

# INTERRAIL

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# INTERRAIL

ALESSANDRO GALLENZI



ALMA BOOKS

*For my family, who were right*

*How can you condemn a man who found himself equipped with a heart vigorous enough to love all the lovable women in the world?... By what unjust and bizarre whim would I restrict a heart such as mine within the narrow bourns of a single society?*

Xavier de Maistre

DON GIOVANNI:

*È tutto amore!  
Chi a una sola è fedele  
verso l'altre è crudele, io che in me sento  
sì esteso sentimento,  
vo' bene a tutte quante:  
le donne poi che calcolar non sanno,  
il mio buon natural chiamano inganno.*



## *Rome, Bologna, Munich*

THERE'S NOTHING TRUER and more sinister than what Pascal once wrote: that if Cleopatra's nose had been a quarter of an inch shorter, the entire face of the earth would have been changed. That Saturday morning, as Francesco was climbing off the train at Munich Central Station, one of the three old spinsters who are said to weave our destinies took her eyes off the spindle for a moment, and the thread she was holding in her hands got all tangled up. This kind of accident, though not uncommon in a man's life, can drive people down uncharted and unpredictable paths.

The day had promised to be beautiful. A ray of light had filtered through the blinds of Francesco's coach, jogging him awake. With somnolent eyes he had opened the doors of his compartment and peeked out into the corridor: through the windows, snapshots of the Alps were flickering by, bathed in the haze of sunrise. As he gazed out, he remembered his solitary departure from Stazione Termini, the girl from Berlin he

had met and played chess with on the train to Bologna, and his spectral night tour of that city's deserted centre before boarding the 00.47 overnight *Espresso* to Munich. Then the image of his father giving farewell blessings, in a sauce-stained vest and unzipped shorts, strayed into his thoughts.

"If you wanna go on this Inter-Ray, then it's fine by me," the old man had said. "You've bought the ticket with your own money, so good luck. But then don't come knocking on this door for help if something goes wrong. Do you understand?" And to press the point, he had banged the door in his son's face.

Soon other passengers began to rouse themselves. Outside, as the sun ploughed across the sky, the fields revealed herds of sheep and cattle, with trees and little wooden chalets clinging to the mountainsides above, while inside people were waking up and shambling into the corridors to stretch their limbs or smoke their first cigarettes of the day. At last the wheels started to screech as the train pulled into the Hauptbahnhof. Passengers got out of their compartments dragging heavy suitcases, outsize cardboard boxes, surfboards and even in one case what looked like a ping-pong table. Francesco queued in the corridor with his small Invicta shoulder bag containing all he needed: a pair of jeans, spare shirts and underwear, a jumper, a map of Europe, a notepad, a pen and two books.

It was just at this point that the Fatal Sister lost her thread.

As he was putting his foot forward to climb out of the train, the woman behind him, impatient to get off, gave him an inadvertent push, and he missed the footboard and landed on the platform face first. For one long moment, all was dark. When he came to, a knot of curious onlookers had gathered around

him. He sat up and then stood, signalling he was all right, though his nose was bleeding and he felt as if it was on fire, and there was blood in his mouth. As the passengers dispersed and flowed towards the exit, someone tapped him on the shoulder. Francesco turned and, through a cloud of cigarette smoke, saw a man of about forty, wearing a beige cotton suit and a loose white shirt unbuttoned at the top. He had a most extraordinary face, with a hooked nose of the Mediterranean variety, slanting eyes, a large mouth and a protruding chin.

“*Tutto a posto?*” he asked, taking another puff on his cigarette. “You all right?”

“Sì.”

“Take this,” the stranger said, pulling a handkerchief out of his pocket.

“Cheers.”

Francesco dabbed his nose and his inside lip, then looked at the red blotches of blood on his hands and on his T-shirt.

The man patted him on the shoulder and said: “You’ll survive. Come on, let me get you a cappuccino and half a pint of blood.”

They sat at a table of a coffee shop nearby. The man waved at the waitress and ordered cappuccinos, mineral water and croissants. Then he took a small silver case out of his breast pocket and offered Francesco a cigarette.

“Thanks,” Francesco said, picking one and putting it in his mouth.

The stranger gave him a light from his own cigarette, then said, after taking a long drag: “So, what are you up to in Munich?”

“InterRailing.”

