

The Happy Club

by Chris Bradley

The kitchen was a six-by-eight space tiled in faded green. A tarnished refrigerator stood against the wall, a squat stove hunched alongside, and, next to that, a bar extended from the chipped white wall. Here I sat to await my breakfast.

Fausto raised an egg to his eyes, then cracked it into a pan of bubbling olive oil. He threw the shell into a rectangular wooden trash box, like those in American fast-food restaurants, and resumed his monologue.

"Jeanne, some things I can't expect you to understand. You haven't been around enough." My cook—and hotelier and concierge and liftman—barely fit in his kitchen when he stood still, poking at my egg with a spatula, and he filled the room wholly when he gestured. His thick arms swept his sides like Pantheonic columns. "The thing about these extracomunitarians is, they're not bad people. But they have no right to be here."

I couldn't immediately find the English word to translate *extracomunitario*. But the meaning was clear. Outsider. Alien. Other. Or, as I had seen, black curly hair. Back at school in Madison, I could tell by skin color which people didn't belong. But in the Mediterranean, where tones tended to be similar, secondary features like hair seemed to be what divided people.

"We have something called a Permit of Stay. If you come here to live, you must apply at the police station within one week of arrival. These are the rules—for everyone. But these migrants know they will not receive permits, so they break the rules." Fausto swirled my egg, and sweat beaded and ran down the back of his neck—from the late-morning humidity or the

stovetop's heat, or maybe it was in his blood. Italians ran hot, unlike their quiet little cars. I would see these later that day at the Fiat plant just south of town. Fausto didn't scare me with his polemic, but I watched for him to shift his engine higher.

He pulled a plate from the slender pink cabinet that rose to the ceiling. "Each city in Italy has different problems with different ethnicities. Here, it's the Algerians. They've come on boats you wouldn't think would survive the Po," he said, "and spread across the land. Like our vineyards, except we cannot manage them."

Yesterday I'd walked to the Po, a river that snaked along the city's east side. Little land on the far side was developed. I photographed the scene in sepia tone, and became for an instant a twenty-two-year-old British princess from the 1800s, come south to see the world before ascending my throne. I supposed I was doing the same thing now, except upon my return to Wisconsin, I would be assuming an office chair at Deloitte.

"They come north by train," Fausto continued, "and they fill our streets. They want to sell us things. Sell *you* things. We know not to buy from them." He brandished his spatula in emphasis, and olive oil splattered the bar. The white of my egg began to turn brown, but Fausto didn't seem to notice.

Two weeks before, I had bought the latest James Bond movie from a street vendor. I was on my way to the Fabriano train station, and then to Rome to meet my friend Whitney. The man, olive-skinned like the Italians passing by, wanted eight euros for the film. I offered three. He asked if I was trying to break him, mentioning a wife somewhere distant, but gave me the movie. I handed him a five-euro bill, and left as he fished in his pockets for my change.

I had stopped tallying days after the first week of my graduation trip, as I bounced from city to city and met friends who'd come to Madison on exchange, but the palm fronds around the train platform told me Easter was near. I sat in first class next to a sunned Italian man with gelled hair and a navy pinstriped suit. He held several fronds and caught a few of my glances. He seemed eager to explain himself, but I didn't question him. Finally he called someone who seemed to be his wife, and they chatted about holiday plans. They would travel to his mother's home in Turin for Easter, and she would make ciambellone, a donut-shaped cake.

Maybe the street vendor would put his extra two euros toward buying his wife a cake for the holiday. The gesture would astonish her, as would the fact that her husband who was so far away could still provide for her so well. She wouldn't eat the cake herself; she would give it to their children, if they had any, or else to the neighbor's kids. But the vendor couldn't actually send cake. He couldn't even send the money in time—Easter was a week away. The train slowed to its final stop, and I pushed through the other riders' foliage to the platform.

One-hundred yards away, cleaved in half by rising shadow, Whitney leaned against a Punto Sma supermarket ad. She twirled her head to the Lily Allen singles surely playing through her headphones. When she saw my approach, she collected her purse from between her feet and walked toward me.

"Where's your frond?" She waved an arm at the people moving past.

I hugged her and kissed the air beside each cheek. "Must have left it on the train."

"There's still time."

"Nah, someone from second class probably stole it by now."

