

## Sassuolo

By Eleanor Thom

The name, Sassuolo, made me think of holes, cheese full of holes. I never saw any holes, but they must have had to dig somewhere because they needed clay. The place made millions of tiles. There were factories all over the countryside, and it was hot, hotter still with all those furnaces going and all that dust which got up your nose.

The dust, and the fried meat Adriana served twice daily, made me drowsy, and in between servings I'd go to my room and sleep. Sassuolo was a half hour away and there was no bus. I felt a mess anyway. I had conjunctivitis. I'd had a whole month of that with the Vaccaros, fried meat, dust, and the sound of the slippers they made me wear, rubber soles slap-slapping between the dining table and my bedroom. Bare feet ruined terracotta. Adriana said. She was stupid about things. She washed her dishes twice before stacking them in the dishwasher, and because my bedroom backed onto the kitchen, she often woke me while she handled crockery and hung cookware from the rack on the ceiling. She had a maid she liked to scold while the two of them scrubbed the frying pans.

It was about then, a month in, when they decided to do something about my boredom. We were at the table. A strip of chicken had just slipped from the frying-pan to my plate, and the small television in the corner was tuned to MTV Italia.

“Adriana. Salt,” said Signor Vaccaro.

She pushed back her chair and returned to the cooker, picked up the grinder and set it down beside her husband without a word. He grated a layer of salt onto his portion of oily beef. Signor Vaccaro was the reason I was with them. He was five foot tall and fat and balding, and I was his au pair. *His* because all the Vaccaro children, his two sons and her daughter, had grown up and left home. I was supposed to be teaching Signor Vaccaro English in return for my bed, my fried meat, and a pocketful of lire from Adriana every week, but so far, he wasn't interested.

“Are you bored yet?” Adriana asked. At first she had tried to talk to me about the Royals, but she had given up with this by now.

I said my eyes were getting better. The conjunctivitis had been so bad that every morning my lids were glued shut and I’d had to paw my way to the bathroom to soak them open. But the infection had made me sleep, which passed more time. That was a benefit.

“You should do something with her. She’s *your inglesina*,” Adriana said to Signor Vaccaro.

He shrugged and chewed his meat.

“She likes animals, don’t you?” said Adriana.

This was how the visit to the stables came about.

The Vaccaros had an Alsatian cross with a long, rough coat, and they kept her chained to a tree. There was also a short-haired pup that scampered around the patio and cried at the kitchen door. I had a soft spot for the pup, even though it had given me the conjunctivitis. I’d let him in my room one night, thinking it would comfort him and he would curl up and go to sleep, but instead, not long after I turned out the light, I saw the shadow of his little tail lift, and heard something running onto the floor. He had messed all over the terracotta, both ends. I had to put him back outside and clean up before Adriana found out. She loved those tiles more than anything.

The pup was free to run around. It was the other dog I felt sorry for. The week I arrived I bought a lead so I could release her from the chain and walk her around the houses. We did a circuit every evening as soon as it was cool enough, and sometimes I’d stop to stroke her coat. She was rough with dust. The streets were empty and the houses were modern, hidden behind electric gates. In the gardens there were figs, lemons and olives. The figs were in season and they were delicious, but illicit. Fierce dogs hurtled along the fences, guarding the fruits.

I thought Signor Vaccaro would be driving us to the stables, but the two of them were waiting outside the front door. Both cars were still in the garage. They were doing this for me. They had deduced from my routine with the dog that I liked to walk. Signor Vaccaro was dressed in a dark purple shell suit, and Adriana stood beside him, towering over him in stilettos with white jeans and a multicoloured Moschino shirt. Her hair was an out-the-box red and tightly permed, dried upside down. They made an unusual pair in their

matching bug-eye glasses. I walked ahead and the Vaccaros took turns behind me, her crippling on the dusty paths, him sweating in his shell suit.

When they caught up with me they asked questions. They were curious about my love life. I kept the details to myself, but there were already three boys that summer, all friends of the Vaccaro sons that had been introduced to me the Saturday I arrived.

The first took me to Reggio Emilia one evening, where we walked around the medieval buildings. It was dusty there too, and all the shops and cafes were shut. He talked about history and his work, and he took hold of my hand, which I didn't really want. I had just finished school, and I thought he was too old to be taking my hand without asking first. Later we stopped at a restaurant and took a table outside, next to a couple who were sharing a mozzarella. It was a whole mozzarella, round and white and slippery, and it lay between the man and the woman like some silken thing that together they had just spun. They petted over it, peeling layers and slowly feeding each other. My date complained that I didn't look at him while he spoke. He must have been used to better attention, but I couldn't stop watching the other couple, gazing at each other as they skinned the moon.