“On your own?”

He shrugged. “A friend of mine – Leonardo – bailed out on me at the last minute. Says he’s too busy, trying to write a novel. He decided to stay with his mummy.”

“Ha! You been travelling long?”

“Not really. I left yesterday.”

“Where from?”

“Rome.”

“Rome? That’s where I’ve just come from. Where are you staying?”

“Don’t know. Some youth hostel, I guess.”

“Well, if you want to get changed or take a nap, or even stay for the night, I’ve got a room booked in a place round the corner.”

Francesco didn’t say anything.

“Don’t worry,” the man added with a smile, stubbing out his cigarette with his foot, “I’m not suggesting we play naked Twister in the shower.”

The waitress brought the order and the bill, which the stranger insisted on settling.

“You ever been to Munich?”

Francesco shook his head. “I’ve never been abroad, actually.” He took a last puff and put out his cigarette in the ashtray. “Where are you from?”

“Me? I’m from Corsica. From Ajaccio. My name’s Pierre, by the way, Pierre Cordier.”

“I’m Francesco.” And they shook hands.

Once they were out of the station, Francesco asked Pierre if he could recommend any places to visit.

“There’s loads. I tell you what: if you give me half an hour to check in and freshen up a bit, we can mosey around Munich together for a while. How’s that?”

“Sounds good.”

It was too early to check in, so Pierre left his luggage with hotel reception and went back outside to where Francesco was waiting. They headed towards the city centre in an almost straight line, until they reached a square where a large crowd of people was milling about, gazing up at the tower of a sturdy neo-Gothic building. Pierre explained that three times a day – at eleven, twelve and five – the bells of the tower chimed the hours, accompanied by a carillon and clock with moving statuettes. Since it was only a few minutes to eleven, they decided to stay, and watched the carousel of dancing figures right up to the third cock-a-doodle-do of the gold-plated cockerel. Then they followed a noisy group of Italian tourists to a smaller square, which was even more packed. On all sides there were stalls with every kind of food, and people sitting on long wooden benches drinking from massive jugs. At the centre of the square there was a kind of maypole, decorated with the emblems and flags of Bavaria.

“Fancy a beer?” Francesco ventured, inspired by the joviality of the place.

“Sure. And some grub. That little restaurant over there looks all right.”

Pierre chose an empty table and ordered drinks.

The beers were brought over. Francesco took a sip and asked, wiping froth from his lips with the back of his hand, “So what kind of job do you do?”

“What kind of job do I do? Well” – Pierre took some time over this – “you could say I’m a jack of all trades. But mostly I am a poet.”

“A poet?”

“Yeah. I deal in finance. And money is a kind of poetry.”

Francesco laughed.

“Although some people claim that finance is the supreme form of institutionalized theft,” Pierre added, almost as an afterthought.

“Oh yeah? Why’s that?”

“Why? Because they say the capital used to produce profits should belong to the exploited labourers. But then again, there are two kinds of people in the world: those who pull the cart and those who sit in it.” He lit up and added: “It’s money that makes the world go round and stops society from falling to pieces. It’s always been like that – history began not with the taming of fire or the invention of the wheel, but when the first coin was minted.” He took a longer drag of his cigarette and exhaled a large cloud of smoke, then emptied his glass. “You should read *Das Kapital* – it’s every bit as entertaining as *La Gazzetta dello Sport*.”

Food was ordered and delivered to the table, followed by another round of drinks. Once they’d eaten and drunk their beers, two more frothy jugs landed in front of them. The conversation took on a philosophical turn. Pierre began to talk about saints who had fled to the desert, hermits in the mountains, Diogenes and other ancient thinkers who renounced all social life in order to embrace poverty and personal freedom. He explained that all great men had despised money and the rules and constraints imposed by society, which he compared to a big chicken run.

“Behold the fowls in the air,” he continued in a deeper tone, with a slight slur, widening his eyes for effect, “for they sow not, neither do they reap nor gather into barns – yet your heavenly

Father feedeth them.’ You know who said that? Long hair, goatee beard, walked on water?...”

“So we should all flee to the desert?” asked Francesco, deadpan.

“I wish we could, but life’s a bitch. Money can give you freedom, but it can make you a prisoner too.”