She slipped her arm through mine and led me away. The last time we had walked arm in arm was at her graduation the year before. She now worked in Lyon as a translator. I accepted a crumpled map from her and unfolded it to reveal the night's plan. She'd devised it over the

past few days, after coming down from France. An intersection in the northeastern part of the city was circled many times over in red ink, and below was Whitney's curly writing: "*disco-teca*."

"Lots of different people go there," she said. "Tourists, students, locals. We'll go at midnight or one. Our hostel has a shuttle."

Whitney waved away the cupped hands of an old gypsy woman with a shriveled face, and we emerged a few seconds later into the bustle of Via Marsala.

Engines revved at the intersection below. Their rumbling and a slight breeze came through the window at my elbow. It was still cool outside, but the temperature had already risen a few degrees in the fifteen minutes I'd been sitting there.

Fausto's rant was my fault. The balcony of my room on this fourth-floor hotel overlooked a place of worship—it was all bulbs and spires—and I hadn't known whether it was Jewish or Muslim. I had asked Fausto about it when I sat at the bar. He grimaced, flattening his lips into a surly line, shook his head, and started in. The Jews could go where they wished, he'd said, because they'd been persecuted for so long. But the Muslims had their own holy land. Why would they forsake Mecca for Catholic Italy? He did not come to Wisconsin to worship Juventus. Nobody cared about soccer, and he would only be a nuisance. Fausto didn't answer my question.

Fausto paused for breath and stared at my egg in the frying pan. It had browned completely, and he scraped it through the swinging door into the trash. He selected another from the crate and cracked it in the pan. He'd taken my breakfast order the night before when I arrived. Any Italian passing through his hotel would have accepted a pastry and espresso and been on her way, but Fausto evidently wanted to show that he could accommodate Americans.

He stepped away from the stove. "An Algerian robbed my friend Giorgio once. Giorgio has told me the story maybe fifteen times. The man had been lingering outside his grocery store for an hour leading up to the lunch closure. He was short, around one hundred seventy centimeters, and leaned with his back against the glass right by the door. One customer complained about him—she said the man had stared at her and made her anxious." Fausto, unanchored, seemed to feel uncomfortable, and leaned back against the wooden frame of the trash. "The last customer left at five to one, and Giorgio snuck to the door to lock it, hoping to leave through the rear employee entrance. But the Algerian was quicker than Giorgio's key and slipped inside. He pulled out a knife and escaped with three hundred fifty euros, the whole morning's earnings. A policeman came five minutes later, and asked Giorgio what had happened, and what had the thief looked like? Giorgio described his narrow brown eyes, and said he was Algerian. The policeman asked if he was sure—if maybe the man could have been Moroccan? And Giorgio said of course he was sure.

"But such information is useless. I haven't told Giorgio this, but, Algerian or Moroccan, how would you find the man? When there might be no door to knock on?"

Fausto crossed and uncrossed his arms, staring at me. The hair of his eyebrows was wide and thick, endlessly tangled, and the two sets almost touched in the middle as he wrinkled his forehead. Even away from the stove, his puffy cheeks glistened. His Adam's apple projected slightly from under his lowered chin, and leapt as he swallowed.

After a few seconds, I began to feel like Giorgio's customer. To make this man keep talking, I said, "So how did he know? Giorgio?" My vowels crackled after I had been silent so long.

"Algerians are very distinct. Yes, they can be short or very tall, and have straight or curly dark hair. But this thief—he had the right cheekbones. Very distinct."

"How so?"

"Very high. You'd have to see it."

That night with Whitney, around one a.m., I had seen it. The man had been staring at me from the corner shadows of the Happy Club. A pair of disco balls scattered bits of light, but none illuminated him. His tight curls were dark; I couldn't identify his color. He sat in an armchair with the legs of his white pants crossed, and held a tumbler in his hand. Besides his square jaw, and a hooked nose with wide nostrils, he had quite high cheekbones. They looked like little kneecaps propping up his eyes. Neither these eyes nor the level of his drink had dropped in the last ten minutes. With each new song, I hid myself amid the crush of dancers and emerged to dance alone, as I shrunk from and hungered for his gaze. I scanned for Whitney and found her at the front of the dance floor with a man in an orange jacket. He maintained contact with her even as he jumped and spun.

"Who's this?" I yelled over the drum and bass pounding from the speakers.

"Carlo!" Whitney said.

Carlo nodded to me, then pulled Whitney in tighter. His arms appeared amputated at the elbows as he delved into Whitney's argyle sweater. Back through the crowd, the corner armchair was now empty. I started as I felt a hand on my shoulder.

