



**EVERYBODY'S
RIGHT
PAOLO
SORRENTINO**

Contents

Cover
About the Book
About the Author
Dedication
Title Page
Epigraph
Preface

Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen

Acknowledgements
Copyright

About the Book

This is the story of Tony Pagoda, a hero of our time, a man of incredible energies and appetites with a dark secret in his past and a unique perspective on the world.

1980s Italy is Tony's oyster. A charismatic singer, he is talented and successful, up to his neck in money, drugs and women, enjoying an extravagant lifestyle in Naples and Capri. But when life gets complicated, Tony decides it's time for a change. While on tour, he disappears to Brazil and a life free from excess, where all he has to worry about are the herculean cockroaches. But after eighteen years of humid Amazonian exile, somebody is willing to sign a giant cheque to bring Tony back to Italy. How will he face the temptations of his old habits and the new century?

A huge bestseller in Italy, *Everybody's Right* is an extraordinary debut novel from the award-winning film director Paolo Sorrentino. It is a book about Italy and a book about the modern world; a book about Tony and a book about all of us. Through Tony's irresistible voice Sorrentino illustrates his imaginative power and his incredible gifts for drama and satire.

About the Author

Celebrated screenwriter and director Paolo Sorrentino was born in Naples in 1970. His films have been widely acclaimed internationally and have won, among other prizes, the Nastro D'Argento (*One Man Up*), the Cannes Prix du Jury and the Italian Golden Globes for Best Screenplay and Best Director (*Il Divo*) and been nominated for the Palme D'Or (*The Consequences of Love*). Everybody's Right is his first novel. It was shortlisted for the prestigious Strega Prize in 2010.

To my mother, who thought that way

Paolo Sorrentino

EVERYBODY'S RIGHT

*Translated from the Italian
by Howard Curtis*



HARVILL SECKER
LONDON

*Once you have given up the ghost, everything follows with
dead certainty, even in the midst of chaos.*

HENRY MILLER

In this novel, people who really existed appear side by side with purely fictional characters; their involvement in the narrative and the statements attributed to them are products of the author's imagination and are not intended to depict real events.

PREFACE

by Maestro Mimmo Repetto
(written at dawn on the day of his hundredth birthday)

THERE ARE NAMES for all the things I can't stand.

I can't stand old people. Their drooling. Their complaining. Their uselessness.

Worse still when they try to make themselves useful. Their dependency.

The noises they make. Too many, too repetitive. Their endless anecdotes.

The way their stories are always about themselves. Their contempt for subsequent generations.

But I can't stand the subsequent generations either.

I can't stand old people when they kick up a fuss, demanding that people give up their seats for them on buses.

I can't stand young people. Their arrogance. The way they flaunt their strength and youth.

Young people's belief in their own heroism and invincibility is pathetic.

I can't stand rude young people who won't give up their seats to old people on buses.

I can't stand yobs. Their sudden, loud, pointless bursts of laughter.

Their contempt for anyone who's different. But good, responsible, generous young people are even more unbearable. All voluntary work and prayers. Very polite and very dead. In their hearts and in their heads.

I can't stand capricious children who relate everything to themselves, or their obsessive parents who relate

everything to their children. I can't stand children who scream and cry. And silent children unsettle me, so I can't stand them either. I can't stand workers or the unemployed and their uninhibited, saccharine flaunting of their divine misfortune.

Which isn't divine. Just a lack of work.

But how can I stand those devoted to the struggle, the presentation of demands, constant meetings and sweaty armpits?

Impossible to stand them.

I can't stand managers. There's no need even to explain why. I can't stand the petty bourgeoisie, barricaded in their shitty world, their lives dominated by fear. Fear of anything that isn't part of that little world. Which makes them snobs, even if they don't know the meaning of the word.

I can't stand men in love, because they get in the way.

I can't stand women in love, because they interfere.

I can't stand tolerant, liberated, open-minded people.

Always correct. Always perfect. Always irreproachable.

They'll allow anything, except murder.

You criticise them and they thank you for the criticism. You despise them and they thank you good-naturedly. In other words, they put you in a difficult situation.

Because they won't allow you to be unpleasant.

That makes them unbearable.

They ask you, 'How are you?' and really want to know. Which is a shock. But beneath their disinterested interest, the knives are ready to come out.

But nor can I stand those who never put you in a difficult situation. Always obedient and reassuring. Loyal and obsequious.