When the bill arrived, Pierre again insisted on settling it. There was a problem, however: none of his credit cards seemed to be working, and he didn’t have enough cash on him. Francesco offered to pay up with some marks he had exchanged before leaving, but Pierre said:

“No, I’ll take this. You’re my guest. Wait here.”

Banks, however, were closed for the weekend, and the two cashpoints nearby wouldn’t let him get any money out, so he returned to the bistro mumbling swear words to himself, and emptied his pockets onto the table with a mock-thespian gesture, producing just under eighteen marks in total. Francesco looked up at him and said:

“I think I’ll have to help you shore up society today.”

After another couple of beers in the square courtesy of Francesco, they worked their way back down Kaufingerstraße and stopped to see the Frauenkirche from the outside and, to get some cool air, went inside the Michaelskirche. Then they headed north and out of the city centre, towards the Englischer Garten.

“I used to go there when I was a horny young devil like you,” Pierre said, “to do a bit of bird-watching near the nudists’ area.”

“The nudists’ area?”

“There’s some Teutons who like to sunbathe *au naturel*,” Pierre said. “What’s that face? You don’t believe me? I’ll take you there and show you an eyeful of apples and pears

– and bananas too, if that’s what takes your fancy.” He gave a wink and grinned. “I’ll tell you a story. Once I went there in the morning with a German friend of mine. We were students then – full of pranks. We had binoculars and a little megaphone, one of those we used for our protest marches. There was this couple, about a hundred and twenty years old, who’d arrived before everyone else and stripped down to their bones – *uno spettacolo magnifico*. The man had a barrelful of guts drooping out, chicken legs and a tuft of hair clinging to his head. The woman was all droopy and wrinkly and jellylike: she looked like W.H. Auden’s balls. Anyway, the man chooses a spot, spreads his towel out on the grass and puts down his picnic basket... The old girl picks up an apple from the basket and hands it to him. He’s about to take a bite when my friend yells into the megaphone in German: ‘It is heb-so-lute-ly *verboten* to eat in ze park!’” Pierre scratched his nose and suppressed a laugh. “Boy, you should have seen their faces. I nearly pissed myself, and the old man almost swallowed his dentures. The lady jumps up, looks around and starts flapping her arms about. Then my friend shouts again: ‘It is heb-so-lute-ly *ver-bo-ten*...’ – so they clear out without waiting to think twice...”

“Adam and Eve’s Expulsion from the English Gardens,” was Francesco’s comment. He clapped his hands. “Shall we check out what ales they brew in the Earthly Paradise?”

After a long walk in the park, three more beers, a few cigarettes and a piss behind a tree near the Chinese Tower, they headed back towards the city centre.

“I need a shower,” announced Pierre, definitely slurring now. Then he added, waving down a taxi: “Let’s go back to the hotel.”

“I have no money,” Francesco pointed out.

“Jump in,” Pierre said, and he opened the door.

“I have no money,” Francesco whispered again, getting into the taxi. “How are we gonna pay?”

The driver, a Turkish man with silver-rimmed sunglasses, a golden tooth and formidable moustaches, asked where they were going.

“*Zoom Floock’afen, veea ’Otel Europa, beetteh,*” Pierre said, closing the door behind.

“*Flughafen?* The airport?” thought Francesco, and darted an interrogative look at his companion, who reached out and gave his arm a furtive squeeze.

There was traffic, and the meter kept clicking away. Francesco broke out in a nervous sweat. Ten minutes later they stopped in front of a large hotel, not the one where Pierre had left his bags in the morning.

“*Un Moment, beetteh, veer ’ollen oonserr Ghebeck,*” Pierre told the driver, as they got out of the taxi.

They entered the hotel, walked past a smiling receptionist and straight to the lifts, got to the first level underground, crossed to the far end of the car park to an emergency staircase and came out at the back of the building, onto a busy street.

“Now run,” Pierre said. “Some taxi drivers know the trick. They’ve smartened up.”

Not long afterwards they were laughing and drinking beer in Pierre’s hotel room. They slept for around two hours, took showers, went outside again and spent the rest of the afternoon crawling from one *Biergarten* to the other, until the additional money Francesco had exchanged near the station at rip-off rates was reduced to a bunch of *Pfennig* coins.

“I’ve drunk too much,” Francesco said, light-headed.

“You’re right – I think we should eat something.”

