

# POW

(Prisoner of War)

A Short Story

By: Franco Forleo

Dedicated to my Dad, Antonio Forleo

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I would like to express my gratitude to the late Mario Gazzini for the well-documented facts I researched in his book “Zonderwater, I prigionieri in Sudafrica (1941-1947)”

Ethiopia 1940, Lieutenant-General Sir Richard O'Connor, unsmiling, dour, and shabbily dressed, perched on his lookout post, a pair of field glasses glued to his face. He growled softly as he wondered what the enemy was up to. He had managed to draw the Italians up as far as Sidi Barrani. It took Marshal Graziani's men four days to reach that point, where they had now stopped, having outrun their supplies, exhausting their infantry, and had worn down their vehicles. They were now dug in. Graziani needed to extend the metalled road and water pipeline to his frontline units. It was a game of chess. O'Connor had to make the next move. Activity was high in the Italian trenches. *The Ities are restless*, O'Connor thought. He picked up a figure through his lenses, jumping from one foxhole to another. *A rabbit*, he thought, pity he didn't have a Lee-Enfield, this could make for some good game shooting. O'Connor fancied himself as a sharp shooter, a veteran from the Great War, but perhaps now, past his shooting prime.

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Lieutenant Lorenzini, aluminium cup in hand, was the rabbit. His destination; the foxhole sporting the radio antenna. He had left a trail of black tea behind him, spilling most of it as he serpentine through the dugouts, finally reaching his destination. Under the headphones, Antonio looked as attentive as he could now that his lieutenant was next to him. A fever burnt him up. He looked at his lieutenant's outstretched hand that offered him the relief of tea and, as he sipped it, he felt the weak black fluid soothing his raw throat.

"Any message?" asked the lieutenant.

"No, signor tenente, nothing."

The lieutenant looked up to the heavens as if to find some form of inspiration, a message, anything!

Perhaps the War Gods knew the plan, but the lieutenant certainly didn't.

"The enemy will pass over Keren Antonio, but they will first pass over my dead body."

Antonio did not feel as patriotic as his lieutenant. He felt sick. Stuck in this foxhole for four days with little more than tea and biscuits to eat. Twice they had brought him pasta, which was the ration of that day, hardly the quantity Antonio was used to. He remembered home at times like this, his mom standing at the door of Via Cristoforo Colombo, shouting out at him, calling him to dinner. His father was seldom at home, being a merchant sailor and always out to sea. Concetta had a hard task of raising her three boys, two of whom were more subdued, but Antonio, the youngest, made her a grey haired woman before her time. She found it easier to palm him off onto his aunts and uncles. He remembered the time he played a joke on his Aunt Teresa, swapping her small barrel of olives with one of goat's droppings. As she slipped her hand into the dark reservoir she muttered that the olives had gone off. Realising the prank played on her, she burst out yelling... *ANTONIO!*

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A crackle came through on the radio, Antonio jumped and so did his lieutenant, who at that time was still looking up into the heavens.

"A message?" he questioned.

"I don't know signor tenente, perhaps."

Antonio fiddled with the dial, notebook and pencil ready in the other hand. Winds stirred the mood and with it, sand. Antonio pulled his hanky up over his mouth and nose. He looked like a robber from the Far West and his lieutenant looked at him and could not help but smile. These were his children for now, his own, far away. He thought how much they must have grown since he last saw them. Mail delivery was few and far between at the front and receiving a picture was an added bonus. How he missed them.

Darkness fell earlier than usual as the sandstorm blocked out the light. The lieutenant stayed in Antonio's dugout for that night, for finding his way back was going to be a difficult task and in any case he liked Antonio and the lieutenant dropped his barriers and they became friends.

"Where you from, soldier?" asked the lieutenant.

"Brindisi, sir."

"Ah Brindisi. Yes, I have been there. Spent some time at the naval base."

“Yes sir. My house is but a stone’s throw away from the base.”

“I hear it’s suffering with lots of air raids. Strategic naval position.”

“Yes it’s true. I hear the city is dead, lots of people have moved to the farms. It’s safer.”

“Does your family have a farm?”

“No sir, my father is away most of the time. I seldom see him. My mother, she tends to the house.”

The lieutenant offered Antonio a smoke. He had not had one in two days, how could he refuse? As the lieutenant lit Antonio’s cigarette, the light cast an unusual glow on his face and Antonio saw a grey aura of death in the lieutenant’s eyes. He was an old wolf, probably fought in the Spanish war.

“Here,” said the lieutenant, handing Antonio a tablet. “It’s an aspirin. It will make you feel better. I carry them with me all the time. Suffer from headaches, you know. All the bombing, I plug my ears to try to save the little hearing I have left.”

Antonio unhitched his water bottle and gulped down the tablet. Water had to be used sparingly, but this was a necessity.

They must have both fallen asleep in the small hours of the morning and in Antonio’s delirious state, he dreamed of home, once again.

His two brothers, standing at the doorway of No.19, one holding a loaf of bread, breaking off pieces, the other with a leg of “prosciutto”, laughing at him, their mouths disgustingly full, pointing and mimicking him as a military clown.

They were not called up. Italian law has it that the eldest son in each family stays with their mothers in the absence of the father. His other brother fell short in health and was therefore also not drafted. Antonio was not unhappy to serve his country. On the contrary, he was proud. But things had changed. Il Duce did not deliver as promised. He had sent his armies to Africa ill equipped. He had sold most of his new hardware to Spain and Turkey. The Italian forces had poor equipment. Armoured cars dated back to 1909. The L3 tank only mounted two machine-guns. The under powered and thinly armoured M11 was little better -- its 37 mm gun could not traverse. The heavyweight M13 packed a 47-mm gun, but crawled along at 15Km/h. The Mannlicher-Carcano rifle, 1881 model, suffered from low bullet velocity. Breda machine guns were clumsy to operate and jammed easily. The Model 35 "Red Devil" hand grenades had a cute trick of exploding in the hands of their users.

And now, even his brothers tormented him at night.

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General O'Connor gave his men the order. They rose at pre-dawn, and the air attacks began. Naval ships bombarded Italian camps. British surprise was complete. On the morning of 9th December, the British moved forward, troops dragging extra grenades, wearing heavy underwear and woollen sweaters in the cold predawn air.

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Antonio woke to the sound of the bombs falling, then silence. He then heard the sound of Scottish bagpipes. He had never heard this sound before and as he crawled to the top of his dugout to inspect this strange sound, his jaw dropped as he saw the advancement of British tanks and troops. Scurrying back down, he tugged at the lieutenant’s arm, who was still groggy from sleep.

“Tenente, tenente! Wake up signor tenente, the British are here, we are under attack.”

Antonio scrambled for his radio, attempting to raise the alarm. Headphones half off his head, hands shaking, knees trembling, he looked up to his lieutenant who had drawn his pistol and was ready to go over. Lieutenant Lorenzini edged his way to the top, the rattle of machine gun fire making him cautious. He had been in this situation before. Slowly he lifted his head and as he did so, he fell back, hitting the dirt like a sandbag, a clean black hole on his brow. Antonio scrambled over to him on all fours. He looked into the lieutenant’s eyes. As Lieutenant Lorenzini drew his final breath, his eyes fixed on Antonio, an eerie smile came to his lips as if to say, *I told you so.*

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Antonio did not know how long he knelt in that position, looking down at his lieutenant. "Come on, come on! Raise them hands Itie.... come on," Bayonet pointed edging him up. "Raise your hands!" Antonio rose slowly, lifting his hands and cupping them around the back of his neck. Looking into his captor's face he saw a young boy, barely his own age. His first thought being, as he studied his enemy: *What a stupid helmet, looks like a pasta bowl.* What was Antonio thinking? There he stood, staring down the barrel of a 303 rifle, criticising his enemy's helmet. He could not believe his own thoughts. "Come on, Itie, join them brothers of yours... fall into that column. The war is over for you." Antonio did not understand his captor, but he got the message. He turned to look at his lieutenant, spread out like Christ on the cross. His pistol still in hand, tunic twisted, blood streaming from his head. Turning to his captor, he unhitched his right hand from behind his neck and slowly turned to look at his lieutenant for the last time, saluting him as he did so. The war was over for both in a split second and split second timing was to decide who should live and who should die.

## II

As the ship steered into harbour with the help of a tug, the decks were packed with curious prisoners. A few weeks prior, this same ship had left this harbour carrying allied troops for the desert front. "This could be any port in the world. It could be Naples or Genoa," said one man. But no, it was Durban, South Africa. A far away country, a country that had fought wars with the Zulu tribe, against the British, a country that boasted the finding of the biggest diamond in the world, the Cullinan Diamond. Where were they destined? A place called Zonderwater. As Antonio disembarked, he felt the earth move from under his legs, all that time at sea, he felt clumsy. He could not help noticing the contrast of this magnificent city, against the thousands of Italian prisoners all sporting their new prisoner numbers. He was No.51423. The docks were empty, there was no spectator value, only the military, sailors and bayonets. They were also living the war. "What a relief!" someone muttered. "Whoever wrote the Geneva Convention, thought of this as well, at least we are not on public parade" Their legs were tied, their luggage, the little they had, was dropped along side. They had to walk fast, run! Two rows of South African soldiers flanked them as they retrieved their belongings and then fell in once again.

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"Come on, come on!" - orders from the guards. By now they had become familiar with this command and they obeyed. Antonio was on his feet, the ground moved, a feeling that he was still on the waters. A noise rang in his head. He could not take all of this in at once. There was a train, space, mirrors, brass, leather seats... Is this for real? As he took his seat, he did not feel like a "prisoner" - he was a "traveller". Murmurs around him confirmed the same sentiments. He wondered if this was another of his tormented dreams. The train finally began to move, this beautiful train! He managed to get a window seat to which he glued himself. He did not intend wasting a minute of this journey. He was a prisoner, but who knew how long this wonderful experience would last. They were going through the outer city. He saw a blonde, and she was laughing as she playfully pulled at a sailor's arm. She was wearing a blue bathing suit, the colour of the sea. Antonio was mesmerised! They came to a level crossing, cars, horses, women, and children, a market, street vendors, faces, all going about their lives as content as could be. The window was the frame, which held many a picture. The sun was starting to set and Antonio became drowsy, head leaning up against the window, watching the changing vegetation from the lush banana plantations of Natal to that of pine trees passing through the Natal Midlands. Antonio dropped off and drifted into another far-away country, a familiar country, his home.