I can't stand billiard players, nicknames, indecisive people, non-smokers, smog, clean air, salesmen, pizza by the slice, pleasantries, chocolate croissants, bonfires, stockbrokers, flowered wallpaper, fair trade, disorder, environmentalists, public-spiritedness, cats, mice, alcohol-

free drinks, unexpected rings at the doorbell, long phone calls, people who say a glass of wine a day does you good, people who pretend to forget your name, people who defend themselves by claiming to be professionals, school friends you meet after thirty years who call you by your first name, old people who never miss an opportunity to remind you they were in the Resistance, spoilt children who have nothing to do and decide to open an art gallery, ex-communists who go crazy for Brazilian music, airheads who say 'intriguing', trendy people who say 'cool' and 'wicked', affected people who say 'gorgeous', 'marvellous', 'divine', people of catholic tastes who call everyone 'darling', pretty women who say 'I adore you', lucky people who can play music by ear, distracted people who don't listen when you talk to them, or pretend not to, people who stand in judgement, feminists, commuters, artificial sweeteners, beauticians, car radios, ballet dancers, politicians, ski boots, adolescents, under-secretaries, rhymes, ageing rock singers in tight jeans, self-important writers, relatives, flowers, fair-haired people, bowing and scraping, shelves, intellectuals, street artists, jellyfish, conjurors, VIPs, rapists, paedophiles, circus performers, community activists, social workers, entertainment, animal lovers, neckties, false laughter, provincials, hydrofoils, any kind of collector, especially collectors of clocks, hobbies, doctors, patients, jazz, advertising, builders, mothers, basketball spectators, any actors or actresses, video art, amusement parks, any kind of experimentalist, soup, contemporary painting, elderly artisans in their workshops, amateur guitarists, statues in squares, kisses on the hand, health spas, good-looking philosophers, swimming pools with too much chlorine, seaweed, thieves, anorexic women, holidays, love letters, priests and their altar boys, suppositories, world music, fake revolutionaries, clams, pandas, acne, percussionists, showers with curtains, birthmarks, calluses, knick-knacks, beauty spots,

vegetarians, landscape painters, cosmetics, opera singers, Parisians, high-neck pullovers, music in restaurants, parties, political meetings, houses with a view, Anglicisms, neologisms, spoilt brats, brats who follow in their fathers' footsteps, rich men's brats, other people's brats, museums, local mayors, local councillors, demonstrators, poetry, pork butchers, jewellers, burglar alarms, gold chains, political leaders and their followers, prostitutes, people who are too short or too tall, funerals, hair, mobile phones, bureaucracy, installations, cars of any description, key rings, singer-songwriters, the Japanese, executives, racists, anti-racists, the blind, Formica, copper, brass, bamboo, celebrity cooks, crowds, tanning creams, lobbyists, slang, stains, kept women, cornucopias, stammerers, young people who are old, old people who are young, snobs, radical chic, plastic surgery, ring roads, plants, mocassins, sectarians, TV presenters and their assistants, aristocrats, wires that get tangled, comedians, golfers, science fiction, veterinarians, models, political refugees, obtuse people, white sandy beaches, new religions and their followers, poor-quality tiles, stubborn people, professional critics, couples where the man is young and the woman older or vice versa, middle-aged people, anyone who wears a hat, anyone who wears sunglasses, tanning beds, fires, bracelets, people who've had to pull strings to get where they are, members of the armed forces, reckless tennis players, fans and supporters, scent bought from tobacconist's shops, weddings, jokes, first communion, Freemasons, church services, people who whistle, people who suddenly burst into song, belching, heroin addicts, the Lions Club, cokeheads, the Rotary Club, sex tourism, any kind of tourism, people who hate tourism and call themselves 'travellers', people who speak 'from experience', people who have no experience but still like the sound of their own voices, people who know the ways of the world, primary-school mistresses, people who are crazy about meetings,

people who are crazy in general, nurses in clogs, why do they always have to wear clogs?

I can't stand people who are shy, talkative, falsely mysterious, clumsy, flighty, whimsical, affected, mad, brilliant, heroic, overconfident, silent, brave, thoughtful, big-headed, boorish, conscientious, unpredictable, understanding, careful, humble, skilled, enthusiastic, pompous, eternally surprised, impartial, shiftless, abstruse, witty, cynical, timid, quarrelsome, proud, phlegmatic, boastful, precious, vigorous, tragic, unwilling, insecure, doubtful, disenchanted, astonished, victorious, stingy, docile, neglected, mawkish, whiny, mournful, capricious, spoilt, noisy, unctuous, abrupt, or who find it relatively easy to socialise.