They sat at an alfresco Italian restaurant, went through a three-course meal, ordered champagne and the most elaborate dessert on the menu and did another runner. Breathless, they crouched down under a tree on the edge of the Theresienwiese and lit up a cigarette, bursting out into fits of giggles from time to time.

The sun was now setting, and their shoulders were hunched under the weight of the long, hot day. Francesco suggested they return to the hotel, and reminded Pierre he had hardly slept the night before.

“You what?” said Pierre. “We have a whole night ahead of us.”

“And no money.”

“I’ve got credit cards.”

“Which don’t work. How are we going to pay the hotel bill? We’ve drunk the minibar dry. I don’t know if I’ve got enough cash.”

“We don’t need money. We are intelligent animals.”

“Even intelligent animals need money.”

“You’re wrong.” And he flicked the stub of his cigarette into the street.

Pierre’s grey eyes were watching two parallel processions of ants moving in opposite directions by the kerb. It wasn’t clear where they were coming from or where they were going, but at one point of the long line the activity was frenzied. The ants were bearing along a dead insect – a black beetle. Francesco admired the intensity, the determination, the spirit of sacrifice shown by those foraging little creatures, which for some reason reminded him of the Candle Race at Gubbio he had seen the

previous year. The beetle seemed to be floating along on a black tide, and its movement was hardly perceptible. Pierre bent forward, stretched his arm and picked up the dead insect. After examining it for a short while, he wrapped it in a piece of paper and slipped it into his pocket.

“Intelligent animals don’t pay: they only take or are given. Noodleheads pay.”

“And you’re either crazy or drunk,” Francesco said with a smile. “Or both.” He lay on the grass and looked at the clear sky, where the first stars were visible. Once more, the scruffy figure of his father tried to break into his thoughts, but he chased it away, along with other unpleasant memories of his life back at home. He had moved out of his parents’ flat the year before, and although he had managed to get by without their help, life on his own had been tough. He had a university scholarship, but the textbooks for his language courses were expensive, and he had had to work in the evenings and on weekends, teaching English to the offspring of wealthy shop owners and small-time industrialists or, even worse, waiting tables and washing the grease off dishes in grubby local restaurants run by despotic managers. Now in two days he had spent almost half of the money he had saved for his journey, and though his head was spinning and his throat was burning, he was happy and free, and felt he could travel and conquer the world.

The night felt like it would last for ever, and the following day they woke up just before noon. They showered and went downstairs with their bags.

“Are you checking out, sir?” said the blonde girl at the reception, baring pink gums and equine teeth.

“Well, actually we have a big problem,” Pierre said with an annoyed expression. “I’d like to speak to the manager of this establishment.”

The girl lost her smile: in fact, it was as if all her teeth had fallen out.

“What is the problem, sir? Maybe you could talk to me?”

“I don’t think so. I want to speak to the manager.”

“Let me see if the assistant manager is in.”

“Perhaps I didn’t make myself clear,” Pierre said in a dry tone, raising his voice. “This is not a matter that can be discussed with an assistant’s assistant or an assistant or an assistant manager.” The girl flushed red. She was alone at the reception desk, there were other people waiting to be served behind Pierre and Francesco, and the phone had started ringing.

“*Einen Moment, bitte*,” she said, and slipped out through a door that opened behind her. An urgent confabulation in German was heard, a few stifled shrieks and exclamations, followed by the rustling of papers, tapping of keyboards and interrogation of telephones. After a while, the receptionist re-emerged from the room with a taut face and, telling Pierre “the manager will be with you in a minute”, she turned to attend to the other guests.

Several anxious moments passed. Francesco expected a Bavarian colossus to appear from behind the door, a giant of six foot five with a double chin and a long fluffy beard. Instead, out of the room came a sort of gnome – not one of those wicked little trolls you find in scary tales, but a kindly sprite with the most peaceable expression in the world – a tiny shrimp just about five foot tall, and as thin as a stick insect. He did have a beard, yes, but it was just a sparse goatee – and that was all there was to him.

Pierre took less than a second to size him up, and said: "You're the boss?"

The other did not seem put off by the curt tone or the stare of his interlocutor. "Yes, sir, what can I do for you?"

"This place is filthy, Mr Mansoor," continued Pierre, whose beady grey eyes had spotted the manager's name tag on his uniform.