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He and his brother, two-up on his bicycle; his treasured bicycle. On a farm road, they were on the outskirts of Brindisi, cycling through the olive groves. Each tree a unique spastic form of art, a character on its own. Hundreds of years old, still faithfully bearing fruit and producing that golden fluid so much in demand. They found their way to Theodore's orchard, which had the largest and best fig trees in that region. Theodore knew that many a thief had targeted his prized fruit. At this time in the late afternoon, he would be resting after a long day in the fields, but he had learned the hard way and placed a hammock in between two trees where he would rest, one eye open, the other closed, "Lupara" on his chest, Bruno, his faithful dog, at his side, twitching his nose from left to right, like radar picking up any foreign scent. Antonio and his brother parked the bike well away from Theodore's boundary. They knew it was going to be a race. How many figs could they eat before Bruno picked up their scent? Slowly they worked their way into the orchard, Antonio's brother holding him back at the first tree. This was good enough for him just close enough to dash away. But this was no game for Antonio. He had to get closer and give his opponents a fair chance at catching him. He chose a tree less than fifty meter's from the opposition, slowly climbing up and reaching out to pick a beauty he had targeted, taking it into both his hands and splitting it open from the bottom, scooping the honey-red pulp into his mouth. Many more followed that one before a sudden misstep jerked the tree and Bruno's alarm went off. Antonio jumped from the tree and was racing halfway back when he heard the first shot from the Lupara. His adrenaline already racing, this was going to be a chancy race. Running to scale the fence, he tripped and landed on his face. In total agony he turned towards his pursuers, who were not far behind. He called out for his brother: "Coco, wait for me!" But Coco was on his brother's bike, pedalling as fast as he could, leaving Antonio behind.

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First light seeped in through the window and Antonio opened his eyes.

As the first rays of sun licked the outstretched landscape, Antonio noticed that the terrain had changed. The soil was dark red and the shrubs were of a nature he had never seen before. There were no trees. The prisoners in the seats around him began to stir after a night of relative comfort on leather seats. The man next to him said something, but Antonio was deep in his own world and did not reply. He saw a military vehicle on the road parallel to the train, travelling in the same direction and saw workers already in the fields. *Their colouring and hair, they look like Italians*, Antonio thought. *They look free and yet they must be prisoners. We must be close now.* The train began to slow down grinding to a halt. The prisoners on the other side of the train mumbled and one could clearly hear the name "Zonderwater" mentioned over and over, which gave the message that their journey had come to an end. An hour must have passed before orders came for them to leave the train. Once again "Come on, Come on," which initiated the reluctant shuffle of bodies. One man chirped as to how sad he was to leave all this leather behind, and what wonderful shoes it would make, but no one saw the humour in that. Two placards between three poles in the shape of a "V" announced where they were and as they fell into columns, with South African guards posted parallel to them, Antonio noticed a difference in their faces to those of the British. The South African soldiers had gentler faces, with somewhat compassion in their eyes. Slowly they marched towards the big iron gates and Antonio felt the hardness of the ground beneath him. They stopped for a moment, congestion up ahead. He saw an anthill next to him and side-stepped to kick it. An army of ants dispersed in a frenzy and chaos. He related this to the Italian army on the day of his capture. *Were they ants? Huge ants at Zonderwater!* he thought. Antonio did not see the gates shut behind him. The long column of men travelled out of sight. Other prisoners were lined up along the fences of the internal road and watched as the new batch of prisoners came in.

"What news of the war?" someone shouted.

No one responded.

They were being divided up now and Antonio and his group were marched to "Block 7", then divided up again, and he finally found himself in camp 27. *How vast this all is, how long will we be here? Tents like this, amazing! In the war we slept under trees, as prisoners we have tents!*

### III

Zonderwater in Afrikaans, “sonder water”, meaning without water. Situated 43-km north-west of Pretoria, in close proximity to Cullinan, in the old province of the Transvaal, once the Boer Republic and now Gauteng. How Zonderwater got its name? Who knows, but Antonio was to experience the true contradiction of that name on his first night there. At around 16:00 hrs a bald sky became dotted with patches of cotton-wool clouds. As the wind came up and brought more clouds one could see on the horizon a dark menacing sky in contrast to a setting sun. By nightfall the skies opened their floodgates, unleashing bolts of lightning that would frighten even the locals. Thunder that shook the earth. A windstorm that tore up tents in the camp and lifted corrugated iron roof tops from store depots. Antonio shook in his boots and on the ground that he stood on... *What have the Gods sent us, he thought, were we that terrible up north that we should be punished like this?* Lightening flashed through the tent, bringing in a fluorescent light stronger than anything he had ever seen. For that instant, he saw the faces of his tent mates, white with shock. The tent flap blew open and he moved over to tie it down. In doing so, he lost his balance and was about to grab onto the centre pole of the tent. “Don’t touch that!” a seasoned man shouted. Antonio looked at him in shock, questioning his shout... “Unless you want to join the others who lie in the cemetery over the hill, that pole will kill you!”

Natural lightning conductors dotted the camp by their thousands. The eight-man tents that housed the prisoners in the early days of Zonderwater were death traps in storms such as this. The “tendopoli” as they were called had metal centre poles and their protruding tops attracted lightning, making them deadly targets. Even Zulu warriors, doubling up as sentries, were victims of lightning as they carried assegai’s in their hands. Water gushed through the tents, creating a mud bath and it was difficult to keep bedding dry. Outside, natural rivers formed, created by the downpour, a sight that had to be seen to be believed. There would be many more such storms, which the POWs’ would never get used to, many more deaths by lightning two of them were buried and laid to rest by Antonio in the tranquil gardens of Zonderwater.

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As months rolled by, new prisoners came in from the front and brought news that the war was not going as expected. The Italians had been defeated at all fronts, firstly in France, then in Greece; the Russian campaign was a disaster and very few soldiers, if any, returned alive. Zonderwater began to look like the saviour of the Italian soldier in the African campaign. But how could they turn their monotonous lives into something of value?

There were two brothers, Peppe and Pasquale, inseparable even as prisoners. Peppe was married and he counted his children and his years. Pasquale, the younger and single, wanted to be a merchant when the war would be over one day, but in the meantime he was cutting hair and shaving those who could afford this luxury. Cutting head after head he would terminate his task by saying, “We are finished.”

“Yes Pasquale,” his clients would respond, “we are finished.” Pasquale’s lack of education and command of the Italian language did not allow him to express himself correctly, but this was short-lived. One day Don Rosario Napoletano was under Pasquale’s razor and when he received his send-off “We are finished. Don Napoletano”, the Don realised that what Pasquale intended was, in fact, that he had finished! The Don decided that these grammatical errors could be rectified with basic tuition and so he set out to recruit all those with a formal education and willing to teach the Italian language.

At a meeting he said, “Perhaps we do not know how many illiterate and ignorant men we have within our midst. We have the opportunity here and now, with the help of the South African authorities to assist these men, so that one day when we return to our beautiful country, we can say that our time spent here at Zonderwater was not in vain.” He received a round of applause and the school, “Duca d’Aosta”, was born. One of those tutors was Antonio. He was allocated fifty men of whom many had never held a pencil in-between their fingers. Starting from the basics, Antonio brought them through the first stages of reading and writing. One day, as Antonio sat in his tent correcting some of his pupil’s work, Nicola Caruso came to him.

“May I, professor?” he inquired standing at the tent flap.

“Yes of course, Nicola, come in.... What can I do for you?”

Nicola had a letter in his hand and tears in his eyes. He sat on a box next to his tutor and said.

“Professore, it is the first time in my life that I am able to read a letter... This one is from home and even though the news it carries is that of a sad nature, I’m still able to read it. Thank you professore.” Antonio too could not hold back his emotion. He was a young man by comparison to his pupil, and in fact he as the teacher was the youngest in the class.

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A group of men were huddled together in the communal shed of block 7 and Antonio had been watching them for a while. He had seen them before and thought nothing of it. He thought that perhaps it was a good game of draughts that held their attention. He had finished his teaching for the day and was enjoying a quiet smoke in the shade. He noticed that every time someone came close to the group they would open as a flower would in the sun, only to close again as they passed. It was amusing to watch people and their ways. Antonio had made lots of friends, some of which were from Brindisi, like Pietruccio who was particularly close to him, then there was Raffaele, but Antonio also enjoyed his own company and often sat out under the shed and just watched. He knew one of the men in the group and targeted him to try and find out what this conspiracy was all about... The group had captured Antonio’s interest. That night as they were queuing for dinner, Antonio looked out for Carlo. Spotting him as he approached the cookhouse, he waited to fall in with him.

“Ciao Carlo, how goes it friend?” Antonio said, putting his free hand round Carlo’s shoulder.

“Not bad Anto`, how about you?”

“Things could be better. The authorities could occasionally take us into the red light district of Pretoria, but I guess I will just have to get used to the calluses on the palm of my hand.”

Carlo laughed! “Ha yes, Anto`, I’m starting to get calluses on my palms... but it won’t be for long, I hope”

“What do you mean?” inquired Antonio.

“Ah, nothing Anto`, I just wish this war would be over so we can get the hell out of here.”

“I know what’s going on Carlo, I have heard... I want in,” Antonio called his bluff. He was fishing and judging by the look in Carlo’s eyes, he had a bite.

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” said Carlo.

“Come on, Faragi has told me.”

“He couldn’t have, we have been sworn to secrecy. What is he doing? Does he want us all caught before we even go? What a fool Faragi is!”

“When do you go?” asked Antonio.

“The night after tomorrow.”

