

LAURA

MARZI

# CHRISTMAS *STOCKINGS*

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The first time I saw him was at a political philosophy seminar, he was invited as a visiting professor. I was slightly late so I passed him discreetly while he had already started his lesson. I remember noticing his slender but muscular forearm - he had pulled up his shirt and sweater and passing by him I glimpsed his slightly tanned, blonde hair. After the class we all went out together for pizza. Professor Giossi insisted that I joined that group of about ten people, all of them intent on gaining the attention of Bruno Meriardi who that evening did nothing but look at me, as if hypnotized.

When we left the restaurant, he approached me, taking advantage of a moment when I was walking alone on the sidewalk.

"My colleague told me that you are a very good student, a promise of political philosophy".

"I do not trust the promises of the destiny, it doesn't always keep them".

"Make your own destiny, then, be true to yourself."

I smiled at him. His confidence made me feel at ease.

"I would like to take you out for lunch tomorrow, before I leave for Catania".

"Sounds good"

"Is there anywhere you would like to go, a place where your peers can't afford to take you?".

"Of course, more than one."

"Good, I see that you are really a prepared girl. See you tomorrow. This is my phone number, I'm expecting your call around 12. Make a reservation wherever you want."

**Bruno was giving me instructions, it was the best thing he could do since I was perfect at carrying them out. Over time I understood that imparting them was his greatest talent.**

For our first date I wore one of the dresses that my mother bought for me without even letting me try them on, sometimes she showed them to me when she was back home, taking them out of one of the many shopping bags, hastily, as if I wasn't able to understand the beauty, not even seeing them. She often put them in my closet without telling me she bought them. The green silk shantung pants I chose for that lunch were among the purchases that I didn't deserve to look at. She wouldn't have tolerated my disinterest and the expression of my annoyance at having used me to satisfy her need: spending my father's money. Over it I wore a bodysuit that looked like a blouse, combining elegance with a collegiate sensuality that seemed perfect for the occasion.

When I saw him in front of the restaurant entrance, I was struck by his elegance. He was thin and the trousers, despite the belt, had a very slight defect in the back, typical of when already small and skinny bottoms begin to age and can't find any way to fill that band of fabric between the buttocks and the waist. That detail struck me, but Bruno Meriardi was completely unaware of any of his limitations. He looked at me with his blue eyes, slightly sunken under a prominent forehead, with a malice almost as deep as his self-esteem. And I smiled at him again.

While we were having lunch I began to stare at his newly exposed forearm, he noticed it and began not to hide his glances at my breasts, accompanying them with a mischievous expression. He had a half-blond, half-white beard, small teeth, and he was almost twenty-eight years older than me. When I got up to go to the bathroom for the third time, almost just to see if he would stare at me like again - from my ass to my face and not the other way around - he got up with me. He walked behind me, so close that every now and then he brushed against me and when it happened I felt jolts of desire. He entered the lady room with me, then the bathroom. He put both hands on the door and cornered me in, between his arms, his body and the toilet.

"The first time I won't fuck you in a bathroom, we'll have time for that."

He took my short hair in his hands and looked into my eyes.

"I've always preferred long hair but I like yours a lot."

"Why?" I asked in a small voice, defeated.

"Because they are real."

He smiled at me and left the bathroom, without the slightest hesitation in the face of the possibility that there might be women outside, who might ask him to account for his presence there, perhaps even raising their voices.

I lowered my trousers and, careful not to touch the toilet seat, I peed while staring at the wall and at the same time at my future which for the first time in a long time seemed like an open road in front of me again, a road to travel with Bruno Meriardi.

We started dating, he came to Turin three more times, always during the weekend, before he asked me to move in with him in Catania.

I did.

I was studying all day and when I wasn't feeling like staying alone at home, I was going to university with Bruno, but as soon as we arrived I locked myself in his study and didn't come out until we had to get home. He used to bring me food, a piece of rotisserie or a white iris.