"Filthy? I can't see any rubbish lying around," tried to joke the manager. He cleared his throat and added: "All the rooms are thoroughly cleaned and dusted on a daily basis."

"A-ha. When is the last time the hygiene inspector called in?"

The manager's right eyelid twitched twice.

"The hygiene inspector? Why? ... I can check ... I can check now, if you wish." He seized the telephone and dialled an internal number. There followed a brief conversation in German. "My colleague is just looking into this."

"You're telling me that you, the hotel manager, don't know when the hygiene inspector last came round? It's unheard of. Is this a four-star hotel or some cheap, run-down joint?"

These last remarks rattled the manager's self-control. It was his good luck that, just before a sharp reply could leave his lips, the telephone rang once more. On the manager's face reappeared the expression of a benevolent gnome.

"My colleague is just bringing the certificate downstairs, all right?" he said. "But you haven't told me what the problem is, sir ..."

"The problem, Mr Mansoor," said Pierre through his teeth, nodding his head, "is that this morning, when we woke up, we discovered that we were not alone in our room."

"Not alone?"

“That’s right. We had company.”

At these words, the elderly American couple who were being served by the girl, and another small group of Japanese guests sitting in the foyer, pricked up their ears.

“I beg your pardon?” the manager stammered out.

“How would you feel if you were paying over two hundred marks a night for a room and found a cockroach crawling around in your bed, uh?” And, at that, he pulled from his pocket the insect he’d picked up off the street the night before and placed it on the counter. “Keep it and frame it: it belongs to your clean-and-dusted organization. *Oonkeziefer*. Vermin. *Capisce?*” He brought the index fingers of both his hands up to his temples and started to waggle them up and down, mimicking the antennae of a gigantic Kafkaesque insect.

There was pandemonium. The receptionist developed an immediate interest in the first guest register she could lay her hands on. The manager muttered an unintelligible curse, the American woman nudged her husband and gave him a meaningful glance, while the Japanese group began to cluck away to each other.

Meanwhile, a young man came out from the room behind the counter. To judge from his face, he was the manager’s younger brother. He was the “colleague” who was supposed to bring the certificate of hygiene. However, in his haste he had carried with him an entire musty old box file that, when laid on the counter, gave off a stench of cellar.

“You sure there are no cockroaches in there too?” Pierre said with a smirk.

With all eyes trained on him, Mansoor riffled through the contents of the box file, but he couldn’t even find an out-of-date

certificate, only invoices, packing lists, receipts and other bumb of no relevance.

“I’m sorry,” said Pierre after a while, “but we have a train to catch in half an hour. Will you agree that we should not pay for the room and receive some sort of compensation?”

“Of course... I’m awfully sorry,” said the manager, who now seemed to have spied an easy way of slipping out of this embarrassment. “We’ll take care of the bill. Actually, let me give you some complimentary vouchers, which you can use at one of our hotels in Paris or London.”

“Thanks very much, Mr Mansoor...”

And a few moments later they swept out of the sliding doors of the hotel and rushed to the station.

Pierre was headed to Cologne, and there was a train leaving in less than ten minutes. They managed to get on just before the doors were closed.

Their journey was long but enjoyable. With his usual cool and what seemed to be a sort of sixth sense, Pierre disappeared into another compartment when the ticket inspector came along, re-emerging the instant the coast was clear.

“Only noodleheads pay in Germany,” he commented, taking his seat again.

They kept re-enacting the scene in the hotel: the flabbergasted expression of the receptionist, the manager’s face when he saw the dead beetle, the long swinging antennae – and Pierre was so good at taking off people’s voices and mannerisms that Francesco couldn’t stop laughing.

“So, what’s your next destination?” asked Pierre when they had been travelling for more than an hour.

“I don’t know. Just going north at the moment.”

“Why don’t you stay at my place for a night? My wife won’t mind. We’ve got a small apartment for guests, and we are having a party tonight.”

“If you’re sure it’s no bother...”

They connected at Mannheim, and at around five in the afternoon their train started to weave its way into Cologne station. They jumped on a tram, and after half an hour or so arrived at a splendid villa with a view onto the Rhine, surrounded by lawns and trees and with a paved driveway. At the end of it, there was a red convertible Maserati Biturbo. They were welcomed at the front gate by a Maremma sheepdog. After being fussed over by Pierre, the dog began sniffing at Francesco and licking his hands.