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On 4 January 1942, a group of forty prisoners disappeared through a tunnel they had dug from the latrines to the fence. Months of work, months of preparation and planning. Antonio was not with them, he had just been curious, but he did not expect to stumble upon something of this magnitude and, with respect, kept their secret. As he lay in bed thinking of the forty, scurrying through the tunnel like moles, he listened to the thunder outside. Had they perhaps postponed their escape because of this vicious storm...? Antonio drifted off.

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She came to him again as she did so often in those years at Zonderwater. She was his mistress of that time. He saw her as usual, as he did that day on the train, in her blue bathing suit. She was pulling at his arm, he was dressed in his tunic and not as the sailor. His “envelope” cap sitting on his head at an angle. His curly dark hair showing only on one side, complementing his dark-brown eyes. He was clean-shaven and yet one could see the dark undergrowth of his heavy beard. Slim and lean he could have been the Clark Gable of the Italian army. He turns to look at the train and sees himself in the window. *Poor man, he thinks, dirty tattered clothes, humiliation written all over your face, what has happened to you, what will become of*

*you? Your country has lost you, you belong nowhere!*

The blonde pulled him away. She was laughing and he smiled at himself sitting in that train.

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Antonio woke up in a cold sweat. It was not yet 06:00 - he had an hour before inspection. He lay in his bunk bed, lifting the flap to see if the sky was clear after the storm. There were the usual mud ponds scattered all round the camp, like mirrors reflecting the first rays of light. He lifted himself on his elbows and looked around the tent. All other seven men were still asleep, their feet all converging to the centre of the tent. Antonio thought they looked like an orange sliced in half, each one of them representing a segment.... *Oh what I would do for an orange right now.* He turned to his makeshift side table, lifting his veldt hat, which he vowed never to wear, he picked up the mirror which lay underneath. He had just acquired it and was lucky to have done so. When parcels arrived from Italian families resident in South Africa, one was never sure what one would get, if anything at that. Perhaps a book, a tin of tuna or a packet of biscuits, Antonio had got a mirror and this made him a very popular man in the camp...

“Antonio, can I shave with your mirror today?”

“Can I trade you a cigarette?”

“Hey Anto’, can I just see how I look? I have a girl coming over to my tent later, you know how it is....”

“Bring the girl here,” Antonio would reply, “I will swap her for my mirror!”

As the camp came to life, there was restless agitation in the block. Messages started to filter from one tent to another...

“There has been an escape, many men have gone.”

Guards came running through the camp, then the sound of whistles, dogs barking, great commotion. Then they discovered the bodies. They found the bodies of Carlo Caradonna and Giuseppe Faragi at the perimeter fence of the camp, both burnt. They had been struck by lightning. During their escape that night, an unfortunate bolt of lightning struck the two men as they were going through the fence. Their burned dark bodies, drenched from the night’s rain made all those who saw, silent with shock.

After roll call, they discovered that thirty-eight men had successfully escaped and were at large. Carlo and Giuseppe were laid to rest respectfully in graves No’s. 21 and 22 at the Zonderwater cemetery.

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The sun was setting and the warm glow cast by the last rays of light gave the white papers Antonio was correcting an appearance of being coloured. He was sitting under the communal shed of Camp 27 as he did on most evenings. From where he sat he could see the big ball of fire disappearing into the horizon and this always gave him a thrill and credibility to his belief that a God did exist. Even though he did not frequent the Lord’s home, times like this made him a believer. He was a man meticulous in his teaching and took pride in explaining mistakes to his students. Antonio had beautiful handwriting and the contrast on each page of his writing to that of his students, made them want to strive for perfection.

Lights made from old tins filled with oil and grease were being lit in tents all round, their flickering wicks casting unusual shadows on the tent walls. The camp resembled a scene from Nazareth and he could not help feeling a sense of emotion flow through him, a place so humble looking so beautiful. This was a time of day that promoted serenity, a time for reading old letters, for enjoying a rationed cigarette, a chat with a friend.

Raffaele came and sat opposite Antonio, resting his elbows on the concrete table, he looked across at his friend and smiled.

“Ciao professore! I’m here for my private lesson.”

Raffaele was a tall man whose appearance resembled nothing of his true nature. Quiet and reserved, he had few friends. At times Antonio thought him to be gay or even asexual, as he never ventured into the subject of women or sex. If Antonio steered him in that direction, Raffaele would find an excuse... “I need to go Anto’, excuse me but nature calls....” So when Antonio was not in the mood for Raffaele’s company, he would conveniently ask if he received mail from his girl back home. But this evening, Antonio felt warm

and had the need for company.

“Ciao Raffae`, don't start by taking the piss out of me now, there is very little I can teach you, you're a man of this world, I can learn from you.”

Raffaele smiled and in a coy manner took this as a compliment.

“So they got away, minus the two stuck to the fence, what a tragedy!” Raffaele said.

“Mmmm, I wonder how long the others will be at large, where do they think they will go? Mozambique? How long will it take them to get there? I knew they were springing, I could have been there with them, but I thought long and hard... what would happen to my students who are so enthusiastic about learning? Where would I get my next meal? Why risk being caught and spending twenty-eight days in the “Red Box” \*, hell no... what for? Are they going back to Ethiopia? Only to surrender again! Look at how many prisoners have come to Zonderwater. There must be 70000 of us. Does it look as if we are winning this war?”

“You are right Anto`, you are always right.... I just felt so sad burying those two today. What a waste of life, as if there is not enough death at the front. What will be written to their parents...? Dear so and so, we regret to inform you that your sons died for king and country, struck by a bolt of lightning, stuck to a fence whilst trying to flee! It's as if God is with the Allies.”

“No Raffae`, God is not with the Allies. All God is saying.... I saved you from this madness; I placed you in a camp that respects human life and the Geneva Convention.... Why fuck with that?”

“ No Anto`, God doesn't swear, Anto`!”

“OK, so perhaps he may not use that word, but he must get pissed off at times! You will see, those guys won't be out there for long... look at that idiot Alfredo from the eleventh block he escapes, stays away for a month, then returns, cutting a hole in the fence to come back in and carries on as if nothing had happened.”

“He did do his twenty-eight days though”

“That's not the point.... What did he achieve? Colonel Prinsloo knows that we are at the asshole of the world here in Africa. Even if we get out from behind these fences, where will we go? We are no threat to the South African government, no threat to the allied forces. All Prinsloo is giving us is shelter, a meal and a shilling a day. Soon we too will be auctioned off to some farmer as cheap labour... In any case, I hear that soon all these tents will be coming down and that we prisoners will be building real dormitories, so when we eventually go from here the South Africans will have a camp built for their soldiers.”

It was pitch dark now and Antonio could barely see Raffaele's face.

“ I suppose we best go get some dinner... that's if the RAF have not raided the kitchens again and left us with nothing,” Antonio said.

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The RAF was a gang of prisoners who reigned supreme in the days of Zonderwater. They were from the fifth block and were made up mostly of men from the region of “Calabria” in the south of Italy. They were notoriously called the “RAF” (Royal Air Force) because of their rapid raids. They would raid the kitchens of various camps, terrorising late night kitchen staff. The RAF satisfied many a hungry pallet, but also at the same time taking away from those who went short. A prisoner who was an electrician by trade came up with the idea to electrify the fence surrounding the perimeters of the cookhouse, the roof, windows and doors. When the RAF next struck, they were met with an electrifying reception and, together with the newly formed counter gang, “Contraraf”, armed with batons, and other blunt instruments, they managed to crush this gang.

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The winter of 1942 saw the end of the tent era at Zonderwater. The South African authorities went out of their way to improve living conditions for the prisoners. Manpower and skills were growing with figures reaching 92000 prisoners. All the authorities needed to do was to supply the material.

By 1943 “The Prisoners City” was complete, it became a permanent structure of red brick and wood. Each of the eleven blocks was designed as a small rectangular fenced-in suburb. The POW's measured these perimeters, not in metres, but in the time it took them to walk round. This was a common recreational activity, “la passeggiata” (the walk), which took 25 minutes.

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\* *Detention Barracks notoriously named “The Red Box”*

It was during one of these walks with a group of friends that Antonio heard a letter being read of a POW who had been transferred to a farm in the Cape. He had written to some of his friends he had left behind.

“Guys!

I think I’m in paradise. . . . I’m on a fruit farm in a place called Ceres where grapes are also grown for export. What a beautiful place!

Let me tell you of an incident, which transpired after our arrival and has since changed our lives from being prisoners to respected people. I happened to find myself in the office with the admin staff when the owner of the farm, Signor Fernhout, expressed his desire to construct a rondavel, eight metres in diameter. As all the rondavels here are of four metres, he wanted a plan drawn. I told him I could do it and set out with my new task. When I presented him with the drawing, he looked and studied it for a long period of time, then, turning to me, he said: “ I think you were overexcited and in a hurry in doing this.” When I queried his remark, he told me that I had forgotten to include the centre pole, which would hold up the roof. I explained that it was not necessary to have such a pole. He looked at me as if I was mad.

It was raining on that day and I saw an umbrella in the corner of the room. I took it outside and showed him that even without the handle, the umbrella could support itself. He broke off the handle and tried it for himself. I convinced him that we could do it.

In our group of Italians here, we also have a carpenter and a builder and I need not tell you that the rondavel is now erect without a centre pole and is the centre of attraction, especially after Sunday mass. Everyone comes to see this structure.

FAME AT LAST!

See you all back in Italy,  
Achille Armellin”

“He has done us proud, in this small but humble way,” Antonio said.

There were many such stories that came out of Zonderwater as the Italian POW ’s shared their knowledge and experience with the locals, some in agricultural, others in engineering and also in construction. Furniture was constructed from wood donated by locals and timber yards. Each year an exhibition was held at Zonderwater, attracting people from all over the country. Tables, chess sets, jewellery boxes all meticulously hand made, were awarded prizes for their fine craftsmanship. A bar table made by Giorgio Francesco, hand carved in the 17<sup>th</sup> century style, an exquisite piece, a true example of the ability of that time. \*

The prisoners carried on walking, most of them deep in thought, their minds drifting each in their own direction. Only when they looked left did they realise they were still prisoners and snapped out of their mind travels. Antonio felt the need to get out and also prove to himself and others that he was worth more. He had done what he could here at Zonderwater. He had given many men the gift of reading and writing, but he was now restless for change. He contemplated escape! Would that be the answer? Perhaps he would not be allocated a transfer as he was teaching. What was it like to work in this foreign land?