I was pleased when the first boy left for America a couple of days later. He brought a yellow rose to the house and handed it to me in front of the Vaccaros. They insisted I keep it, and hung it upside down to dry so it would last forever.

The second boy took me up a winding road to a country club with a pool. Our swim kits were rolled into towels and slumped like swaddled babies on the back seat. The boy talked and grinned. When I think of him now I think of teeth. On the straighter sections of road the boy would take a hand off the wheel and try to dip his fingers up my short skirt. I felt like telling him it was not on. It was like going to the cinema and trying to grab popcorn from someone else's bucket, but I didn't have the guts to say that. Instead I crossed my legs, looking out of the side window, and when we got to the pool I refused to go in the water. I kept my miniskirt fastened and read a book.

Marcello, the last one, was a bit different. I liked Marcello and he liked me. The Vaccaros probably guessed this easily enough because I would speak to Marcello on the phone. But I didn't tell them. I didn't go into details.

At the stables, Adriana's stilettos stabbed through manure and muck, and she bent over to try and brush the red dust from her white knees. We looked into the stalls. They

picked out a beige horse, and I was taken to a room to try different helmets. Adriana watched me swing into the saddle while Signor Vaccaro stood staring into the distance. Clouds of dust were rising from tile factories.

“She doesn’t ride like an *inglesina*,” said Adriana.

Riding was hard work in the heat, but I was pleased to be away from the house. I stayed out for nearly two hours. The Vaccaros waited. When I got back they were leaning with their armpits hooked over a wooden fence, tipping their bug-eye glasses to the sun.

They didn’t know this, but I had gone through their spare cupboards in my bedroom. Most of it was Adriana’s winter clothing, fur coats, cashmeres, ski salopettes, silver moon boots. At the bottom of the cupboard there were piles of old magazines with pictures of the British monarchy on the cover. The Royals stood rigid in front of palace gates in navy coats, silk ties, fancy hats and grey suits. Proper *inglesini*. But it was in amongst these magazines that I found an Italian translation of a sex manual. I sat on the cool terracotta and flipped through it. There were line drawings of a couple doing it in different positions, him on top, her on top, thighs swung around thighs, and just about everything else except for back to back. There was a chapter on all the ways a woman could lick a man’s hard-on and, if that got dull, how to tie bows and beads around it like it was a poochie dog. Maybe Adriana did that with the Gucci scarves she arranged around her neck. She’d want to paint it with nail varnish and sweep eyeshadow over it too. Adriana liked presentable. I put the book back, making sure to bury it deep, sandwiching the cocks somewhere between Adriana’s beloved Diana, The Queen, and the blotchy faces of Princes William and Harry.

Marcello was shy about his thing. A few days before, we’d been in the park, lying on the grass. When it got cold he had snuggled nearer but kept fidgeting his hips to hide how much he liked me. I didn’t mind. He told me about his mum scratching his back. She used to scratch it for him when he was a little boy, every morning before school while he lay in his bed. He spent an hour with my hands. He manipulated each finger till it tingled, making circles in the skin of my knuckles and kneading warmth along the fleshy parts of my palms. My hands felt different afterwards, flexible, like he had dipped my bones in honey.

He needed to go home to fetch a jacket. Marcello lived in an apartment near the main road. He lived with his mother. They didn’t have a garden or a dog, and the apartment had a narrow hall with five or six doors either side of it. Between two of the

doors there was a glass cabinet full of trophies which shone gold and silver in the dim glow from the lamp on the ceiling. They were Marcello's trophies. His mother was proud of them so she kept them on display. He saw me looking at them. He told me he won them for Italian dancing, when he was a little boy. I wanted him to demonstrate but he wouldn't. He said there wasn't space.

Marcello opened the door to his room. It was small with a single bed and the covers were pulled back and rumpled. I could imagine him as a boy, lying face down with his head on his arms, and his mother waking him up, scratching his thin, pink back. He picked up a frame from a shelf behind the door and showed me what he looked like when he danced. The boy in the picture wore a green suit and looked about nine years old, exactly how I imagined him. Marcello put on a jacket and tucked a wallet into his back pocket before we went back out for the evening. At some point later he went into a bar and asked for a pencil, and he wrote the address of his flat in the little blue book I had bought from a museum in London. We could keep in touch after I went home.