“He likes you,” Pierre said. “Wait here, I’ll go and get the keys for your apartment.”

He came back soon after and escorted Francesco to an extension at the back of the villa.

“Make yourself at home. Porn movies are in the cabinet under the TV. Just try not to be messy, OK?”

“Ha, ha, ha.”

“Look, I’ve got to go and help my wife Vanessa set up the room for tonight’s private viewing at the gallery. She was expecting me there an hour ago. Can you come, say, around seven-thirty for eight? There’ll be plenty of booze and muff. Here’s the address.” He scribbled a note on a scrap of paper. “And here’s a map of Cologne. That’s where we are, Rodenkirchen, and the gallery’s around here.” He made a small circle at the junction of two streets. “If you want to have a look at the cathedral first, you can just walk from there: it takes around twenty minutes. All right? See ya.” He headed back to the driveway, with the dog leaping around him as he shouted, “Attaboy, Jester, attaboy!”

 2 *Cologne*

FRANCESCO LOOKED ROUND: it was a lovely studio apartment – much bigger, in fact, than his own flat or the one where he had lived with his parents and his older sister Marcella until the previous year. There were maps and paintings hanging on the walls, including a red Che Guevara print which looked out of place, potted plants and statues, and shelves sagging with art books and exhibition catalogues. At the far end of the room there was an easel with a blank canvas on it. An illustrated volume was spread open on a low wooden table, next to a telephone. Francesco looked at the cover, which said *Paintings by Vanessa Schreiber, 1985–90*. In the inside flap, a photograph revealed the author as a thirty-something Valkyrian beauty, while a short biography described her as the leader of the “Oneiric” movement, a radical school of painting that proclaimed its allegiance to far-left political ideologies. She appeared to have exhibited in the most prestigious art galleries across the world, and two New York museums had acquired some of her works for their

permanent collections. Buried under the book, there was a slim pamphlet in German entitled *Kunst und Revolution*, printed in 1983. This must have been Vanessa's Marxist contribution to the theory of art.

Francesco took another look at the paintings in the room, and realized that most of them were Vanessa's work. He couldn't say he liked them or was impressed by them. No doubt some connoisseurs regarded them as sophisticated pieces of abstract art – no doubt someone somewhere would have been prepared to pay a chunky sum to own one of them – but for him they were nothing more than a meaningless muddle. “The sort of toothpaste-and-shoe-polish job a kid can smear over an empty canvas in the dark,” he thought, soon dismissing the formulation, which sounded too close to what his dirty-vested, opinionated father might say while picking his nose or scratching his arse.

After a quick shower he got dressed and went out. The evening air felt fresh, and a pleasant breeze was blowing. The sky was clear again, the river was motionless and the trees were full of songbirds – all in all, it was not too different from a *serata italiana*. Jester came bounding up to him as he made his way down the driveway and out of the main gate.

When Francesco arrived in front of the two huge stone towers of the Kölner Dom, his heart hummed with a strange feeling. He had never seen a Gothic cathedral before, and the size of that massive black structure overwhelmed his senses, which were more accustomed to Romanesque grandeur. He wandered for a while around the building, then took a seat on a low wall and watched wave after wave of people streaming by in every direction. A group of tourists

stopped nearby, and their guide, a snub-nosed redhead with a German accent, shouted as she brandished a yellow flaglet at the cathedral:

“The foundation stone was laid in 1248, and the building took more than six hundred years to complete. Generations of masons and labourers have worked on it, among wars, plagues, fires and other catastrophes. This is not only a monument to man’s religious fervour, but also to the ambition and tenaciousness of the human spirit. Now, if there’s anyone who likes fancy cakes and chocolates, I’ll show you a wonderful café down on that side.”

As the group straggled away, Francesco caught the brief exchange of an Italian couple.

“Not bad, is it?” said the woman.

The man shrugged. “These churches all look the same to me.”

Francesco went inside, roamed around the crowded aisles and sat down on a pew, trying to make out the bright figures on the stained-glass windows on either side of him. Just as his eyes were trying to measure the depth of the structure and the vertiginous height of the ceilings, a priest walked down the nave to announce that it would soon be closing time. He stepped out into the dimming daylight and made his way west, leaving the cathedral behind him.