#### IV

As many as 600 kilometres away, somewhere on the coast north of Durban, close to where Antonio first set foot in South Africa, Mother Superior Monica woke with a startle. Slipping off her nightgown and pulling over her habit, she rushed through the corridors of the small convent.

“Sister Mary, where are you. . . Sister Mary!”

Her face, spilling out of her facial white frame, her arms pulled up to her sides, moving as if she were setting a train in motion.

“Sister Mary!”

Sister Mary was in the chapel sharing a quiet moment with her maker. She did so most mornings as it was

\* *This table I proudly exhibit in my home today.*

seldom that she could find some tranquillity during the course of the day. Also, the girls would be arriving soon after 07:30 and that meant that the day would begin and only end much later in the evening.

“Sister Mary, Sister Mary!”

Mother Superior stormed into the chapel, half genuflecting and making the sign of the cross before the crucifix, which towered above.

“What is it Mother Superior?”

“A calling sister, I’ve had a calling.... Get the car fuelled, we are leaving now.”

“Where are we going?” inquired Sister Mary in half tones, perhaps for the sake of our Lord who was bearing witness to this outburst. Or was it perhaps to try to remain calm so early in the morning as a full day lay ahead?

“I’m not sure yet sister. Just do as you are told and the Lord will take care of the rest.”

*What does this old bat mean, “the Lord will take care of the rest”...? (Forgive me Lord),* she thought as she looked up to the cross, seeking forgiveness. Why did the Lord send her here to endure this “woman”? Sister Mary closed her prayer book, and followed Mother Superior who was already in the main house. Finding her in her room, Sister Mary spoke from the half-open door.

“Mother Superior, where are we going? The girls will be here soon and we have lessons to cover.”

“Dearie me,” Mother Superior said as she came to the door. “I had a calling last night. This cannot wait. Father Harold will take the girls for today and perhaps even tomorrow, but we must do what needs to be done! Now take the car to Tongaat and have it filled, make sure you check the water as well as the oil... that’s a good girl now!”

Sister Mary went to the old car shed where the Plymouth stood and hoped that it would start without having to use the crank. She drove to Tongaat thinking of what Mother Superior had said. Was it really a calling from above or was she overreacting as she usually did? She thought of the girls. They were in the process of reading “Little Women”. They were so into the story and looked forward to reading a bit more every day. They would sit under the big chestnut tree and even the birds would join in to listen, chirping their approval and encouraging Sister Mary at every pause. When she read, the only sound that came out was that of her gentle voice, and the waves of the Indian Ocean crashing in the distance.

On her return from Tongaat, Mother Superior was waiting on the veranda, ready and packed... “Come on sister, is the car full, are we ready to leave?” This was not really a question, but more of a command.

“But I’m not packed Mother Superior!”

“Don’t worry child. I have all you need in here. The Lord will provide the rest.”

Sister Mary’s eyes widened and the blood rushed to her face. She had had enough, how could the Lord provide her with clean underwear? Her mother had dictated to her as a child but this was worse. She ignored Mother Superior, and brushing past her, she went to her room, picking up her toothbrush, face cloth and a change of underwear. Stuffing them all into a small leather bag, the one her father gave her the day she left home for the convent, she walked calmly back to the car.

“Now Mother Superior, if you wish me to drive you, I will, but we will do so in silence as I wish to pray.... And not before you tell me where we are going and why!”

This was Sister Mary’s first outburst and stance towards her superior and it made her feel good. Mother Superior’s jaw dropped as she watched Sister Mary go around the car, get into the drivers’ seat and turn the key.

\*

Antonio sat with his mug of “café latte” as he did each morning sipping and enjoying this added luxury. Each and every morning he thanked Don Arturo for his ingenious invention of producing “café latte” for the masses. He did not know how he did it. He had heard and seen of the drums and filters that boiled the water and coffee, then the milk. He had also heard of Colonel Prinsloo’s approval and that he had commended Arturo for this fine invention as the system had saved the authorities hundreds of kilograms of

coffee each and every month. Raffaele came and sat next to him and Antonio, instead of greeting him, just said, "Bravo Arturo!" Raffaele nodded his approval as he too sipped at his café latte. They sat in silence savouring the moment.

A guard came up from behind Antonio and tapped him on the shoulder.

"You Forleo?" he asked.

"Si, yes, I am Forleo."

"Come with me please, they want to see you in the office."

Antonio's heart sank to his stomach. The blood drained from his face as he stood up and followed the guard.

Antonio had picked up the occasional phrase book and dictionary when he worked in the library at the "Duca D'Osta" school. He had written out basic phrases and words and had translated them, practising the pronunciation, asking the guards to repeat the phrases so he could hear the sounds. He had never put it into practice, only recited to himself, watching his lip movements in his little mirror.

They drove out of the block and past the other fenced off -suburbs of the town of Zonderwater. Antonio was mesmerised as to how big it all really was. As they made their way to the administrative block, he still had this feeling of anxiety. He wondered if it could be news from home. Perhaps someone is actually missing him. Or could it be that had they captured some of the escaped prisoners and they had mentioned that Antonio knew of their plan.... Would he have to go to the infamous "Red Box"?

As he stood outside Colonel Prinsloo's office, he heard the voices of both men and women. He waited, hands joined together behind his back, as a child would outside the principal's office, awaiting the outcome of his punishment. Finally he was shown in and both nuns turned in their chairs to look at Antonio as he walked through the door. They looked at him as if Saint Anthony himself had just entered the room.

Antonio greeted the nuns with a half bow, "Buongiorno Suore," then turning to Colonel Prinsloo and did the same, "Buongiorno Signor Colonnello".

"Please sit down," said the colonel.

Antonio looked around the room. *So this is where the boss sits.* A simply decorated office, dominated by a huge poster titled "The Geneva Convention". He knew now why the prisoners here at Zonderwater respected this man, a man of integrity and compassion. Sometimes criticised by his own people as being overly caring, saying that the South African prisoners held in Italy was not as well looked after as those here. But he turned a deaf ear to all that talk and made his own judgements.

An interpreter stood by Colonel Prinsloo's side.

"Forleo, you are a very lucky man! Mother Superior Monica here has driven all the way from Durban to fetch you and take you back with her to her convent. She had a dream. St Anthony appeared to her and told her to come to Zonderwater and take Anthony away from the misery of prison-hood. As you may imagine, Forleo, there are many Anthony's here at Zonderwater and as I opened the register for Mother Superior to choose one, she chose you." The interpreter translated all that the colonel had said. Tears filled his eyes, he did not have a hanky and so he wiped them with his sleeve. Mother Superior Monica got up and, digging deep into her habit, she produced a hanky and, taking it over to Antonio, she embracing him. This was the first physical contact Antonio had had in years and his tears turned to sobs.

"Here, here my boy, my dear little Anthony", said Mother Superior. "You poor child."

Colonel Prinsloo too felt the emotion that had entered his office. This, a military room, a place of war, a place for real men and yet there was so much emotion. He turned and looked out the window, a form of protection against his own emotion. He had his doubts as to the dream story, but he was in effect a God fearing Christian and he knew that this fate must have some meaning. In any case, it was one less mouth to feed, or could he make it two?

"Mother Superior," he said, "we don't like sending out just one man to an institute. Do you have place for two?"

Mother Superior had her Anthony, this is what she came for, and she looked at the colonel.

"Another Anthony?"

"Not necessarily, ma'am. Perhaps a friend of Forleo's?"

"What a good idea, colonel, at least he will have company."

"Forleo, you may choose a friend to go with you to this convent they call Genazzano."

Zonderwater was behind Antonio now as the sisters drove both him and Raffaele away on their long journey back to Genazzano. They did not look back as the gates closed behind them. It had been four long years. No words were spoken during that trip. Only when Mother Superior caught Sister Mary's darting glances in the rear-view mirror at Antonio, did she say, "Now sister, keep your eyes on the road. We don't want an accident here today."

Antonio tried to fight his drowsiness as the rocking movement of the Plymouth sent him into a deep sleep and he dreamed... He was flying, flying over Brindisi. He saw the natural horseshoe port, hugging the city he loved so much. The monument built to the fallen sailors, the Roman stairs. As he glided up "Corso Garibaldi", he saw the statue of Julius Caesar on the left, "Piazza Cairolì", its fountain jetting out spurts of water into the heavens and Antonio sensed the spray on his face. All the farmers were gathered there as they usually were, discussing their crops and harvests. And as he glided to the right, he saw Via Cristofolo Colombo and his mother sitting on her stool outside the front door, together with Zia Teresa. They were peeling broad beans. Oh, how he loved broad beans, but he was not staying for dinner; he was just passing by as angels do, gliding down over their loved ones, their widespread wings bringing up a wind from nowhere, and Antonio's mom had to tie her hair back as she turned to Zia Teresa and said, "I wonder where this wind has come from? Perhaps it brings rain, not common for this time of year." She looked up to the heavens to see if there were any clouds and Antonio smiled at her, but she did not smile back.

Antonio's eyes opened; it was dark out there, and they had been in the car for many hours. They were turning now and as they drove up the sand road, the headlights illuminated the wonderful avenue of trees and at the gate a sign read, "Welcome to Genazzano". Sister Mary got out to open the gate. Antonio was not sure as to what he should do; best stay seated, after all he was still a prisoner. Mother Superior half turned, as much as her habit would allow, and announced to the two men. "We have arrived, welcome to Genazzano. Take your bags out from the trunk, my boys, and I will show you to your quarters. Sister here will bring you some tea and bread as it's late and tomorrow we shall resume a normal diet. By heavens how you look as if you need one!"