I was ashamed. The secretaries, her colleagues, her friends - they all were trying to look at me with sympathy and in part they succeeded, but there was always a part of dismay which was the sign of the goodness of their hearts.

In order not to judge me as a careerist and their friend as a profiteer, they suspended judgment and for this reason every now and then - when they weren't smiling or joking with Bruno - they remained for a few seconds with their eyes wide open, staring at us.

**I had started dressing like a very elegant lady, with strictly black capes, cloth pants, never jeans but always flat shoes. I was growing my hair and had a long bob, perfectly suited to my new identity as a lady.**

My mother told me that she had tried to convince my father to welcome me and Bruno for Christmas, with no success. I could have gone alone, this was the compromise that was offered to me and which I obviously couldn't accept: my father

paid the tuition for that last year of my university, but Bruno was the one who was supporting me financially. To cheer me up Bruno asked me to go to Milano with him for a conference. We would stay in a gorgeous hotel and I would walk in the city decorated for Christmas.

We arrived at the Straf around 7pm, the two young men at the reception didn't seem to notice the age difference between us, while I noticed their fluency or perhaps it was just a good dose of professionalism and getting used to the customers' oddities. That welcome put me in a good mood and I was thrilled at the sight of the liquorice wheels in a glass bowl next to the elevator. They are my favorite candy.

I asked Bruno what I should wear for the dinner with his colleague - a professor at the Statale University - and his wife: I showed him two different dresses suited for an adult woman. One green with flowers and another black. He commented on both with great enthusiasm, but I discarded the colored one: it was somehow eccentric and it would have increased the feeling of inadequacy that haunted me every time I found myself in this kind of situation.

In the elevator I glanced at myself in the mirror only briefly while Bruno looked longer at the bags under his eyes that had never left him since the summer ended. As he did so he looked at me, but not to ask me to console him, as if to challenge me, really curious to see what I would say to him, if I would pretend nothing had happened or try to console him. Then he burst out laughing.

"Do you think I've become campy?"

No, I didn't believe he had become homosexual at all, but I thought that perhaps that encounter made him nervous too, even if not for the same reasons as it was making me nervous. That evening Bruno wanted to make a good impression because his dream had always been to move to the north and that dinner had to be used to test the water, collect information and above all win the sympathy of that smart but not brilliant colleague, a full professor, who would not face any risk in helping him. Bruno's job was just to make him want it.

When they greeted us the husband appeared particularly welcoming as he was certainly aware of the fact that the Sicilian was having sex with a student. His wife did not seem upset but annoyed, she put on a sardonic grin which she carried throughout the evening.

"Ludovica, I know that you are always studying and profitably. What career would you like to pursue after university?" the man asked me at a certain point. It was a normal question, but I didn't know if I was supposed to answer like I was talking to a friend or to a professor. I opted for the latter.

"I would like to get a PhD and then work for the IOM. It is the international organization for migration, an agency of the United Nations."

"You have pretty clear ideas, good! If I may ask: where does this desire come from?"

Bruno was looking at me with pride, as my father would have done – my father who had been unaware of my plans for the future for some time.

"I believe that migrations - in addition to being one of the most complex and urgent geopolitical issues - are a development opportunity especially for Italy which is starting to experience a serious demographic decline. With thoughtful projects we could begin to demonstrate the evidence that countries need migrants, especially country like Italy that have such high public costs due to our health and social security system..."

"Oh my God, you're so serious!". Unlike her husband and Bruno who felt reassured every time I demonstrated my preparation in public, the wife looked at me with contempt.

"At your age you should also think at least a little about holidays and fashion. To the boys, that's what you should be thinking about: boys." And as she said it she stared at Bruno, who in turn was challenging her provocative eyes, perfectly decorated with eyeliner.

"Ludovica can think whatever she wants," he replied to her with a satisfied smile.