"Hey, Giulio!" Carlo said. He extended his right hand to his friend while keeping his left on Whitney's hip. "This is Whitney, and ... ?"

"Jeanne." I gave my real name because Whitney had offered hers.

"A pleasure." Giulio spoke in Italian. He shook my hand, then kissed beside both my cheeks. This formality surprised me given the setting, but it agreed with his look. He wore a black velvet blazer and a pair of white Dolce & Gabbana eyeglasses that turned red and green

and blue as the disco ball spun. His short, straight black hair curved back in a neat wave. He smelled faintly of citrus. He caught my gaze and offered me a drink. I glanced to the corner, but the man had not returned. Whitney pulled far enough away from Carlo to nudge me with her elbow, and I nodded to Giulio.

I danced with Whitney and Carlo as I waited, close enough to seem together, but not so close that Carlo might wind an arm around me, too. I closed my eyes and swung my arms wide as the DJ switched to house music, and when I opened them some minutes later, Giulio was back with my drink. As soon as I had sipped it down a few inches, his arm slipped around me. Again I closed my eyes, and we moved sinuously together. He maintained a distance at first, but as I felt the thump of the music, I wanted to feel him, too, and pulled him closer. I smelled in his cool blazer the lemon groves of Sorrento and tasted the sharply sweet limoncello. He likely would have some at his apartment, in the heart of the city alongside the Tiber. I closed my eyes. In only four hours, the sun would rise over the river's east bank and shine on Giulio's bed, and maybe me. His eyes scanned the crowd, then dropped to the floor, and I waited for them to rise so I could ask him to take me home. I raised my head to say this in his ear, but lost my words when I saw over his shoulder the man with the hooked nose. Our eyes met, and he did not turn away. He only blinked as colored light flashed across his eyes. He smiled, pushing his cheekbones higher, and mouthed something to me. I understood that he wanted me on his bed when the sun rose. I couldn't imagine where his apartment would be, but for a moment wished to find out. My breath caught in my chest, and I gripped Giulio's arm.

His eyes snapped up and back to the curly-haired man. He gave the slightest shake of his head. "Algerian," Giulio said into my ear. He clutched my arm. "Let's go outside."

I kicked my boots against the bar. "Fausto."

Back at the stove, he raised his head and looked over.

"I think my egg is done."

He tilted his head slightly, as if trying to catch a stray note drifting by the open window, then grinned and took the egg off the heat. "Sorry. I forgot myself."

This yolk, too, was mostly solid, but the egg was savory after soaking in olive oil. I sliced crescents from the white with the side of my fork as I waited for Fausto's next story.

But he seemed content to let me eat, and prepared espresso. He unscrewed the bottom of the caffettiera and filled it with water, eyeing the level, then scooped grounds into the middle chamber and replaced the percolator, complete, on the stove. Despite his bulk, his movements were swift and precise. We watched the reddening burner for a moment.

Outside, I heard the nasally voice of a muezzin. His words came in a long, steady string, but with their high pitch seemed fragile.

"So it is a mosque, then?"

"Yes. All day long we hear this." Fausto lifted the lid of the caffettiera to check the level of the coffee. "But our own authorities allowed the structure. So many Algerians are here now that, illegal or not, we must bow to their demands. Is that not an empty feeling? To surrender your culture?"

I chewed a bite of my egg, and before I could swallow, Fausto continued.

"Do you not feel the same about Mexicans?"

I'd never had to worry about them in Madison. Most found their way to Milwaukee, where they seemed to just open restaurants. They spoke English—the ones who worked the register, anyway. Maybe whites surrendered more in California. "I don't know, Fausto. We don't have many Mexicans where I live."

"Well, the blacks, then." The muezzin's call continued, and Fausto waved a hand at the window. "So you see, right now, outside, traffic is jamming. Because of these extracommunitarians, business is stopping."

There had been none of that bustle as Giulio led me from the dance floor and outside the Happy Club. Few cars and pedestrians passed, and all lights were off in the businesses and office buildings along the street. In my skirt and blouse, I was just cold enough for the hairs on my arms to prick up. The chill was refreshing after the close air of the club. My pulse slowed.