Pierre’s roughly inked circle on the map turned out to be two streets away from the correct spot, with the result that Francesco wandered off in the wrong direction for some time and when he arrived at the door of the art gallery proceedings were already under way.

His host was standing in the middle of the room, regaling the numerous attendees with a few introductory pleasantries

in Italo-Franco-Deutsch. Francesco was unable to catch a single word, but the audience greeted his comments with laughter and applause. A short speech followed, this time in English, from the artist whose exhibition was being launched that day, a young Mexican sculptor called Philodemus. He explained how his art aimed at revolutionizing the world's "two-dimensional bourgeois perceptual schemes with the aid of three-dimensional, mechanical plastic works" – in other words, small toy theatres. One member of the audience, who looked like an old Italian immigrant, asked him if his work had in any way been influenced by the art of the *presepe napoletano*, the Neapolitan Nativity crib. For a few moments Philodemus was confused, until Pierre improvised a translation. The artist seemed rather put out by this insinuation, and pointed out, with a certain pique, that there were no influences to the "natural-born wellsprings of his imagination", and that if he had any influences, then these must be the very greatest of contemporary masters, such as Carlos María Gutiérrez y Gallardo or Luís María Álvarez y Petardo – names that neither Francesco, nor the immigrant, nor most of those present would have known – who epitomized the marriage of Mayan traditionalism and Spanish innovation, as Philodemus emphasized in a somewhat obscure elaboration.

Francesco looked on, bemused. Modern art wasn't his thing, and the creator of those mechanical thingummies, in his military combat suit, with his enormous, bull-like head that swayed this way and that, with his arms as long as those of a Pithecanthropus, seemed himself, under the spotlights of the gallery room, to be the main character in one of his movable toy theatres.

The presentation, to the relief of the audience, lasted no more than ten minutes, and then everyone got down to the real task of schmoozing, with the help of a glass of wine or champagne. Francesco was having a look at the work on display when the Mexican artist, mistaking his idle curiosity for sincere interest, came over to him and started a conversation in English.

“They’re entirely made out of recyclable materials.”

“Hopefully there won’t be any need to recycle them.”

The sculptor stared at Francesco for a moment in consternation – then he got the joke and smiled, revealing big white teeth, with black shreds of tobacco wedged between them. Whenever Philodemus spoke, he was in the habit of chewing on a quid of tobacco that he would draw from a little pouch he kept in the front pocket of his camouflage jacket.

“No, I didn’t put it very well,” he corrected himself. “What I meant was they’re entirely made out of recycled materials.”

“Mm. Interesting.”

“You see, the idea is to establish a parallel between modern society, based on the recycling of old ideas and conventions, and these pop-up theatres in which the materials are plastic objects, nuts, bolts, toothpicks, newspapers... in short, all the detritus of contemporary civilization.”

“Like in the Middle Ages, when they would build cities using the marble and bricks from ancient monuments,” said a little old fellow behind him, before knocking back a glass of champagne in one great gulp.

“That’s so right!” agreed Philodemus with enthusiasm, and the two continued to chat together. Philodemus launched into a detailed analysis of his works, ranging from their pre-Columbian undercurrents to their “intertextual” allusions

– yes, intertextual, since he had endeavoured to select the bits and pieces he used in the “printed” parts of his work with the greatest care, using only articles that denounced America’s neo-imperialist policies of capitalism, globalization, etc. etc. Maybe some of these ideas were perfectly valid – thought Francesco – but when they were expressed by a young man of more or less his own age, with that great tangle of hair on his big square head... And after all – he said to himself – when you need so many explanations to prove that a work of art really is beautiful, that’s always a good reason for starting to feel suspicious. As his empiricist father would say, fine words butter no parsnips. He remembered the great dark bulk of the cathedral, its towers and spires, that vast collective work of art that man had erected to glorify his yearnings for the divine... and his absent gaze wandered along Philodemus’s little trinkets, in which the human figures had been assembled out of old knick-knacks and the trees were made out of pieces of chewed tobacco. At least, Francesco *hoped* it was chewed tobacco.

The evening continued back at Pierre’s villa, where a select group of around a dozen people gathered for dinner. In the entrance hall, greeting the guests as they arrived, stood the celebrated Oneiric artist, Vanessa, in a revealing cyclamen-coloured dress in crisp contrast with her blond hair and gold jewellery.

