

Simone

Living on the Italian side of town, Reiva had an excellent little market just around the corner, on the main street, where she shopped when she could. Corvaia's. Sicilian. Two brothers — or maybe three, it was hard to tell when you never saw them together. At Corvaia's she could get real sheep's milk romano so strong it dripped oil on your clothes getting it home, and balls of fresh mozzarella in water. There were fava beans and Spanish oranges and vats of Greek olives and prosciutto and arborio and big Sicilian capers and fiore. Simone, who lived on the Irish side where there was nothing like this — curiously, no market at all — was making it a habit to stop by Reiva's on Saturday morning for espresso and shopping.

Corvaia's had a big display window where crates of produce were tipped up. The store was tiny and absolutely crammed. La nonna (there was only one granny, apparently) kept an eye on a boy of fifteen or so while she knitted something black. Always black. This apprentice Corvaia kept shop in a heavy canvas apron, sitting in the alcove by the door where the register was and the deli slicer and the vats and rolls of waxed brown paper. The aisles were narrow; the shelves were tall.

Simone said the place was a romance. She walked up and down the aisles.

It's the perfect neighborhood market, Reiva said. I wonder whether there are any others left.

There are a lot of old things here which aren't moving, though, Simone pointed out, blowing the dust off the shoulders of a tiny bottle of... hm.

She picked up a can with a faded label.

What's this? she muttered, turning it around in her hand before putting it back. As Simone studied the position of the can on the shelf bleakness settled on her face. Like a chess player adjusting a pawn, she reached out and turned the can around.

Crumbling old buildings, crumbly plumbing, morning glories poking through the crumbled walls.

Purchases rustling two plastic sacks each, the friends stepped carefully over the icy broken concrete two blocks back to Reiva's flat where Simone's car had been left on the street. Reiva's rusty blue one was parked on the lawn, or what would be the lawn in three or four months, between the sidewalk and the curb in a slot shoveled into the snow just wide enough to get the driver's door open. This was to keep the narrow driveway clear for the people in back, who had the use of a small garage with leaf-hinged doors that folded back over a space about the size of a Model T. The garage was to make up for their having the original kitchen, but Reiva doubted they ate anything back there but hamburgers and frozen pizzas. She herself had a modern gas stove and cupboards, a gas log, and the original bathroom with a colored glass window over the tub, but she would never feel right parking on the lawn. That was a thing done by people she didn't want to know.

The window was something which had once delighted Reiva and Simone both.

Simone came in for coffee as usual. There was half an apple pie. She warmed her hands on the cup, hunching over it disconsolately.

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Whatever was wrong with Simone stayed wrong. Spring came and went during a couple of weeks in May just as the term was finished and Reiva was wondering, if she didn't get summer work, how she would be able to live.

At the last minute she got a survey course which no one else wanted because it was one of those which meets all day one day a week and gets in the way of teaching anything else. But as there wasn't anything else, she took it. The difference could be made up with a weekend sales job in a Syracuse department store and by scrimping.

Simone was not teaching at all. There were no French students in summer school. That didn't matter — she had an academic contract which paid a decent nine-month salary and the Philosopher made extra money teaching business ethics and western civ and they were comfortable.

Reiva's Wednesdays were free. At three o'clock in the afternoon the two of them sat in one of the dim unused pubs on the Irish side of the river. All the bars, curiously, were on that side, just as all the groceries were on the other. On both sides there were plenty of places to drink in but they were almost all in the converted front porches of people's homes and mostly not open in the afternoon anyway, and certainly not in the summer.

We had to get rid of a beehive this weekend, said Simone, sipping her beer and following with her eyes the wandering dust motes which appeared and vanished in the striped light according to the logic of a breath too light to be felt by such a gross creature as Simone. A partially eaten muffin lay on a chipped white plate between them.

Did you get in the bee men? What bee men?

Well there's these farms, Reiva said. They sell honey at the farmer's market out on the highway, I thought... well.

