

Daisy

I was recuperating after the battle of Monte Cassino, in a little town on the outskirts of Naples when I first saw Daisy. It was only a severe sprain to the ankle but it was enough to remove me from the action until it healed but I was still in uniform and allowed out and about, with care, and so I went to a café in the square where the recent German occupation already seemed a thing of the past and Italian values were re-establishing themselves in the May sunshine.

A blonde woman in her mid-forties was sitting, head bowed, at the next table to me, in a corner where I had chosen to sit quietly and watch the world go by – a precious respite after the hell of months of battle in the mountains. Her eyes were closed and I couldn't tell if she was asleep or just withdrawn into herself, but it gave me the chance to drink her in unobserved. She wore a thin dress, almost a party frock, well out of fashion and well-worn and her make-up was just a little too heavy for such a Spring afternoon – her expression a little strained and lines were beginning to set into her face.

Suddenly she lifted her head and her eyes opened and she caught me staring at her. A smile transformed her face and she said in a trilling American accent "Is that you, Jay, have you come for me?" Then a cloud seemed to cross her face and she continued, crestfallen "No, it can't be, you died, didn't you..."

"Pardon me, Ma'am?" I said, bemused at the rapid play of changing emotions on her face.

"Oh! You're American, and a soldier too, how lovely!" And the sun came out again, transforming her face once more.

"Yes Ma'am. That I am..." Being a soldier felt anything but lovely to me, knowing I would be returning to the front line as soon as my ankle permitted. I was weary of this brutal campaign and I wished I could sit here in the sunshine forever.

"Giuseppe! Another coffee for this young man, please." She called out to the waiter who was clearing tables nearby.

"Certainly, Madam Daisy" he said with the slightest of grimaces, so quick it was barely noticeable before the smile of his profession re-asserted itself, "cappuccino or Americano?" he asked of me with the slightest of disdain.

"Cappuccino, please – I am New York Italian, you know..." I smiled at him and he smiled back.

"So many of your countrymen don't like 'the frothy coffee' so we had to invent Americano to suit them – one cappuccino coming up sir!" and he turned on his heel and went into the interior of the café.

"Why thank you Ma'am, that's very gracious of you!"

"So formal – call me Daisy!" she said "and you? What shall I call you?"

"I'm Giovanni, Ma'am, I mean Daisy!"

Daisy laughed and offered her delicate hand to shake "Welcome to Italy, Giovanni!"

"What is a young woman like yourself doing here in the middle of a war?" I asked as I gently shook her hand, which tensed suddenly and the clouds were back.

"Oh, I really can't say – I'm sorry I have to go now!" and she stood up and hurried out of the café and across the square, disappearing round a corner. I was taken aback, not least because the waiter returned at that moment, bearing a small tray with my coffee and watching Daisy leave.

"I'm sorry, I will pay for the coffee, of course..." I said.

"Don't worry about it" he said "Madam Daisy, she is, how you say? She is not quite right in the ..."

"Sure! What's her story anyway?"

The waiter, paused, looked around and seeing that it was quiet, pulled out a chair from my table and sat down. "You don't mind?" he said. I gestured my acceptance.

"Madam Daisy came here on holiday some ten years ago with her husband, Tom. I say 'holiday' but they were rich and their whole life seemed to be a holiday, except for the rows... Such rows they had – even in public, like they just didn't care who saw!"

"Really? How un-American!" I said, and we both laughed.

"Yes, they came to this café a lot, they liked it here, and we got to see the drama close up, though it was hard to understand them – it seemed they had both been unfaithful. He didn't want to talk about it but she couldn't seem to let it be. He was a brute and more than once she came with a bruise, handprints on her arm and once a black eye, though she concealed it behind sunglasses, you know. After those occasions, Tom would be quiet, penitent – you know..."

I nodded. "My family aren't rich, we run a deli back in New York – I know the type, we had lots of rich customers – pricks... go on." I said.