Sister Mary knocked on the door of the room in the corner of the gardens, close to the chapel, and as Raffaele opened the door, he took the tray from the sister, "Grazie, grazie, sorella, e molto gentile...." The two men wolfed down the bread and drank the tea. They had not eaten all day and were famished. Antonio went outside to smoke a cigarette. He had only two left from his ration of five from the previous day- he did not collect his quota on the day as there was no time. The sisters wanted to leave quickly, there was just enough time to pack his sausage bag with the little items of clothing he possessed, not forgetting his mirror. As he walked through the dark gardens, all he could see were a few lights up in the main house, but what he did sense was the familiar smell and sound of the sea. This felt like home.

Antonio rose early the following morning. The strange environment did not allow him a peaceful night. He slipped on his shirt and shorts, reached also for his envelope army cap, the only thing he really had left from the war. He sat this on his head at an angle as he went outside. The sun had not risen yet, but there was just enough light for him to see the chapel next to his quarters. The convent was there, up the path behind the big chestnut tree. He could hear the waves, but the lush greenery that walled in the grounds did not allow him a view.

He walked along the perimeter, hoping for a gap so he could catch a glimpse of the sea he missed so much. He came to a metal bridge that crossed over the railway line. *So, there is a railway line between the beach and us.* As he stepped onto the bridge, he heard the distant sound of the 05:30 express, puffs of grey and white smoke announcing its arrival. He waited for it to pass, engulfed in clouds of smoke and soot, the thundering sound of that powerful mass rolling along the tracks grasped the pit of his stomach. He watched as the smoke vanished into thin air, then crossed the bridge. He stepped on the white sands of the Indian Ocean. The waves rolled and crashed, *how much wilder this sea is.* He walked to the waters edge, crouching down to get as close as possible. It was high tide and the water line was high and yet the beach was still so vast and wide. He cupped his hands and collected some of the clear salty fluid and splashed it

on his face, which at the same time stimulated his taste buds when he licked his lips. He opened his shirt and did the same.

The sun was rising fast now he had missed the orange ball coming out of the sea and he promised himself that he would be down often enough to witness that moment. He stood up and looked around. In the distance a fisherman was wetting his line. Antonio waved at him and the fisherman waved back.

He made his way back to the convent, crossing over the bridge again and walked towards his room. As he passed the chapel he saw the cracks and peeling paint on its walls. He went to the door. That too was peeling. The salt air is harsh on structures at the coast and maintenance is an ongoing process. He took his hand from his pocket and ran it over the door; the paint fell off, brittle and dry to the touch. Pushing the door open he stepped inside. He looked up at his maker nailed to the cross and wet his brow with holy water. Walking slowly up the aisle, he found the front pew. Genuflecting, he knelt, joining his hands together and all the time not taking his eyes off the cross.

“Dear Jesus,” he said, “I know you and I have not had much of a relationship, in fact the last time I saw you, was on my first communion. It’s just one of those things, Jesus, nothing personal, but I’m sorry! I don’t know what I did to deserve you noticing me at Zonderwater, but I want you to know that I’m grateful. Grateful firstly that you saved me from the war... I’m not going to question why Lieutenant Lorenzini had to die, that is your business, but he was a good man. Perhaps you know something I don’t. I’m thankful also that you sent me here, to this wonderful paradise.”

Sister Mary arrived at the chapel as she usually did most mornings, only to find the door already open. She peaked inside and saw a figure in the front row. Slowly and quietly she took a seat at the back and watched the figure from behind.

“I can see, Jesus,” Antonio was saying, “your house here at Genazzano is in a bad way; perhaps it is this that you want me to take care of...? Give me a sign, Jesus, tell me how I can pay you back.”

Antonio tilted his head to one side, waiting for Jesus to give him a sign... was that a wink? But the statue remained still.

“Jesus, I have brought Raffaele here with me as you know. He is not so good with his hands, perhaps I could have chosen someone more helpful, but he is a good man. Very quiet Jesus, you know. I thought that in a convent, why bring someone that is rowdy like Pietruccio, perhaps he would look at the sisters as women and not as your servants. Between me and you Jesus, I think Raffaele is asexual.... So he is safe and you can trust him and me too. But I promise you, Jesus, I can do it on my own. I will, Jesus, you will see I will fix this house of yours, that all at Genazzano will be proud!”

He got up, half genuflecting, half signing the cross and spun around, heading for the door as if a race had begun.... His race. He did not see Sister Mary sitting in the back row. She had her head bowed, her closed hands resting on her chin with an underlying smile all over her face. She did not understand a word Antonio had said, but his hand movements, his body language and gesticulations were enough for her. And all Jesus did was just listen to this one-sided conversation.

Antonio had left the chapel, only to rush back in and say; “Buongiorno Sorella” then rushed back out again.

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Mother Superior took a keen interest in and was a regular spectator to the work that was being done to the chapel. Antonio systematically removed the doors and windows from their frames. He then did the same with each glass pane and sanded the wood down to its original texture. Varnishing each piece, he set them aside whilst he went about removing all the loose plaster and filled the cracks on the structure walls.

Another keen spectator was Father Harold. Each morning, Sam, the convent helper, would place a deck chair in an appropriate position so that he could watch Antonio at work. He would shout out words of encouragement and approval, then after a while, while he become drowsy and fall asleep in the sun.

Antonio had been at the convent for three months now and already there was a noticeable change as to its general appearance. It had become a hive of activity, each day bringing something new. Raffaele had started a vegetable garden behind the kitchen, and fresh salad, radishes, beans and tomatoes were regular items on the daily menu.

Each morning before Antonio began his work at the chapel, he would fill brick moulds that he made from some timber found in the storeroom. Nailing together two parallel pieces of wood, then dividing them up into sections with more timber, the moulds resembling miniature stepladders. He filled each compartment

with a mix of river sand and cement and allowed them to set, lifting the frames after a few hours and creating instant homemade building blocks. These would lie in the sun and bake naturally. After days of drying, Antonio stacked them in neat piles. Making twelve of these each day, he had accumulated over one hundred and soon he would begin the construction of two new schoolrooms. The girls and Sister Mary were most excited about this new project and each day they would ask the same question: “Anthony, when are you starting our new classrooms?”

Stopping what he was doing and placing one foot adjacent to the other as a ballet dancer would, hands on his hips, he would say in his best possible English: “A very soona my belle signiorine.”

This would spark a chorus of giggles amongst the girls and Sister Mary alike. After all, Sister Mary was but a child herself and found the interaction with a man almost her own age, rather pleasurable.

Antonio’s English had improved somewhat since his arrival and this was thanks to Sister Mary who would spend time with him in the late afternoons as the sun was setting. She had learned a bit of Italian herself and she showed great potential. She had confessed to Antonio that her dream was to one day be in the Vatican City and to be as close to the pope as possible. Her staunch Catholic upbringing back in Ireland had taught her to admire the work of the highest order and that is where she wanted to be.

Mother Superior had shown her displeasure to these reunions, saying that Sister had other duties to perform, but Sister Mary had grown immune to Mother Superior’s dictatorship and dug in her heels. Mother Superior’s persistence was in vain and she finally gave in, ignoring these meetings. After all, it was all for a good cause communicating with Antonio had become much easier and the work he was doing was nothing short of a miracle.

During his midday breaks, as the sun was at its highest, Antonio would take a seat with the girls under the old chestnut tree and listen to Sister Mary’s readings. They had finished “Little Women” and were now on “Great Expectations”. Antonio did not understand much of what he heard, but Sister Mary’s soothing tones and listening to the language did help him along with his own learning’s and, at the same time, warmed his soul.

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Nine months had passed and Antonio was now assembling all the newly varnished windows and doors. He had re-plastered and patched the cracks. Painting the chapel made all the difference and today he was busy with the finishing touches. He had continued his task of making building blocks and had accumulated close to 350. Mother Superior had wanted the classroom built at the bottom of the gardens, but Antonio had convinced her that the top of the slope would be better. It was the only point in the gardens that had a sea view. Antonio had mapped out the foundations and had asked Raffaele to help with the digging.

As Antonio was putting the finishing touches of enamel paint to the gutters and down-pipes, Father Harold came down to the gardens as he usually did. In the past months, not only had he needed the help of Sam to carry his deck chair but also needed someone to lean on. Father Harold was well into his eighties and had spent most of his priesthood years at Genazzano, serving mass to the locals every Sunday. He had earned the respect of the people. He was known to have baptised some whom he later married and again baptised their own children.

“Buongiorno, Mussolini!” he would call out, as he approached Antonio.

“Gooda morning, Fatha Harold, how are you dis morning?”

“Very well, my good man, top of the morning. Mind you, don’t fall off that ladder there, son. We wouldn’t want another war casualty here at Genazzano.”

“Donta worry, I’m OK.”

Antonio looked down at the old Father and thought how much he had aged since he had been here. But even with that, the old man would never miss a day’s entertainment or DIY lesson.

As Father Harold fell into his chair, propping his stick alongside, Antonio shouted out:

“Today we paint, Fatha, very good, very well.”

“Yes, Benito, today we paint... bloody hell, son, the only decent thing your leader ever did was to send you here to us!”

“Watta you sey, Fatha?”

Father Harold did not reply and Antonio imagined that he had already dropped off. The time he spent awake in the gardens grew shorter and shorter with each day and Antonio knew that the moment the words of encouragement had ended, he would be in dreamland.

By midday Father Harold was still asleep and it was time for Antonio to take his break and go to the old chestnut tree to listen to Sister Mary's readings. He climbed off his ladder and went over to the old Father to wake him so he could go to lunch.

"Fatha, Fatha Harold, wake-up, is hot here fora you."

Antonio crouched down to look under the old priest's wide-rimmed Panama hat and saw that his false teeth were protruding from his mouth. He lifted his wrist and felt no pulse. Slowly he got up and walked to the main house and knocked on Mother Superior's door...

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There were many people at Father Harold's funeral, all the locals from Tongaat and even some from as far as Durban. The girls were all there dressed in their Sunday best. Their parents, most of whom worked at the sugar mill close by, filled the chapel to capacity. Antonio had asked Mother Superior if he could make the old priest's coffin, which he did, working through the night.

