began passing the time by reading the book I had brought with me.

As the crowd grew, and Via dei Fori Imperiali filled with people of all ages and backgrounds, and the epic scale of the event began to take shape, I felt someone tap me on the shoulder. I turned and met the gaze of a smiling woman, quite attractive: light brown eyes that matched her hair, full lips, and a scattering of freckles across her cheekbones. She was wearing a white T-shirt with the opening lines of *Blackbird*. On the back of the shirt—as I would soon notice—was the phrase "Against Racism" in bold, capital letters.

She asked, in halting Italian that I struggled to understand at first, if I could move slightly to make room. She gestured to the man and the young girl beside her. "We're together," she said. I nodded, and abandoning my anti-sardine ambitions, I managed to make just enough space for them to sit down beside me. It was on that occasion, as I have already mentioned, that I made the acquaintance of the Suffenlaw family: mother, father, and daughter. The mother's name was Martha Mengini: born in New York but of Italian descent (her great-grandparents were from Calabria, she explained); a lawyer by profession. At the time of the concert at the Imperial Fora, Martha was about to turn fifty-one the following month, but she looked younger. I was nearly forty-five and already seemed older than her. Her husband Dave, also in excellent shape, was a couple of years older than Martha. And their daughter Jodie had just turned thirteen.
As I have already hinted, I could not have known that, in a certain sense, that encounter would shape my life for the next twenty years.
We began to talk and quickly became familiar. We hit it off immediately, as sometimes happens in festive contexts such as the mega-concert we were about to experience. Since Martha's imperfect Italian was roughly equivalent to my own English, and because we were both eager to improve our language skills, we decided to speak in each other's mother tongue, agreeing to correct one another. This practice would continue years later during our video calls over the internet, though at some point we eventually spoke only in English.
As was inevitable, once the pleasantries were out of the way, our first conversation turned to why we were there, packed together with thousands of others. We began to recount how our interest in Paul—and, naturally, in the Beatles—had begun.
I discovered almost immediately that Martha was no ordinary fan. Not only because of the enthusiasm and empathetic energy with which she recounted her anecdotes, captivating anyone who listened (her husband Dave usually just accompanied her chatter with smiles and nods, speaking very little). Martha was special. She would always be special.

And she would remain so, despite what would happen a couple of decades later.
The first anecdote she told me dated back to the 1960s, in the height of Beatlemania. Along with her mother, a friend, and the friend's mother (only much later would I learn the pivotal role this girl would play in her life), Martha had attended one of the most important live performances in Beatles history: the first of two concerts at Shea Stadium in New York City, on 15 August 1965.
"Wow," I commented. "That was a truly historic concert."
"Yes. And I was the same age as my daughter is now. Thirteen, just like her," she repeated, giving Jodie a gentle pat on the cheek.
"Well, what a coincidence," I said.
As I would soon learn, the words "coincidence" and "chance" did not feature prominently in Martha's vocabulary, nor in her worldview. For Martha Mengini Suffenlaw, many of the events that we hastily label as random or coincidental hide something far more meaningful. She tried to explain this to me right from the start of our first meeting.
"The thing is, we never take the time to really reflect on what happens to us," she said. "We are like scattered shards, and we don't understand that not everything that happens is by chance. If we are lucky and put in a little effort, we can grasp it. And this applies to every aspect of our lives. I am convinced of it."
She went on to illustrate this sort of off-the-cuff philosophy with great emphasis, until at some point she asked what I thought. Was I a believer in chance, or open to the idea of grand designs that hover over our lives?
Meanwhile, the background noise increased. Near the stage, some were improvising choruses, singing Beatles songs accompanied by makeshift acoustic guitars. Others shouted, trying to catch the attention of friends lost in the crowd. Voices overlapped, horns honked, distant sirens wailed.
"I don't know. It depends," I said, hoping to steer clear of philosophical debates that seemed out of place.
"Depends on what?"
"I don't know. On the situation, I suppose. But it's not a topic that particularly excites me."
She nodded, as if to acknowledge my point of view.
She stared at me for a moment longer without saying anything else. I had no idea what she was thinking. Then again, as I would learn, it was not always easy to navigate Martha's mental circuits. To break the awkwardness, I steered the conversation back to the anecdote she had just told, asking if it was true, as I had read in several accounts, that at the famous Shea Stadium concert you could barely hear anything over the deafening screams of the fans.
"What I felt, and not just with my ears," she said, placing a hand on her chest, "I felt so strongly that it has stayed with me my whole life."
I had no difficulty believing her.
Then she returned to her tirade against chance. From her perspective, the fact that her daughter was about to attend a Paul McCartney concert for the first time at the same age she had been at the historic Shea Stadium show… well, that circumstance could not be considered mere coincidence. Nor could it be a coincidence that they were there at that very moment. She explained that they had booked the trip to Italy over a year in advance, unaware of the concert schedule at the Imperial Fora.
"Do you understand?" she said. "We come on holiday to Italy for the first time, and… what happens on the very days we're in Rome?"
"There's a Paul concert."
"Exactly."
"And that's not a coincidence."