"Well one day, Tom came on his own – wanted to talk to the boss. He said Daisy would be staying on here for a while, gave him a wad of money, said he would send more each month and that my boss was to look after her, give her the money as she needed it, but not so much that she could leave town. My boss wasn't happy about it but he liked Madam Daisy so he went along with it and sure enough, Tom sent money each month according to his word. Daisy seemed relieved that he had gone and my boss was very discrete about the money, let her eat here, paid the bill where she was staying and at the bar where she drank, and boy could he drink..."

"And that was ten years ago, when Tom left her here?"

"It was! Scusi – let me see to this customer." The waiter went to serve a new arrival but returned shortly afterwards.

"So we look out for Madam Daisy, steer away unsuitable men..." He looked at me with a quizzical tilt to his head. "You gonna give us trouble?" I half raised my hands in a gesture of surrender "No sir! Not I – I was just curious I guess. I mean, how did she manage with the occupation – wouldn't the Nazis have been interested in an American woman on her own. They might have thought she was a spy or something..."

The waiter thought for a moment then replied "You are right, it was a dangerous time for her. The family who run the hotel where she stays and my boss, we all looked out for her, persuaded her to stay out of sight as much as possible – she seemed to understand the danger. It has been good to see her out and about again, but I think it didn't help her, how you say, state of mind..."

"I guess it wouldn't, being cooped up..."

"And drinking alone..."

I returned to the café the next day and found myself disappointed that Daisy was not there, but half-an-hour later she appeared and sat at the table next to me with a smile. "Sorry I rushed off yesterday. Giovanni. How are you today?"

"My ankle is a little better, I will have to return to my unit in a few days..."

"Oh you poor thing! I noticed you were limping when you arrived before, I hope you get better soon – although perhaps not if it means going back to the fighting?"

"Well it has to be done, Daisy, I feel like I am leaving my comrades in the lurch, sitting here, drinking coffee and talking to beautiful women!"

"Women! Giovanni? Do you have other women?" She looked around the café in mock seriousness then we both burst into laughter.

"I used to know a soldier – he became very dear to me but then he too had to go off to the war – the last war, you know..."

I nodded thoughtfully, "And did he return?" I asked carefully.

"He did!" said Daisy, "but by the time I saw him again, I had gotten married..." And there was that cloud again.

"What happened to him?" I asked.

"Oh, he died – it was a jealous husband was his downfall..."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Daisy."

"Yes – it was a Greek tragedy alright..." She lapsed into silence until Giuseppe came near and she ordered a bottle of wine which he brought, giving me a sideways glance as if to say 'Here we go...'

She offered me a glass but I demurred, I wasn't a great drinker and her tale of the young soldier, her lost love, had unsettled me. Too close to home at that time. I made my excuses and left.

The next day I had orders to get back to my unit which was on the move and I carefully complied, my ankle would have to take its chances.

Some years after the war, I decided to take a trip to Italy and was drawn back to the small town, I wasn't consciously seeking Daisy, I told myself I was just retracing the route of the campaign, taking in the country in peacetime, laying old ghosts to rest. But I found myself at the café in the square, Giuseppe had taken over proprietorship. He came and joined me in a quiet moment and I asked him what had become of Daisy.

"Very sad! A tragedy! She had been drinking, a little too much, and walking home – a car – how you say in America automobile – well. you know... And the strangest thing? We had no address for Tom, her husband, and the money from him, kept coming, every month, like clockwork. We buried her here and we bought a nice stone for the grave and after that, we sent the money to the orphanage. Too many orphans after a war – you know, I'm sure..."

I asked Giuseppe for directions to the cemetery and headed off to pay my respects to Daisy. It was a indeed a nice stone, white Carrara marble with just a name and the year of her death, Daisy Buchanan – 1950. I left a bunch of flowers, removed a wilted bunch that was not too old and wondered who else came to pay tribute to this beautiful woman who had come to grief in a strange town, far from home, or perhaps she had already foundered on grief before she ever arrived there, a tale nobody would ever know...