I can't stand nostalgia, normality, spite, hyperactivity, bulimia, courtesy, sadness, melancholy, intelligence, stupidity, impertinence, resignation, shame, arrogance, niceness, double-dealing, apathy, the abuse of power, ineptitude, sportsmanship, kindness, religiosity, ostentation, curiosity, indifference, play-acting, reality, guilt, minimalism, sobriety, excess, vagueness, deceitfulness, responsibility, light-heartedness, excitement, wisdom, determination, self-satisfaction, irresponsibility, propriety, dullness, seriousness, frivolity, pomposity, sullenness, human misery, compassion, predictability, unawareness, carping, briskness, darkness, negligence, slowness, averageness, speed, inevitability, exhibitionism, enthusiasm, sloppiness, virtuosity, amateurism, professionalism, decisiveness, autonomy, dependence, elegance or happiness.

I can't stand anything or anyone.

Not even myself. Especially not myself.

There's only one thing I can stand.

Shades of grey.

1

'Gondolier, take me to Naples.'

FRANCO CALIFANO

SOMEHOW, IT JUST crept up on us, but it really started because one of us had talent, unfortunately, and that was me!

What else is there to say? You spend your life telling yourself everything's all right. But it isn't all right at all. It's almost never all right. And I'd stop right there if it wasn't for this unhealthy vanity running around inside me, overwhelming me.

I'd like to be clear, but what'd be the point?

I've already retched three times and there are these tiny beads of cold sweat on my low forehead, mine, Tony Pagoda's, Tony P's, and I'm carrying forty-four bitter years on my back like a burden, but I've stopped counting them, because if I count them it hurts too much. Most men want to stay children all their lives, it's no joke getting old. But I don't know. I think you just have to get on with your life. Ducking and diving as the occasion demands.

I'm what's called, by those who believe in stupid labels, a 'crooner'. But I'm not a label. I'm a man.

All the same, with hindsight, isn't it better to be a label?

So here I am, in this luxurious dressing room as big as the living room of my apartment in Naples, with these red velvet drapes that hit the wrong note as far as I'm concerned, waiting to give the most important concert of my brilliant career, which, as everyone knows, I've

gradually built up over many years. I kneel and try to stop the flow of mineral water climbing from my stomach to the washbasin and make the sign of the cross and put my pudgy gold-ringed hands together. My palms stick to each other like sweaty magnets. I'm soaked with myself.

I try to pray, stirring distant memories of my first communion, but nothing comes, not even a measly Our Father. The thing is, if you do cocaine each and every day for ages, it fucks up your memory big time, and not just your memory. And I've been happily doing coke for twenty years now without a break. Then you tell yourself it isn't really like that, there's still a part of your mind where memory hangs on, a tough old survivor; you leap at the evidence, self-delusion has fallen over you in a curtain of powder. So has the high, though slowly, in flashes. The stench of novelty, all at once.

That's when you start to get terrible pains, your gastric juices are strained to the limits, and you find yourself face to face with your own soul, flaccid, submissive. That invisible monument.

But not even a little prayer can draw it out, no way, though I remember something I said once to a woman journalist with nice tits. 'If it was the Lord who gave Sinatra his voice, then mine was sent to me, more modestly, by San Gennaro.' That's what I said.

In those days I used to boast, big time. And if this concert goes well, I might be that way again.

I get back on my feet and again feel like retching. My stomach's like a bucking bronco at a rodeo. I can feel my third gin and tonic rising into my throat. I don't do coke when I sing. Mick Jagger might have been able to, because all he does is scream and run around and wiggle his hips. But I sing, and I have to feel my taste buds beating like a snare drum and my vocal cords throbbing like the strings of a guitar. The reason for all this retching is out there, in the front row of the massive Radio City Music Hall. There he is,

choked by alcohol and experience, the Voice himself, waiting to hear to me, this Neapolitan nobody knows in the States, but whose LPs sell like hot cakes in Italy, Germany, Russia, Spain, Belgium, Holland, Brazil, Argentina and Venezuela.