After a round of introductions, they found themselves in a large living room, decorated with every shade of luxury that is possible to imagine, from the overly decorated objects that crowd the homes of people with pretensions to nobility to the inevitable Swarovski crystal ware, that unforgivable tribute to tackiness. And of course there was no lack of precious works

of art from every period and style, infusing the room with the aura of a museum.

Around ten thirty, after an aperitif served by white-liveried waiters, the guests were requested to take their places at the dinner table. Francesco was sitting between an American sculptor and a professor of oriental languages; Pierre sat opposite him, with a couple of German painters, while Vanessa was at the far end of the table, next to Philodemus, who would not touch any of the dishes that were served as “he had no interest at all in food”. The most extravagant artistic discussions buzzed around during the course of the evening, such as the proposition that “conceptual art is one of man’s greatest conquests, as it frees the idea, which is perfect, from the form, which is the imperfect husk in which the idea is embodied” or that “death is a journey, and there is no art without death”.

Francesco could not remember a time when he had yawned so much in his life, not because he found those aesthetic disquisitions trivial or uninteresting, but because he was dead tired and longed to go to bed at the first opportunity.

But the party dragged on until well after midnight. Vanessa did not say a word to Pierre for the whole evening: she seemed to be cross and distant, although from time to time she would favour Francesco with an occasional glance or smile.

Finally, in good Italian style, the after-dinner liqueurs were offered.

“So, what plans do you have for tomorrow?” Pierre asked Francesco, slipping into the chair of the Japanologist, who had exchanged seats with him.

“I was thinking of jumping on a train in the morning,” Francesco replied in English, out of politeness to the other guests.

“Where to?” asked one of the German painters.

“Oh, Berlin, probably...”

“And then?” asked Pierre.

“Then I don’t know... I’ve still got nearly a month left on my InterRail pass. I’d like to travel a bit around Germany, and then visit Amsterdam, London, Paris... we’ll see, I have no definite plans.”

“If you stop off in Paris,” squeaked the only other woman present, a wizened old bony thing wearing a black widow’s dress, “you must absolutely go and see the Père Lachaise cemetery. It’s a lovely place.”

“Sure...”

“Hey bud,” continued Pierre sotto voce: his piratical eye was starting to gleam from the effects of the champagne and a big Havana cigar he’d been smoking, “if you’re going to London, we should see each other... I’ll be there in ten days’ time for an auction at Christie’s. We can arrange to meet up for a drink or something... And I’ve got those hotel gift vouchers the midget gave us... what was his name?...”

“Mansoor?”

“That’s the one!” and he gave Francesco a friendly slap on the shoulders. He’d definitely been knocking back the bubbly.

“Sure, sure. Let’s talk about it tomorrow... I’m dropping off now,” Francesco said in a whisper, while Vanessa kept glancing at him in a strange way.

As soon as he got back to his room, Francesco threw off all his clothes and took a quick shower. It was almost two in the

morning when he finally switched off the light and slipped beneath the sheets.

But sleep wouldn't come for a while. As he rubbed his eyes and massaged his nose, still painful after the bump it had taken the previous day, or rather two days ago, he started thinking about Pierre, this funny character who advocated a life without money while living in a luxury villa surrounded by all the comforts of bourgeois life. Then he thought about his unfulfilled sister, Marcella, with whom he had shared a room until the previous summer, his long-unemployed dad, his fretting mum, aged before her time – all content with their small-town world, all seemingly resigned to their fate since their very first day on earth.

He was half asleep when a sharp noise – the sound of footsteps on creaking floorboards – made him sit up in bed with a start.

“Who's there?” he said, first in Italian and then in English.

The only reply was a light being switched on behind a recess at the back of the room, which revealed an open door and a staircase communicating with the rest of the house.

“Hello?” he ventured, with a hint of fear in his voice. Then he thought it must be Pierre acting out some drunken prank, and was about to call out his name when a woman's voice said:

“Do you mind if I switch this other light on?” A dark shape was outlined against the faint glow from the open door. Before he could reply, the light had already come on. It was Vanessa, still wearing her cyclamen dress, which revealed her shapely body and the teasing lines of her underwear. Her eyes were red-rimmed, as if she had been crying, and her forehead was wrinkled by a slender furrow.