My legs ached after the horse-ride, and the walk back to the house was uphill. Adriana hurried far out in front, stepping wide to manage the path in her stilettos. I held back. It was one of those evenings that just didn't cool off, and I could hear Signor Vaccaro stepping behind me, struggling for breath. He had to take a rest every few paces.

“Are you alright?”

He didn't have the wind in him to answer, but nodded and waved me on. He seemed to smile, for just a second, and then without a sound the smile fell away. Signor Vaccaro collapsed. He went kind of sideways onto his knees, then toppled back. It was fast. No noise or fight for breath. He just went down and that was it. I looked at him curled in the dust, his eyes closed but his mouth open, with some vowel sound left unsaid, stuck like a peach between his lips. ‘Ah’, he seemed to have wanted to say.

Ah.

“Adriana!”

I shouted three times before she heard. She made a strange, high-pitched noise of surprise, and started immediately back down the hill to see for herself what sort of a state he was in. She called him directly a few times, but he lay so still he could have been dead, and when one of her heels came off at a jaunty angle she stumbled and twisted her ankle. She kicked the shoe across the road.

“Die killed,” she screamed at it.

She gave up after that. With one stiletto still on her foot she tripped away like a three-legged greyhound, back towards the house where she could telephone for help. I suppose that was quick thinking.

Left alone, I unzipped the top of Signor Vaccaro’s purple shell suit. The bug-eye glasses were in his hand and he was clasping them very tight. I took my cardigan from round my waist and made a cushion under his head. I checked for a pulse in his neck. There were drips of sweat running down him, wetting his collar. He didn’t look pale, but then I supposed he wouldn’t. His skin was so deeply tanned you could almost call it a hide. It reminded me of a goatskin bag I’d bought at Camden Lock. I remembered the stall holder telling me he bought them in the Middle East. They were his bestsellers.

I found a pulse, but I couldn’t tell if it belonged to me or Signor Vaccaro, and I couldn’t think what to do anyway, apart from rolling him onto his side and tipping back his head. I moved a leg forward and made sure his chin was lifted off his chest. I thought it would be good to roll him into some shade, but I couldn’t do that alone, so instead I sat beside him with my hand on his shoulder. I watched for cars and listened for the siren. Adriana’s stiletto lay in the gutter like a pistol.

The ambulance and Adriana arrived at the same time. She had changed out of the white jeans, and on her way down the hill she stopped to pick up the shoe and put it in her handbag. They had a mask on his nose by now, and they had rolled him onto a bed which raised and lowered on silver wheels. Adriana handed me a key.

“Is this your daughter?”

Adriana explained that I was just the au pair, and she took the young paramedic’s hand and let him help her into the ambulance after the bed. Inside, the paramedic began explaining what they were doing to Signor Vaccaro, and all the time she kept hold of his white-gloved hand and used the other to cross herself. The doors closed behind them.

I had my collar between my thumb and forefinger. It was a superstition, learnt on a school trip. If you see an ambulance, clutch your collar until you meet a four-legged creature. The ambulance left. I watched till they swerved onto the road at the bottom of the hill, and then I just stood there in the silence. All I could hear was the Rottweiler in the house opposite, panting through the bars of the gate. I let go of my collar.

I was at the airport within a couple of days. Signor Vaccaro was still in hospital and I'd hardly seen Adriana since the walk. She got her maid to drive me away in her small, white Fiat that smelt of cleaning cloths.

"You missed your mamma?" she asked me.

"Yes."

She said she had a daughter about my age. "You are pleased to be going home early."

When she dropped me off she said "*Buon viaggio, Inglesina.*"

I told her my name.

"They always called you *Inglesina.*"

"I'm Scottish, really," I said. "I just live in England," and she laughed so hard she had to prop up her sunglasses and wipe her eyes.

It was too early to check in. I blew a good deal of my lire on a phone card, and rummaged in my bag for the little blue book. I spoke to my parents and my friends from school. I couldn't wait any longer. I wanted to know if it was sunny in London.

Two hours later I was eating a tricolore salad from an Alitalia dish. Tomatoes, avocado and pure white mozzarella. I wondered what I would say in my letter to Marcello. I felt bad at leaving without a word. I'd never told him I liked him. I strung a few sentences together in my head but, some seconds later, at an altitude of about thirty thousand feet, I realised I couldn't write to him anyway.

I was so excited to be going home that I'd left my little blue book at the airport. I knew exactly where it was. I could picture it. It would be sitting there now for someone else to find, all loose pages and scribbled addresses, and Marcello's neat, pencil handwriting. Propped open on top of the payphone.

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