They're waiting for me. If there's anything in this world I'm good at, it's keeping people waiting. In fact, I'm so good at it I sometimes don't even show up at all. But that's another story.

That audience of sixty-something Italian Americans is already applauding the still-empty stage, the kind of applause that reeks of nostalgia, like "O sole mio" and 'Munasterio 'e Santa Chiara'. They're waiting for the usual triumphant entrance. My triumphant entrance!

I know this audience like the back of my hand. An audience fed on Italian TV and raised to expect great floods of melancholy. You have to trust people like that.

My long-time pianist, Rino Pappalardo, knocks at the door of the dressing room with a practised hand, fingers crossed for good luck. It's time.

'I'll be right out,' I hiss, with only one of my vocal cords, studying my bare, deformed, swollen, hairy belly in the mirror. I peer at myself with these proud eyes that have slain so many girls and note with a touch of anxiety that now really isn't the time, fuck it, for these brown eyes to have all these lines around them, though they're still cunning and opportunistic, cynical and romantic at the same time. I hold my breath and try to pull my belly in. The results aren't encouraging. I tuck in my silk shirt, then look at myself resolutely in the mirror, which has too many white lights around it, and, hopeful as I am by nature, I feel a riot of emotion, fear, anxiety and excitement.

Rino pounds on the door again.

'All right, ladies,' I say, quickly knocking back my fourth gin and tonic. 'It's show time.'

We walk down the neon-lit corridor leading to the stage, like a mayor and his councillors, me in front, followed by Rino Pappalardo, Lello Cosa the drummer, Gino Martire the bass player, and Titta Palumbo the guitarist. All in tuxedos, all way out of our comfort zones, all keyed up something rotten, shit-scared because this concert is bigger than us. Deep down, Titta must be thinking about the fact that we can't even read a note of music. But that's private, between us. Ours is a success built on the ear.

'I could do with a drop of Ballantine's,' Cosa whispers to Martire.

'Maybe he's in the audience,' Martire says ironically, even though he's terrified.

'Who?' spits Lello Cosa, a bit deaf.

'Ballantine, the owner of the whisky company,' Gino Martire says.

'Cut the crap,' I order, and they all stop talking.

'Four!' Lello Cosa gives a hoarse shout and sets up a 4/4 rhythm on the drums, more slowly than usual, though he speeds up the second time round. From backstage, I look grimly at Cosa. During the interminable twenty-four-second intro, it hits me without mercy that the hall's even bigger than I remembered it, but my saliva glands aren't working too well, and there's too much saliva in my mouth, and I'm going to be on in fifteen seconds, maybe even less, go away, saliva, fuck off, saliva, fuck off.

I've stabilised my blood pressure at about the level of a gecko's, and my face is as pale as a medieval saint's, but what the hell? I slither onto the stage like a jaguar, as if not sure where I am. I'm a master at entrances, an archangel, I could write handbooks about them, pamphlets ... The applause makes my jaw quiver, it's a kind of hung-over applause, thank Christ the saliva goes down a bit, and as I move my mouth towards the microphone I smile at the happy audience, who are yelling because they've recognised 'Un treno per il mare'.

When the intro ends, I start singing. And after two mentions of the word 'love', those Italian Americans start applauding wildly again. I still have too much saliva, I'm weak in the head with emotion, but I slay them anyway, it's always like this, love always drives these people crazy, and nobody will ever know ... that I have too much saliva, too much saliva.

Now the walls of my brain are knocking like shutters left open in a windstorm. I peer into the front row, looking for Sinatra, but can't see him. Where the fuck is he? Don't tell me he got cold feet!

I start the second verse half a second late, soon catch up, and 'Un treno per il mare' burns itself out. A mediocre performance. I say '*grazie*' and 'thank you' and as I say it I locate Sinatra's purple face. Give it all you've got, Tony, I whisper to myself, and Tony gives it all he's got as he starts 'Un cometa nel cuore', one of those songs that'd break the heart of a Swedish serial killer. After two chords, I've as good as smashed down the walls of emotion.

And an odd thought crosses my mind: when you smash down the walls of emotion, life becomes a Christmas bauble.