“No, it isn’t.”
“Well, if it’s not a coincidence, what is it?”
She narrowed her eyes in an expression so sweet that I still remember it and said: “Magic.”
I told her *magic* was a rather overused, almost worn-out word—much like the word *love* and a few others. She shrugged, repeated the word *magic*, and, almost playfully, intertwined her fingers and held them briefly to her chest. Meanwhile, I noticed that her husband Dave had begun to laugh heartily, and I started to suspect they had conspired to tease me, perhaps to while away the time in good spirits before the concert began.
“You’re done for,” Dave said in English, noticing my puzzled look. “It’s just started, you know…”
In fact, we were only at the beginning. After the Shea Stadium anecdote, Martha began to bombard me—with her halting Italian interspersed with English—with a series of stories intended to highlight the magical dimension of our lives. And although she did not fully convince me, I must admit she somehow charmed me. There was magic, yes… but not so much in what she said. The magic lay in the way she engaged with words, facial expression, gestures, and the subtle shifts of tone in her voice. Listening to her speak was enchanting, and at times, amusing. Because Martha Mengini Suffenlaw also had a playful, self-deprecating side; an awareness that she sometimes tended toward exaggeration (not to say over-excitement). During our future video chats, for example, in moments of heightened verbal excitement about Paul, it was not unusual for her to suddenly pause and declare that she was experiencing full-blown “McCartney mania” (a term she had coined herself).
At that point, we would begin to laugh together.

In the time leading up to the start of the concert, Martha told me a little about their story. At the same time (David had been right when he said we were only just getting started), she put me through a sort of improvised quiz, which, as she later admitted, was meant to test my knowledge of Beatles-related matters. So, after revealing that she and Dave had met at another Paul McCartney-related event, she asked me to guess which occasion she was referring to.
“How should I know?” I said. “How could I possibly know?”
“Come on, give it a try. Just to pass the time and have a bit of fun.”
“Well, another concert, I suppose…”
“Exactly,” she said. “But that’s too easy. Try to be more specific. Which concert? In which city? In which year?”
I turned to her husband, who raised his arms as if to say he wasn’t responsible for this interrogation. Or perhaps that he wasn’t authorised to give me any hints.
“I don’t know. I give up,” I said.
“Come on…” Martha insisted, wrapping me in her smile. “Try.”
I decided to play along and guessed that the city in question had to be New York and the venue the Madison Square Garden. I said it only because I knew Martha was from New York City and the Madison Square Garden was the only New York venue I knew that hosted concerts, aside from Central Park. In any case, I got that right. I got the year wrong, though. Considering that their daughter was thirteen, I quickly calculated a date a couple of years before her birth and said: 1988.
The concert in question, however, was actually on 24 May 1976: one of Paul’s historic shows with the Wings.
“I was twenty-four,” she told me. “And that concert was truly unforgettable.”
I thought the acoustics must have been far better than those at Shea Stadium, but I kept that to myself.