The old convent cemetery was up in the woods, behind the convent grounds, and Raffaele had taken it upon himself to include its upkeep as part of his garden duties. Very unassuming, simple and quaint, this small burial ground had the history of a small but proud community. Nuns and God-fearing Christians were all laid to rest here, some children, those who died from illness, snakebites and even drowning. Father Gerard, from the local parish of Durban, was asked by Mother Superior to say mass and as they all sat in the newly renovated church, a sense of pride came over the people of Tongaat.

Mass had begun and Antonio and Raffaele stood at the back door of the chapel when a lady, dressed in a black pencil skirt, black hugging jacket and a veil covering her head, asked to be excused. Squeezing herself through the people, she found her way into the chapel and asked some of the girls to move up so she could sit. Antonio could not help noticing her stiletto heels and black seamed stockings. He turned to look at Raffaele, but there was no reaction from him to this epitome of beauty that had just passed them, leaving a trail of sensual perfume. Antonio was struck! From the back row of the church, Sister Mary had noticed the late arrival and had also noticed Antonio's reaction to this grand entrance. She saw him lifting his shirt and smelling it, just where the lady had rubbed past him.

Sister Mary thought to herself: *She has to come! Perfect timing as usual... the Black Mamba of Genazzano!*

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Sister Mary stood at the sea edge. She had got up early that day and decided to dedicate her prayer time out in the open, watching the new daybreak. It was another way of being close to her maker as each and every sunrise was different and carried a special kind of magic. It was Sunday and Sundays did not demand from her the usual duties. This gave Sister Mary more free time and, on occasion, she would go to the beach and bond with nature. She would take off her veil when no one was around and allow the wind to sail through her beautiful long blonde hair. She stood there now, her habit raised to her knees, allowing the waves to crash onto her lily-white legs, gasping as the cold seawater sent shivers through her body. These times reminded her of her youth, back in Ireland. The simple days she spent with her family at the beach. Antonio had missed the sunrise that day. He had slept late and was getting himself ready for one of his long Sunday walks along the beach. As he crossed over the metal bridge, he saw the figure of a nun at the water's edge. He was about to turn around and go back, sensing the nun's intimate moment, when Sister Mary turned round and saw him. She immediately scrambled for her veil and Antonio, sensing her embarrassment, turned and faced away. He gave her time to recover herself and, when he turned again, she was standing, arms folded, facing the sea. Antonio walked up behind her and whispered: "Buongiorno Sorella Maria."

"Ah, buongiorno, Antonio," she replied with a somewhat embarrassed tone in her voice.

"Che bella giornata - what a beautiful day," he said, not directed at Sister Mary, but just making a statement.

"Si", she replied. "Do you feel like walking, Antonio?" she asked.

"Si", he mimicked in reply, and they smiled.

“The schoolrooms look lovely, Antonio, they are coming along nicely.”

“Yes Sista, still a lotta work.”

“Yes Antonio, there is a lot of work to be done and you have done a lot for us here at Genazzano. God bless you for your kindness and may he give you the strength to continue. Soon the war will be over and I hope you will have finished what you have set out to do, before then.”

Antonio did not fully understand all that the nun had said, but he did understand the meaning.

“Sista Maria, the war is finished maybe soon, batta me, I no go before I finish work at Genazzano.”

Sister Mary smiled and a warm feeling crept through her body. They were so lucky to have him here, a true miracle.

“I see you noticed the woman in black at Father Harold’s funeral two weeks ago.”

“Ah Si, bella donna! Who she?” he inquired.

“That, dear Antonio, is the brow-raiser of Genazzano and she certainly did that to you, didn’t she?”

“Brow-raiser?” Antonio looked confused.

Sister Mary took Antonio’s hand. She had soft, delicate hands and her touch gave Antonio a tingling sensation through his body. She raised his hand and placed it on his brow, “This is your brow, Antonio.”

“Ah, la fronte.”

“Yes, la fronte”, she mimicked. “You liked her, right?”

Antonio was put in a spot. He shrugged his shoulders as if to show indifference, but Sister Mary read him the way she read Charles Dickens.

“She, Antonio, is Elizabeth, an author, a writer... she writes books, Antonio, novels, do you understand? Not the type I would read to the girls that is... In fact, I would not read them at all!”

“Si, si,” Antonio was nodding his head, picking up quickly the intent and also the feeling that Sister Mary did not like the woman at all.

“She comes to Genazzano once or twice a year. A bad year for us is when she comes three times. She is married to a doctor in Johannesburg, but it’s a marriage of convenience. He is much older than her and has lots of money. When she is here, we all stand to attention.” She stood still in the sand, standing to attention like a soldier on parade, even raising her hand in salute. The bottom of her habit was wet and had gathered sea sand which gave it an embroidered look. Her veil sat skew on her head and a tuft of blonde hair was showing.

“Yes sir, no sir... Si signore, no signore, at your service sir...!” she mimicked.

Antonio laughed. She was acting like the young girl that she really was and he felt the sudden urge to take her in his arms and swing her around and around till they dropped from dizziness. But Antonio knew his place and it took a lot of courage to hold back.

“She brings lots of money here for the convent, Antonio, she donates a lot for us to survive. It is her money that is paying for the renovations, also the restoration of the chapel, the building of the new schoolrooms. She spends hours in her room locked up with her typewriter. She comes out to walk on the beach. She sometimes asks for her meals in her room. She never talks to us, only to Mother Superior and Father Harold, God rest his soul. She never says a kind word. The story goes that she had a twin sister who was a nun. She was sent to a missionary school in Zululand and died of pneumonia. She feels that by being at Genazzano, she is being close to her sister. She stays in the suite next to the convent, the one that is locked. You know the one you recently painted its door. That is reserved only for VIPs”

“VIPs? What is VIPs?”

“Very important people, Antonio, certainly not you or I.”

They had come a long way and Sister Mary turned round to see just how far...

“I’ll race you back, Antonio,” and she said and started to run.

Antonio did not understand the challenge, but the moment he saw her break out in a run, he followed, making sure he kept a distance, as this was one race he did not want to win.

## VI

“It is better to live a day as a lion than a hundred days as a lamb.” Words spoken by Benito Mussolini. And on 28 April 1945, his days as dictator and reigning lion of Italy came to an abrupt end, when he was shot, together with his mistress, Claretta. Strung upside down in the Town Square of Azzono and placed on public display, hundreds of angry, mourning mothers spat in his face. Italy had surrendered to the allies and the long process of repatriation of Italian prisoners had begun.

Mother Superior Monica received an official envelope from the prison authorities of Zonderwater, informing her of this news. The prisoners, Antonio Forleo and Raffaele Conti, were to report to the military police barracks at Durban Harbour, three weeks from the date of the letter, as they were to be repatriated. A tear came to Mother Superior’s eyes. The boys had become a part of Genazzano and they had done so much to improve it. Raffaele had tended to the gardens, the cemetery, and the vegetable garden, and even the chickens had multiplied sufficiently to supply eggs to sell. Antonio had not yet finished the two classrooms. He was at roof height but there was still so much more to be done. Mother Superior thought of making the letter disappear, perhaps pretend that it never arrived. Then she thought of hell and her cheeks flushed as if she were already being burned just at the thought and quickly changed her mind. *What shall be, shall be, and the Lord will take care of the rest*, she thought and broke out into a quick march to where Antonio was working.

Antonio was on the scaffolding and Mother Superior had learned from experience not to stand too close under this structure, as when Antonio came to the edge, his loose shorts and trunks would display his manhood. This had left Mother Superior sleepless for more than one night! Sure, she had seen the statue of David, but that was in stone. She had seen the statue of St Theodore with his horse standing on its hind legs... But that was an animal. Seeing Antonio, that was real, and for her a first.

“Anthony, Anthony, my boy, a letter from Zonderwater. The war is over, son. You have orders to go to Durban so they can ship you home.”

Antonio turned round and came to the edge. Mother Superior took two steps back, just to be safe. He looked down at her, envelope cap skew on his curly mop of hair, cigarette hanging from his mouth, one hand on his hip, the other sporting a trowel. He stood there and looked at her for a long time. She, in turn, looking at him. He then bent down, dug his trowel into the pile of cement he had next to him and continued laying bricks.

“Antonio, son, do you understand what I have just told you?”

Antonio ignored Mother Superior and continued as though the interruption had never taken place.

“God bless you, child!” she muttered as she walked off.

\*

“I don’t want to go back,” Antonio said as he lay on his top bunk, hands resting behind his head as he stared blankly at the ceiling of their room.

“We have orders, Anto`”, Raffaele replied from the bottom bunk. He was sitting, polishing his shoes.

“Surely we can be amongst the last to leave. Why do they have to start with us?”

“Anto`, I don’t know how you feel, but I miss my family. It is none of my business, but I have seen that you never get post from home and you never write. Does your mother know that you are alive?”

“If I were dead, the war office would have notified her. My mother has too much to worry about. For me to be out of her way is a blessing. She got rid of me as a child, sending me to that prick of a barrel maker. Said I needed to learn a trade, when all I wanted to do was study. My mother couldn’t even read my report card to know how well I was doing at school. I didn’t want to be like that. When they called her to tell her not to take me out of school, she replied that there was no money at home and that I needed to learn a trade. Thank God I went as far as I did, thank God I am able to read and write as well as I do.”

“You do Anto`, I know. All that fine work you did at Zonderwater, you helped so many to do the same.

“My asshole brothers, one cutting hair, the other still looking for his niche in life... please Raffae`! Here at least we are someone, the nuns, they like us. I love my mother, I have always wanted her to love me, but she kept pushing me away.”

“I’m going, Anto`. You can stay if they let you. I’m grateful to you for bringing me here with you. I will be eternally grateful, but home is home. Mussolini has taken a big chunk out of my life and I need to get back

on my feet. My mother needs me.”

“I wish my mother needed me, but my way, not hers. When I used to tell her that the barrel maker would tie me to a tree, sadistic prick, placing two corncocks under each of my knees, then piss on me, she wouldn’t believe me. She would say that I was lazy and that I did not want to work for the family.”

Antonio got up from his bunk and walked out the door...

“Where you going?”

Antonio didn’t reply.