Now, as perky and full of myself as that TV-star parrot on *Portobello*, I've perched four tones higher, on that crazy high note in the chorus, a note not even Diamanda Galás could hit, the kind of thing that makes the walls of Radio City vibrate like a harp played by some idiot, and the Italian American audience clap their thick hands raw and the women's eyes fill with tears so that their eyeshadow starts to run like cheap margarine. The kind of thing that breaks your heart if you've ever been in love. And who hasn't been in love at least once in their lives?

Even Frank Sinatra, sitting there in the front row, straightens his gabardine trousers and laughs. He's enjoying this vocal display. With more restraint, of course, because he's learnt to bear himself with dignity. He's

something else, is Frank, it'd take more than this to surprise him, he's been around the block a few times and then some. And now I catch him in close-up, our Frank, and our eyes meet, in one big mutual admiration society.

I'm in the Hall of Fame, fuck it, or at least in Frank's clan, I think.

I'm one step away from paradise, and I'm singing like a god now, I feel like a god, I really am a god with my eyes closed and my head tilted back. If you could see God Himself right now, He'd probably be holding the microphone for me, Tony Pagoda. Alias Tony P.

So, like the Charlie Chaplin of easy listening, I set off arm in arm with Our Lord from ten to midnight. New York time. On the stage of Radio City.

Sinatra, although he's very drunk, doesn't fall asleep, doesn't even look like nodding off. Now that's what we Neapolitans call a result. A gold-plated result.

A vortex of syncopated notes and songs and thoughts is swirling around in my worried brain and I tell myself that now I really do have to give it all I've got ...

I belt out 'Quello che resta di me'. I have balls of iron in that one.

I hurl 'Un giorno lei mi penserà' into the air. This time I have balls of steel.

I drown the audience in its own tears with a heart-rending 'Non c'ero, amavo'. By God, I think this success is going to last me my whole life ... so tonight, I'm going to have myself some whores, American whores, New York's full of them.

And then I camp it up as only I know how with 'Lunghe notti da bar', and as I sing I slip one hand in my jacket pocket and let my fingers play with the little three-gram packet of cocaine. There are two thousand people here, hanging on every flicker of my eyelid, and yet they don't know that my wicked fingers are playing with the drugs,

and I'm thinking about the American whores I'm going to have tonight, and all this is going round and round in my skull like milkshake in a blender.

I'm having a great time now, pulling the wool over the eyes of these sixty-something Italian American fans of mine. If you think I'm naked now, baring my emotions, being totally honest, all for the price of your tickets, then you're way off track, it's not like that at all; even with all your eyes on me you could never know my secret, the secret of my fingers playing with something forbidden, illegal. But then we never do know anything, about people or things, simply because a thing or a person can never be seen in its totality, you see a person full face, you don't see his back, you always have a partial, approximate vision of the whole.

Lives are only attempts, mostly fucked-up ones.

And I peer out at my audience swaying in their seats and I see watery eyes and elderly couples holding hands to confirm the rightness of thirty years of marriage, no, it hasn't been a mistake, this life spent together, it may have been a dog's life, full of snares and insults and sorrows and disappointments, but it was worth it, and I see mothers with big arses thrashing about in their seats, deeply moved, they've got up to all kinds of mischief in their lives, but you're not supposed to say so, and anyway the priests have absolved them. I'm rambling now. I see tradition, folklore, expectations, strong wills, these fucking Italian Americans, it's a whole other world, SuperTony flies up to the top note of 'Lunghe notti da bar'. According to surveys, people break the rules more these days, but it isn't true, it's just that people talk about it now whereas in the old days they didn't. I'm crazy about surveys.

And I lavish encores like flyers at an underground station.

Back in the dressing room, Titta feels lighter, he's lost about two kilos of accumulated tension, and he kisses Lello, Rino, Gino and yours truly. They yell and sing a rousing chorus of a football song as if they'd won the championship. They're sweaty and happy. I look at them, and I'm pleased for them, but I don't join in, because I'm the boss and I have to pretend I knew all along that this New York gig was going to work out well. My manager, Genny Afrodite, comes in, out of breath, with his square, nondescript little face, and the obstinate little forelock that keeps flopping down over his forehead, and the little diamond fucking up his left ear, which makes him look a good six months younger, and silences the chorus with a sentence that falls like a thunderclap.

'Boys, Sinatra's here, he wants to say hello.'

A fragile, existential silence falls.