No, we did it ourselves. They weren't honeybees anyway. I don't think. The same black and yellow stripes but little. Size of a fly.

They were a problem?

No. Well — there were a lot of them. I suppose we could have been stung, but no, they only went about their business flying back and forth from here to there. We thought they might be carpenter bees or would get into the house. Do carpenter bees live in hives? You wouldn't know where they were so busy going and when we broke open the hive the combs were dry so who knew what they were living on.

Like me, Reiva muttered. No visible means of support. Hm. Simone passed Reiva a suspicious look, but her eyes soon returned to trailing after the motes and she went on

with the story.

We had this garden gnome, she said. Hollow it was, with a drain hole at the bottom. They got in there, were building in there. Gary put a net over his head which we improvised out of one of those bags you wash nylons in and got a rope around the gnome's neck and dragged the thing out to the fence and smashed it.

Out of the pale.

Reiva murmured some things about pogroms and enclosures but the stricken, panicky expression this humor produced on her friend cut her off.

I smashed the gnome with a two-by-four, Simone said in an ordinary voice. She drank a little beer, getting foam on her upper lip where she was beginning to show some moustache. Cracked it open with one blow, she said, like in the children's story. We didn't have that story when I was a child. French stories are all about ogres. Nothing but ogres. Gnomes and trolls are German.

Ah.

I expected these bees to come boiling out. There were masses of them clinging to the combs and the broken pottery. The combs were as thick with bees as central Bombay but they acted stunned. Sunday morning we went back to look. A lot of them had fallen off. The rest weren't doing anything so Gary sprayed them with something for roses that is supposed to be toxic to bees. Birds, fish, cats, everything. Why are there such poisons?

The barman was watching television while he idly polished glasses. Just then came a home run and he dropped the glass. Simone started and the sound, her face losing color.

Or so Reiva thought — it was hard to tell in the walnut light.

Imagine you're a bee, Simone said when she had recovered herself. These bees. I don't suppose they think of themselves as individual bees, do they? Something a bit creepy about bees, I've always thought. Ants and termites. As if it were Hong Kong or Singapore that's alive, not us.

Protecting the queen, I suppose.

Gary said they wouldn't swarm. As if he knows. So long as... it takes time to make another queen, apparently. One of the drones has to change sex. Or so he said. But that didn't happen. Nothing happened. We busted their hive and Gary sprayed them and they all sat there and died.

Reiva had the good sense to stay quiet now, at the crucial moment.

Imagine you're a bee, Simone said. You're in the hive. Life is going on. Suddenly everything turns upside down and there's a terrific explosion and the light pours in and you're lying in the dirt and it's all destroyed. Smashed, ruined. You die. What in god's name has happened? You die, as stupid as the day you were born. Hatched. Whatever.

On impulse, Reiva reached across the table to cover Simone's hand but Simone pulled back at the touch.

It was me, she said.

The shuffling everydayness of the afternoon had vanished.

Me. With the two-by-four. Crack Smash. Me. The ogre.

After giving thought Simone revised this. Not an ogre, she said. An ogre is just a big ugly powerful stupid ... *person*. Not so dumb as a troll, dumber than Krishna.

The destroyer, Reiva said quietly.

That's him.

Also the creator, Simone.

Bullshit.

After some morose rumination Simone took up her jacket and went out, leaving her beer unfinished. Reiva pulled the glass to her side of the table, pondered it a bit, sitting on as he twilight deepened outside, her large hands lying flat on the table, fingers spread. She tipped Simone's glass toward herself. Some unappetizing brown froth clung to the sides. Reiva looked into the bottom of it for a moment and returned the glass to its place on the table.

Laughter and excited talk came from behind the bar, from

the nearly muted television. Reiva began to nibble at the half-eaten muffin, pinching off bird-sized crumbs. By the time it was full dark the muffin was gone. Reiva rubbed a finger across the saucer where a white linen napkin, perhaps with a narrow border of blue, should have been.