\*

“Are you sure this is what you want son?” Mother Superior was asking Antonio.

“Si, I donta wanta go. I have too mucha work here to finish. Pleasa Motha Superiore, tell Zonderwater, I stay, please.”

“And Raffaele?”

“He wonta go home.”

Mother Superior’s heart opened with joy and once again she saw this as a miracle... *Oh! My dear St Anthony, what have we done to deserve all you have sent us.*

\*

The letter authorising Antonio’s stay until further notice arrived two weeks after Raffaele had left. Antonio was adamant that he was not leaving until he had completed what he had started. The farewells were emotional and the two men hugged and made promises of seeing each other again back in Italy, but time proved them wrong and that was the last time they saw each other.

\*

Timber beams formed the skeleton of the school roof. Antonio spent his days nailing each piece together, forming the converging shapes that would house the corrugated iron sheets. It was whilst he was perched on this jungle gym, looking like a contented chimpanzee, similar to those that frequent the area of Genazzano and are notoriously famous for stealing fruit and anything else they could lay their mitts on, that Antonio saw the arrival of the black car. It travelled with such elegance and style through the avenue of trees. Everyone stopped what they were doing to witness this arrival. A lady, very elegantly swung her long legs out of the car, her polka-dot, figure-hugging dress showing her shape. Stilettos wobbled a little as they sank into the loose soft ground, but the lady soon found her stance, adjusting her big dark glasses, flicking back her wavy black hair as she walked to the main house.

“Welcome, Mrs. Elizabeth,” Sister Mary said as she saw her coming through the entrance hall. “Your suite is ready. May I help you with your luggage?”

“You certainly may, Sister. Is the hot water on? I need to take a bath after that long journey. Oh, and Sister, don’t forget my typewriter, it’s on the back seat of the car.”

Antonio watched as Elizabeth and Sister Mary came back out. Elizabeth’s swing just as he had remembered it that morning in the church. He lost concentration for that moment and, as the hammer came down, it found the nail, but not the one intended. Antonio yelled blue murder, a volley of Italian curses echoed through the grounds of Genazzano and Elizabeth stopped in her tracks, looking to see where this commotion was coming from. She stood and stared at Antonio who was balancing and cursing, holding his broken nail in his other hand.

“Its Antonio, Mrs Elizabeth, the Italian prisoner of war, the one Mother Superior wrote to you about.”

“He certainly sings well, the cute little fellow!” she said as she walked on.

\*

More than a fortnight had passed and the corrugated iron that was meant to arrive from Durban had still not been delivered. Antonio kept himself busy, doing odd jobs around the convent. He had been up to the cemetery to see how the ground had settled on Father Harold's grave. He wanted to build a brick frame around it, with a crucifix in his memory. He had transported the bricks over a period of time and was now ready to begin.

As he arrived with his bucket of cement and trowel, he placed them down and heard a voice coming from the woods. He walked around the tombstones and followed the voice. Using the trees as cover he finally found the source and saw Elizabeth, gesticulating, reciting and dramatising. She was alone and as Antonio had never seen anything like this before, he wondered as to her sanity. Her body movements fascinated him, her hands caressing her breasts, pressing them together as she flung her head back and forward. It seemed like poetry coming from her soul.

Antonio stood there for ages, watching her in awe, finding it all very sensual. It reminded him of the stage shows held at Zonderwater, where the prisoners would dress up as Parisian Follies and do the cancan on stage. Even though they were men, their make-do make up and wigs made from rope, would drive the prison audiences mad. But this was a real woman and Antonio had to pull himself away and get back to what he was there to do.

As he was clearing away old leaves and pine needles so as to create a small foundation, he saw Elizabeth come through the woods and walk towards the cemetery. She walked up close to Antonio and as he was on his one knee, her hips were in full view. Antonio's heart was pounding: *I'm sure she can hear my heart beat or even see it pounding through my shirt.*

"Hello Anthony, I'm Elizabeth. Mother Superior has told me about you and all the fine things you are doing here at Genazzano."

"Buongiorno, Signora Elisabetta, I'ma happy to know you."

She was looking down at him and he was looking up at her. He could not move. His mind told him to get up, but his body failed him. If there had been any onlookers from a distance it would have appeared that Antonio was her slave. She was aware of this feeling of power and she moved in even closer.

"What are you doing here in the cemetery?" she asked.

"I'ma fix grave for Fatha Harold."

"Will you do my grave for me some day?"

Antonio looked at her, not fully understanding her question and not risking answering.

"One day I will be buried here in this cemetery. I have written this in my will. My life will not be a long one, I'm certain of that, and when I die, I would like you to build me a tombstone as well... Will you?"

Antonio again kept silent.

"I have chosen that spot there, next to that tree," she pointed behind him and as he turned she moved even closer. She was enjoying this game and she knew that when he would turn again, his face would be right up against her pelvis. Antonio could smell her perfume and his head was spinning. He turned round and was met by the sheen of her tight skirt. She placed her hand behind his head and pushed it into her most sensitive part. Antonio gasped! She fell to the ground, pulling him with her and they became lost in each other, making love over and over again, on the soft leaves and grass. Their only witnesses were those who could not speak.

\*

Work on the classrooms slowed down dramatically even after the corrugated iron sheets had arrived. Antonio would disappear for hours where no one would find him. He missed out on Sister Mary's readings, something he still routinely did and she noticed his absence, feeling profoundly hurt. They would still meet for their daily language lessons, but Antonio was distracted. She had asked him why and expressed her concern for him, but he simply replied that he was worried that he would be called back for repatriation before he could finish his work. She knew this was not true, and needed to find out what it was that had changed him so much.

One day as she was reading to the girls, she noticed him walking away from his work site and make his way towards the woods. She asked Anastasia, her top student, to carry on reading whilst she went away for

a short time. Anastasia cherished moments like this and would take over the reading with enthusiasm and expression. Sister Mary walked in the direction of the convent and, when she was out of sight, she cut in the direction of the woods.

\*

Sister Mary came stumbling out of the woods, her hands cupped to her mouth. She stood behind the convent wall and vomited. She felt sick to the stomach. "Why?" she cried!

\*

Sister Mary sat in the chapel, usually she would kneel, but today she felt weak.

*Lord, she looked up at the cross, are you the only real man who could stand and fight temptation?*

She bowed her head, placing her face into her hands. Tears filled her eyes.

*Lord, what is it that I feel? My love is for you; I am your servant, yet I cannot think of living a day without seeing that man. What is it I feel? Is it jealousy, lust or is it plain hatred for the snake that lures sin into your sacred garden? I hate her, Lord. Please forgive me, but I do, now more than ever. Antonio is a good man; he is a weak man. But perhaps weakness cannot be measured in terms of lust. I cannot relate to that, I shut myself off from that. Yet when I see him and am close to him I feel warm... Is this a sin, Lord? If so, I ask you for forgiveness and I ask you for the strength to continue serving you.*

Sister Mary lost track of time and was not sure how long she sat and prayed in the chapel that day. When she finally emerged, it was dark and she made her way to her room, locking herself in, not coming out for dinner and not even responding to Mother Superior's persistent knocking.

\*

Elizabeth watched Sam as he packed her car. She had looked out for Sister Mary whose job it usually was, but she had not seen her in weeks. *Lazy girl*, she thought, *they all start out so keen, then their true colours come out. Sarah was not like that she was a good nun.*

Mother Superior was standing with her.

"Drive safely now, Elizabeth. That road to Johannesburg is a dangerous one."

"I will, Mother Superior, don't worry."

"I'm pleased you managed to finish another novel. Perhaps some day I will find the courage to read one of them.... What did you say the title of this one is?"

"I didn't haven't come up with one yet," she lied.

She turned to look at the new schoolrooms. Antonio was on the veranda, sitting on the ledge with his back up against a pillar, smoking a cigarette.

"Lovely!" she exclaimed, but she was not looking at the rooms, she was looking at Antonio.

Mother Superior turned to admire her new classrooms, nodding her head with approval.

"Yes, nothing short of a miracle."

Elizabeth took advantage of Mother Superior looking away and blew Antonio a kiss.

\*

Antonio was on all fours. He was laying the cement floor in the classrooms. He had his bucket of water, a brush and also a pocket of dry cement. Splashing water with the brush and tossing powdered cement, he created a smooth finish surface with his trowel. He was in a good mood and was singing a piece from "Il Barbiere di Siviglia", and when the words failed him he would whistle. Sitting up on his haunches he was admiring the glossy finish he was obtaining. Mother Superior made her way to the classrooms and as she climbed the four steps leading onto the veranda, she stopped halfway as she always did and read the inscription cast in cement, "Italian POW 1945/1946". She could hear Antonio singing. She loved to listen to his voice. She stood out of sight, not to be noticed so that she could listen for a little while longer.

Mother Superior loved opera and classical music, but she seldom spoiled herself. Listening to Antonio was

a treat. She now stood in the doorway.

“Antonio, you never cease to amaze me, you are truly God’s child”

“Ah Matha Superiore, you come to visit me.”

“Yes, Antonio, I come to visit you,” she mimicked, trying to imitate his broad accent. “But Antonio, I don’t have very good news”

“Zonderwater, she write again?”

“No Antonio, not Zonderwater, it’s Elizabeth. Her husband phoned a short while ago. There has been an accident. Elizabeth is dead.”

Antonio’s heart sank. The blood drained from his face. He was lost for words.

Finally the words came out: “Elizabetha, she wanta to bury here at Genazzano, she tell me.”

“Yes Antonio, I know”

What Mother Superior meant by her parting words, no one really knows... What did she really know?

\*

Not many people attended Elizabeth’s funeral. Her tall, grey-haired husband sat in the front row next to the coffin. Next to him was Elizabeth’s publisher.

“Here, Max,” said Elizabeth’s husband handing him a file, “It’s a draft copy of the book she came here to write.”

Max looked down at the title. It read: “Grave Passion”.

\*

Elizabeth was laid to rest at the spot she pointed out to Antonio, but her wish of having him build her a tombstone never materialised. Her husband had one erected for her. “In Memory of my Loving Wife”, read the inscription.