With the speed of a cheetah hearing a rifle shot, I rush to the illuminated mirror and tidy my peroxided mahogany-coloured hair. Crazy hair, a bit like that magician Silvan's. I brush it right back and close my dressing gown and make a sign to Genny with my arm. A dictatorial, unforgettable kind of sign. And the door opens. Titta is shaking, apologising to himself for the times he's been self-critical, the times he hasn't even liked himself. We hear muffled, rhythmical footsteps in the corridor. More than one person is coming, rapping the carpet. The bodyguards come in first and then Frank appears, unsteady on his feet and as red in the face as a peasant from the Abruzzi. He walks up to me and holds out his hand, and on it there's this huge ring, a hundred and twenty-two thousand dollars, list price. An orgasm of diamonds. I respond with a thirteen-million-lire ring from a goldsmith in the Via Marina. We shake hands. The two rings touch with a clink that everyone can hear. Fifth Avenue versus the Via Marina, an unequal duel. Titta looks in humiliation at his wedding ring and, at the most important moment in his life, discovers a new inferiority

complex he never knew he had. What I discover, meanwhile, is a whole new concept in generosity. I'd like to offer old Frank some coke, but I somehow manage to stop myself.

Frank, who's shorter than the most pessimistic forecast, though the way he holds himself makes him look like an emperor, settles into my chair, the only place to sit in the dressing room. My group and I stand there and wait for the pronouncement that could validate our entire careers. Absolutely the wrong moment for Lello Cosa to remember that he's something of a humorist on top of being a talented drummer.

'He looks like Napoleon,' says Lello Cosa, hoping for the unlikely complicity of his companions. I glare back at him. Thank God Sinatra hasn't understood. Frank sits there, but still doesn't speak; the tension rises, indescribably, it hangs in the air like damp. With the slowness of a heroin addict, Sinatra takes out a packet of cigarettes. Like giraffes, we all crane our necks to see what brand he smokes. But none of us have ever heard of this brand. It's called Sinatra.

Frank places the cigarette between his lips - like a scene from a musical in slow motion - then takes out a 1958 platinum Dupont lighter and puts together a sentence in broken Italian.

'Marilyn Monroe gave me this as a gift.'

We're eager now to hear more. Very eager.

'The concert was good, but remember one thing, Tony, success ...' - he gives an alcoholic laugh - 'success is a cesspit.'

Success is a cesspit.

Your Tony remembers these words as he sits alone, trapped inside this black limousine - God knows who paid for it, it certainly wasn't him - and looks out with gin-and-tonic-soaked eyes - he's had six of them - at the Midtown skyscrapers gliding past. The driver wouldn't pay any

attention to me even if I begged him, so I tell myself it's time to snort some cocaine. I hunch over the powder and take a snort that could bring down the Empire State Building, but the black driver hasn't even heard me because he's behind one of those soundproofed panes of glass that in Italy you only ever find in banks. So here I am, alone again. I'd been counting on a dinner with Sinatra, but he just pissed off, like someone who's already done you an enormous favour by coming to your concert. I was so optimistic, but as everyone knows, stars, celebrities, always have somewhere else to be. Somewhere where I'm not. I was imagining myself having a friendly time after dinner with Frank in a house furnished by Billy Wilder's set designer, instead of which I'm headed straight for Times Square, where all the whores are concentrated. That's my kingdom. I don't feel out of place there. I go by ethnic groups. I take on board the limousine a black girl, a Puerto Rican girl and an evil-looking blonde who could be German, Hungarian, something like that, I've always been a bit confused when it comes to the east and the north. I'm used to the luxury of America or the heat of the tropics, where I feel like a pharaoh on holiday. I left the rest of my group in a bar in the Village, where at least they can ask for a beer at a dimly lit bar counter. Not that they can talk to the barman - the dictatorship of the English language has cut them off from the good things in life. No one knows where Genny Afrodite is, he has his own haunts and never reveals them, he always says he has work to do, which might be true; it might also be true that he shoots up on heroin, what do I know?

Whereas I, as I offer cocaine to the three girls, pipe up with a few American words, probably sounding like a turn-of-the-century immigrant. Their noses are already in the white powder and they don't even answer me. But I like to communicate. I've always liked it. And I've never been fussy about the method. Words, blows, tears, laughter, love

letters, sex, alcohol, cocaine: it makes no difference to me, it's all communication.

In the hotel room, we snort some more coke, lines so long you can see the start but not the end. I throw myself down on the bed in an attitude that says: I'm here, take me, do what you want with me.