Benches lined the sidewalk across the street, and I started for one. But Giulio's grip was tight. If we could have stepped from the club to his apartment, I might have sat with him on his couch, or his bed, and had another drink. I might have slipped off his blazer and gone below the buttons of his shirt. But here, on the street, I wished he would release my hand. He was neither dancer nor host, and I saw his desire laid bare.

"You're very pretty," he said in Italian, the most consecutive words he'd spoken.

"Thanks." His eyes lingered on my face, and I averted mine. Nobody exited the club. Whitney and Carlo continued to dance, and maybe the man had returned to his corner chair. I suddenly felt his eyes on me, too, but the street was empty.

We walked slowly away from the Happy Club's entrance, and from Via Tiburtina, the main thoroughfare running by the disco. Ahead, the street lay between a series of high-density apartment buildings. With their uniform balconies overhanging the narrow street, they looked like enormous filing cabinets with their drawers flung open.

To our left was the awning of one of the buildings, its entrance recessed. Giulio stopped alongside, and because he still had my hand, I stopped, too.

"You're very pretty," he said, this time in English. "Like Julia Roberts."

"Thanks," I said again, in Italian.

He stepped into the alcove, and pulled me after. "So the neighbors don't see," he said.

Giulio shifted me back against the oak door with ease, and placed his palms on the wood above my shoulders. He completed the fourth wall. Alcohol was now his strongest smell. I wanted to run into the street, wherever it led, and I raised a hand as he leaned in to kiss me. He pulled it down. I tried my left hand, but he did the same. He held my arms gently but firmly at my sides, and kissed me hard. I turned my head, but his lips followed me and forced me into the oaken door. "No," I whispered—English and Italian. "No." His tongue pressed my lips, and when I opened them to escape it, he thrust it inside my mouth. I tried to yell, but managed only a desperate hum.

His released his grip on my left arm, and his fingers crawled under my blouse. I jabbed him with my free hand, but he only kissed harder and probed farther.

He pinched me under my blouse, hard, and pain did what fear could not. I screamed loudly and deeply, and hoped my sound would travel to the people who lived above, to Whitney, even Carlo. But I saw no one on the balconies or the street beyond the alcove. I had no idea what time it was.

I still screamed, and as Giulio raised a hand to my mouth, a man rose behind him and slammed an elbow against his head. I watched Giulio's life speed from his eyes. He fell sideways against the concrete wall of the niche and slumped to the ground.

The man with the hooked nose extended a hand. Crying, I took it, and found it warm.

"Thank you," I said.

"You are welcome." He spoke English—clearly, but slightly clipped and lilting. "You should not leave a club with a stranger."

"I've heard that one before." I stepped down from the alcove into the street. The man was a head taller. "Did you follow me?"

"I—" His eyes fell. He kept his hold on my hand. "Yes."

"How did you know he would do that?" My chest itched where Giulio's fingers had touched. I was grateful he had fallen facing the wall.

"I didn't. I was just jealous." He raised his eyes and smiled. "Your friend, is she still inside?"

"I think so."

"I should take you back. She will be worrying."

He started back, but I stayed in place. "What's your name?"

"Yanis."

We were still holding hands, so I simply pumped his arm. "Jeanne. Pleasure to meet you."

"And you as well."

I freed my hand, and, gathering my will, returned to Giulio in the alcove. I dug through his jacket until I found his wallet, and pulled out a fifty-euro bill. I straightened and turned to Yanis. "I'd like to buy you a drink."

He nodded, linked his arm with mine, and led me back.

Fausto sipped from his espresso mug, a thimble in his broad hand. When it had cooled, he gulped the rest and refilled his mug at the stove. "They're not bad people, they just shouldn't be here. We protested the mosque's opening, but we couldn't do anything. The man who built it, he was legal."

My espresso remained untouched in my mug. "But—if the man was legal, and followed the rules, why can't he build a mosque?"

Fausto smiled without showing his teeth. He dumped two packets of sugar in his espresso and stirred for a moment. "You use my own words against me. If his mosque attracted only legal Algerians, yes—he should. But now this man and this building, legal by themselves, bring in the rest of the extracommunitarians, which aren't. And they—" He punched through the swinging door of the trash box, depositing his empty sugar packets. "They, like the trash thrown in the Po, flow through our city."

I almost told him what I hadn't told Whitney, and what Giulio had surely not told Carlo. But I had not yet found the right words. I threw back my espresso, and slammed the mug on the bar. Fausto looked at me with eyes the commonest brown. "Sometimes," I said, "the trash is the cleanest thing in the river."