In her will, Elizabeth had made provision for financial help to Genazzano. This made Mother Superior sigh with relief. Antonio would often visit her grave and also that of Father Harold. He found peace in the quaint old cemetery. He now had time to take it all in the atmosphere, the serenity. He would close his eyes and play through the endless memories he and Elizabeth had had there together.

## VII

1947 drafted the last of the POWs for repatriation and, as before, Mother Superior was notified by mail. Just like before she went to Antonio who by then had completed the schoolrooms, which were already being used by Sister Mary and the girls. They had taken it upon themselves to decorate the rooms with posters and maps and each student wrote a poem related to the building of their new classrooms, which they displayed proudly on the walls. Sister Mary sat at a desk now, but she could not quite get used to this and would take her chair and place it in front of the desk and read to the class.

Antonio sat on the veranda ledge, smoking a cigarette. Out of sight, but at the same time listening to Sister Mary reading. Things had not changed between them and he was made to feel unwelcome in her class.

“Antonio, come here son”, Mother Superior called from the bottom.

Before he reached her, he put out the cigarette. She did not approve of him smoking. “They will kill you, son,” she would say.

“Antonio, there is a saying in English that all good things come to an end. You have been good to us here at Genazzano, but now it’s time for you to go home to your family.” She stood there with the letter in her hand.

Antonio looked down at the letter and asked, “Zonderwater?”

“Yes Antonio, two weeks from today. We will take you to Durban where you will report to the Military Police. There will be a ship there that will take you home.”

\*

For the two weeks that followed Antonio potted around the convent, doing odd jobs here and there. But mostly he took long walks on the beach and thought of his life and what lay ahead for him when he got home. He thought of Elizabeth and pined for her touch, her soft skin and her smell. Why was she taken so young?

He thought of Sister Mary and how they used to be and how they were now. He wished he could speak to her and make her see that he was not the man she thought him to be. He was just a man, with the needs of a man. He thought of South Africa, beautiful South Africa! He knew then, that one day he would return to this beautiful land. Perhaps he could work in the mines... Perhaps find a big diamond himself, or rather just work as a builder!

\*

The morning of Antonio's departure dawned. He packed his sausage bag and placed it by the door whilst he tidied his room. Before leaving, he stood in the doorway, placing his envelope cap on his head at an angle. Taking one last look around, he swung his bag over his shoulder and walked towards the convent.

On the veranda, Sister Mary was there waiting for him. She saw the familiar figure walking towards her and she felt butterflies in her tummy. They had not spoken in months. She desperately needed to talk to him. She needed to make her peace with him before he left. She had looked for opportune moments during the last two weeks, but none had arisen. She was now running out of time. The only way she saw it possible was to have Antonio alone in the car with her as she drove him to Durban. She knew from the day that the letter had arrived that it would be her duty to drive him to Durban. But how could she arrange it?

The previous night, she slipped into Mother Superior's room whilst all the nuns were at dinner. Digging deep into one of those hidden pockets that nun's habits have, she produced a bottle of castor oil. Quickly moving to the tray that carried Mother Superior's kettle, milk jug and sugar, she poured a good slug of the oil into the milk jug. *I hope this works, please forgive me Lord, but this is an emergency.*

Sister Mary was not a malicious person. On the contrary, she loved her fellow man and went out of her way to help and be kind. But situations had taught her to react in ways that were sometimes a little unorthodox. This was one of those times.

\*

“Buongiorno, Antonio,” Sister Mary called out from the veranda. “Are you ready to leave us today?” She was nervous and her nerves had caused her to react in this boisterous manner.

Antonio was rather taken aback. This was the first time she had addressed him in months and he was pleased.

“Sorella Maria, che piacere, what a pleasure I see you this morning.” He smiled at her from the bottom of the stairs. He looked ready to go, with his bag resting over his shoulder.

“Give me a minute, Antonio, I will see if Mother Superior is ready.”

Antonio was restless and he could not stand still. He walked about and in doing so he walked past Mother Superior's bathroom window. As he went by, a loud echo of flatulence came thundering out. Antonio stopped and smiled; *Mother Superior is having problems this morning!*

He found his way back to the veranda which by then had filled with all the other nuns and staff of Genazzano, all waiting to bid Antonio farewell. They did so and there were emotional scenes, hugs, kisses and many goodbyes.

Sister Mary came out once again and announced that Mother Superior was not feeling well and would not make the trip to Durban.

“Antonio, she asks if you will go to her door. She wishes to say goodbye to you there.”

Antonio dropped his bag and went to Mother Superior's door, knocking very gently. A pale woman in a dressing gown opened the door. She had no veil over her head and her long white hair covered her shoulders.

“Antonio, I’m not well this morning, I will not make the trip with you son, but I want to kiss you goodbye, my boy. If the Lord had wanted me to bare children, I would have wanted one just like you. Go well, Antonio, and may God protect you for ever.” She gently kissed him on each cheek and watched him walk down the corridor.

\*

The old Plymouth bounced up and down as it travelled along the uneven road that led to Genazzano. This time they were travelling in the opposite direction. The avenues of trees stood erect on either side as armed guards would, the overhanging branches being their swords, which crossed and formed an arch. It was as if he was receiving a royal salute as he departed. They reached the end of the road, and turned right. The sea was straight ahead of them now. They turned right again and began their southward journey to Durban with the sea view on their left for most of the way. A kaleidoscope of greens, blues and turquoise, specks of white surf peaking into miniature pyramids. Barrel waves, curling and crashing, curling and crashing, over and over again, spreading their white foam all over the beaches.

“Beautiful!” exclaimed Sister Mary; “you shall miss this Antonio?”

“Si, I will, but more, I miss you and everybody in Genazzano.”

“Your family will be happy to see you after all these years. We were lucky to have had you. You were on loan to us. You belong with them now.”

Antonio did not reply. He just gazed out to sea, watching the sensual motion of the waves.

A long silence prevailed but there was a feeling between them that lots needed to be said. Finally Sister Mary broke the silence.

“Antonio... If this were Hollywood, I mean, if this were a scene in a movie, you know... cinema? I would be eloping with you, running away with you.”

She was nervous but she now had his attention and she continued.

“I would have packed my bags and left Genazzano, left the convent and had asked you to take me away with you. I would have packed a dress just like Elizabeth used to wear, God rest her soul, and we would have taken a train to Johannesburg together. But this is the real world, Antonio, and my love is with God, I will serve him till the day I die. This does not mean that I am inhuman. Under these robes is a person, a person with feelings and emotion and if ever I were to have a change of heart about my devotion to the church, I would leave it for you, Antonio. Deep down inside you lit a fire within me, you brought out a certain feeling in me that I didn’t know I had. I just wanted you to know that, Antonio.”

Antonio was silent and Sister Mary kept darting glances at him. Had she made a fool of herself? Was this what he wanted to hear? This is what she wanted to tell him and she had. Had he understood her? Why was he not saying anything?

Finally. “Sista Maria, Mussolini take me, I’m a young boy. He give me gun and make me man. I believe him he is fatha for Italy. After POW and Zonderwater, me I’m a half man. Zonderwater take my young years I come to Genazzano, I’m a hungry, hungry for food, hungry for life and hungry for work. I find all at Genazzano! Elizabetta, she come and she make me man again. I respect you and all Genazzano I love you and everybody at Genazzano, but I’m a man and I go home man.”

Sister Mary remembered the day she heard him having his conversation with the Lord in the chapel, how full of expression it was then in Italian. Today, three years later, he was expressing himself as he had that day, but only this time in English, an English that she knew she would miss terribly. She heard what he said and wanted to reach out and touch him, to tell him she understood and that it was OK.

The skyline of Durban appeared before them and as they entered the city they drove down Snell Parade, then into Marine Parade, making their way to the harbour. Antonio had never seen riksha boys, dressed in their beaded outfits, carrying horns on their head-dresses and pulling their brightly decorated carts. He laughed and Sister Mary laughed with him. They looked at each other and they laughed even more.

They reached the military boom at the harbour and Sister Mary produced the letter from Zonderwater. The boom was lifted and they drove to their directed destination. She found a place to park between two white lines and as she turned off the motor, Antonio said in a nervous voice. "You come with me?" "I wouldn't have it any other way," she replied.

It took a while for Antonio to get his boarding pass. The queues of prisoners arriving from Zonderwater and Pietermaritzburg by train were never ending. There was a hive of activity at the docks that day, hysterical laughs, shaking of hands, shouts of joy as friends met after years of being separated. It was in total contrast to that first day that Antonio had set foot in Durban.

He found his way back to Sister Mary. She was waiting for him close to the gangplank. She looked so small in contrast to the huge ship that stood behind her, the ship that was to take Antonio home. He stood before her, placing his bag alongside. He looked at her and she looked at him. She reached out to shake his hand and he lifted his, taking off his envelope cap and slipping it into her hand. "For you," he said. She squeezed it and lifted it to her face as if to kiss it. He came close to her and kissed her on each cheek. As he did so, she put her arms around him and held him tight.

"Goodbye Antonio, may God bless and take good care of you. I will miss you, my friend."

There were tears in her eyes and as she released him he bent down to pick up his bag, slinging it over his shoulder he began his walk up the gangplank. Reaching the top, he looked down at her. She waved at him with his cap and he waved back.

*Goodbye, Antonio.*

## Epilogue

Antonio returned to Brindisi, Italy, and met the woman he would finally marry. He then returned to South Africa and stayed at Genazzano, but without his wife to be. He married her by proxy several months later and she eventually joined him. Mother Superior would not allow them to stay as man and wife until they formally re-married in the chapel at Genazzano.

Antonio made his life in Johannesburg, South Africa as a building contractor, never to return to Italy.

For many years that followed, Antonio and his family would attend the memorial service held at Zonderwater for those who died in captivity.

This memorial service is still held today on the first Sunday of every November.

Genazzano still exists, but as a "Boys Town". Nothing more is known of the nuns of that time.

Antonio passed away peacefully on the 11-09-91 and is survived by his wife Ida, his children, Tina and Franco, and four grandchildren.