The black girl has grandiloquent breasts, drooping on either side, with big stretch marks on them, the result of too many children or too many hands groping her. This last thought couldn't have come at a better time, because it actually arouses me! The Puerto Rican girl is a neat and tidy little thing, she undresses in a corner, as if she's going to sleep by herself, then chooses a chair and puts her things on it, like a shop assistant trying out for a job. She's thorough. At a rough guess, I'd say she was a girl who was OK at school but when she was at home didn't really like to hang out with her brothers and sisters and relatives. That's the idea I'm getting. But the one who alarms me is the icy blonde girl. She's standing there, leaning motionless on the doorpost, fully dressed, looking like a crooked accountant. As if she's saying: I'm here, but I wouldn't behave any differently if I was at a convention of dentists. She's starting to get on my nerves, which is likely to cancel out any excitement caused by the black girl's heavily groped tits. It's the black girl, in fact, who's the first to get down on the bed with me. She rubs herself against me, and I try to kiss her, but she avoids my kiss.

God knows why, but I open my mouth and say, 'I'm a singer.'

Nobody has said a word, only me.

None of the three could give a fuck.

The Puerto Rican girl joins in, with a show of heat. She's sneaked up behind me, like an assassin, and now she's stroking me all over, while the black girl has gone straight into her routine, with her legs open. I enter her and for

some reason it hits me that I'm not solving any problems here. I'm aroused, but I'm not as hard as I was, not as hard as you might think. Coke soon puts paid to that kind of macho expectation. And the blonde is really annoying me now, she's still standing there, watching indifferently, without moving away from the doorpost, without undressing, what the fuck am I paying her for? I'm going to lose my temper in a minute. I move on top of the black girl, without feeling anything. Solitude grabs me by the balls and turns me inside out.

We have to be strong, Tony.

I give it all I've got, because a moment like this – fucking three different women with different life stories and different fathers and mothers – justifies everything, has to justify everything: all the hard work, all my fears and anxieties. Anyway, I'm speeding up, panting away, moving from body to body, and I let slip that I'm about to come and only then do I realise that the blonde girl, as furtive and rapid as a silent jackal, has squeezed in beneath me, still fully dressed, and she takes me in her mouth and I finally make it and die of pleasure. It's the one I didn't like who's given me this Christmas present, what a performance! A silent performance. The thing that kills me about sex is the way, when you think it's going to be really noisy, it turns out to be silent, and vice versa. It's one of the few things that continues to surprise me. I'm still blue in the face, and the last spurts are still coming out, when the room telephone rings. It's my wife, Maria.

'Hi, darling,' I say, as I peel myself away from the black girl's legs, though without any great hurry. Not even Jesus Christ could tell me what to do or make me feel guilty. I've paid the three girls in advance, so I watch as they dress in silence while I laugh heartily and tell my wife that the concert went great. I hear her jump for joy in our home. Like a kangaroo. She shares all my joys and sorrows. I can't see the blonde girl, she must have left the room, she was

already dressed anyway. What the fuck did she need to stay for? My wife tells me the kid wants to talk to me. I hear that innocent voice say, 'Daddy.'

While the black girl and the other one slip out of the room without even so much as a goodbye wave, my daughter tells me she's missing me. I think the whole of life is missing me.

'Sweetie, I'll bring you back a present, but you know, it's late here, didn't Mummy tell you? With the time difference, and the jet lag, Daddy's really tired, he's been working tonight.'

I'm in a hurry. Why?

I put the phone down, but I don't feel well. My stomach hurts. It isn't the ulcer, it's the jet lag that's killing me. I still have sperm on my hands, but I give a start, because the one thing I don't have is the thirteen-million-lire ring. I had it a minute ago. I let out a scream like a starving seagull. That blonde whore stole it. Why don't things like that ever happen to Sinatra? Maybe because he doesn't go around picking up whores in Times Square. My suspicions are confirmed when I go to the door and check my wallet. Those whores got my cash, too. All because that bitch of a wife of mine always phones me when she shouldn't, and has done for the past twenty years. The woman has no sense of timing.

I feel like crying.

It's 27 December 1979 and for some days now everyone's been that bit nastier.

But I don't cry.

Only, by now, I've had it up to here with the States, I want to go back to Italy. I even cry out in my sleep, a cry of pain that wakes me up in a sweat, 'Gondolier, take me to Naples!'