I sensed something between them that hadn't existed between me and Bruno for a while, or rather that had only existed at the beginning of our relationship when he came to visit me in Turin and ours seemed like a clandestine affair that was based only on attraction. Between the two there was sexual tension. I became convinced that they had fucked in the past and dinner suddenly became interesting. I began to stare at that woman's husband, his grizzled mustache, just at the edge of his lip, carefully trimmed every morning, his belly swollen like someone who eats too much and doesn't care. I felt disgust for him and an alternation of compassion and anger for her who looked at Bruno and wanted him, while Bruno would never have given up my twenty-three-year-old body to go back to

her. Feeling immersed in the muck of adult life gave me a sense of liberation: I could stop trying to make amends for my firm skin, for being makeup-free and flawless.

**I looked at Bruno and mine wasn't one of the usual girlish looks, the ones he was used to. As always he wasn't scared, but he was surprised.**

Back in our hotel room he didn't try to make love to me. He was too smart stupid to ignore that such a move could have led me to ask questions and from those a disharmony would have arisen. Any change in vibes from the usual one threw him into despair, he much preferred to pretend that the problems didn't exist, to continue to smile and do so, when unavoidable, until the moment before the outbreak of an argument. I watched the film Elizabeth on TV. In Catania we never turned on the television, it was a habit that Bruno hated, he thought it would have affected our intelligence. Also for this reason, because it resembled a transgression, I loved staying in that comfortable bed, full of pillows, enjoying the story of a girl who killed her enemies to save her life.

In the morning Bruno went to the conference early and I had breakfast alone, to celebrate that sense of freedom that being in Milan gave me - close to, but not at home. I ate a sandwich with ham instead of the usual cereals. At the table next to mine were two men: they were on a business meeting, they had briefcases and together they were looking at documents and making comments. One must have been just over forty years old and the other not yet thirty. I usually avoided indulging the gazes of men younger than Bruno, it was like admitting to the game someone who would surely win, with whom there could be no fair competition. The night before, however, I had understood that my attempt to be innocent at all costs or to try to become innocent by mortifying myself with high-necked clothes and sober colors was ridiculous. I was compromised, I was living with a university professor of political theory and I was about to graduate in a related subject and my father was right: Bruno was with me only because I was young. I might as well really be.

I looked back at that young man and when he and his colleague got up to leave I smiled back. I waited a little longer, had another coffee and then went out. I always loved the

days before Christmas. Just outside the Straf you could see the wonderful cathedral, and then the square, the Gallery. By public transport I went to the Sormani library, it was the only place in Milan that I knew well and where I knew I could warm up a bit. Then I decided to buy something for myself: I chose a pair of colored tights, at first they seemed girlish to me, but in reality they were simply suitable for my age. I put them on immediately, in the store, and went back to the hotel almost skipping, happy with my happy legs.

At the front desk that young man I had seen at breakfast was asking for information on the hotel spa. When he saw me enter, he hastily thanked and stood next to me while I was waiting for the elevator. I turned my face slightly to smile at him. Without looking at me he stared happily at the doors as they opened.

"Do you want to go out with me tonight?" he asked me as soon as the doors closed.

"I cannot".

"I supposed".

I nodded.

"Do you want to come to the room with me now?" I replied to him.

I didn't know any middle ground between innocence and ruthlessness, I hadn't had the opportunity to learn it.

Without saying anything he followed me into the corridor with all the brass doors on the left, until I opened the one to our room, mine and Bruno's.

In the uncertain darkness, with only the street light coming through the window, while the door was still closing behind us, he lowered my tights and his jeans and entered me. He remained there for a few minutes, moving imperceptibly. He had rested his face on my shoulder, so that by turning my head I could touch his cheek with kisses. When he left I remained stuck to the wall a little longer, with my palms open against the wall.

**In that hotel there was the most beautiful shower in the world. I entrusted myself to it to wash away all that life that I felt on me and that didn't suit mine.**



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