What the fuck does that even mean?

2

*'I've been ready for hours
And I'm wearing my best.'*

CHARLES AZNAVOUR

IF THERE'S ANYONE with the power to piss me off, it's Titta Palumbo, my guitarist as well as my crazy, useless tennis doubles partner.

It's midday and my thighs hurt. I was quite shaken up last night after those three bitches robbed me blind, and to compensate I snorted at least three or four grams, so now, inevitably, my thighs hurt.

The six of us are lounging in one of the bars at JFK airport, waiting for our flight. I'm drinking tequila brown, and I don't give a fuck what the others are drinking. I only know that Titta gets on my fucking tits, talking complete crap the way he does for hours on end. And he always seems to find that imbecile Gino Martire ready to back him up. Right now, they're discussing which kind of pizza is better, a ripieno or a margherita, and getting quite worked up about it. Two stupid fucking Neapolitans. You work like a donkey to get your music out of a regional backwater and into the world, and the same old Neapolitans are still strutting like seventies models in transparent veils of cliché. They're the first to talk about pizza and spaghetti and sunsets and the pines in the Via Orazio and Vesuvius and Capri and the Sorrento fucking pensinsula. Just like these two big queers I have as musicians.

In defence of the ripieno, Titta cites a Polish writer with a name I couldn't pronounce even if I made two hundred attempts at it, one of those names that's all consonants and no vowels. He's well read, is Titta; the others are in awe of him, he knocks them out with all his adjectives and his complicated names, but he doesn't impress me. Titta wouldn't impress me even if he spewed the whole *Encyclopædia Britannica* over me. Which by the way, my dear Titta, I have at home, never mind that some of the volumes are still in their cellophane wrappers. I always tell Titta to shut his trap and that keeps him quiet. He may be able to quote books, but I've got experience on my side, the kind of experience he can only dream about, spending every evening as he does in his three-room apartment in the Colli Aminei with his mousy wife and his three kids who he says are quite healthy but to me look like mongoloids with driving licences.

Titta always tries to come over as hypersensitive, a many-faceted man, whereas in fact he's a jackass. A jackass who weeps. That won't get you anywhere, Titta. Especially if you don't go out in the evening because you're at home reading. In the evening you have to go out, do the rounds, devour the night, explore the other side of the tracks, realise that only the night with its unlikely notes and chords will ever teach you anything. The night forces you into a duel between your own life and everyone else's. It's something that can't be told. But I'm going to tell you anyway, all of you out there. You just have to be patient. I may even tell you about the August night I ate ragù at four in the morning in Torre del Greco with these three really scary characters, the kind only I could meet.

In any case, I'm the sole witness of this crap they're talking at the airport and so I present to you ...

... *the famous conversation about pizza* ...

‘When I get back,’ Titta, says sociably, ‘even if I’m jet-lagged, even if I’m feeling really shaken up, I’m going straight to Angelo’s and ordering a ripieno.’

‘Jet lag always screws up my stomach,’ I say passively.

A resounding silence. I’m the leader but nobody gives a shit about what I say, which really pisses me off.

Martire is off to a flying start, like Niki Lauda. ‘Going to Angelo’s and ordering ripieno is stupid,’ he says quite passionately. ‘It’s like eating mozzarella gnocchi in Caracas.’

I’ve retreated into a resentful silence which should have drawn their attention but doesn’t. I’m even more offended than I was before.

‘Apart from anything else,’ Titta says, getting on his high horse, ‘Angelino’s a friend of mine, so watch what you say, and anyway, his ripieno’s so good, it’s almost scary.’

‘I’m attacking the pizza,’ Gino says defensively, ‘not the man.’

‘Angelino lives for his ripieno,’ Titta says philosophically, ‘so you *are* offending the man, it’s a simple syllogism.’

‘Without meaning to,’ Gino says fatalistically, ‘Angelo makes a better margherita.’

‘You’re an idiot,’ Titta says resentfully. ‘Angelino doesn’t give a damn about margherita, he makes it against his will. When he’s asked for it he glares at you. He once told me something about the margherita, something so profound it brought tears to my eyes: “That stupid patriotic queen thought we were a simple people and palmed us off with a simple pizza, but who did she think she was, when we have something as complex as the ripieno? She had her just deserts, though. When a monarchy starts dictating how people should eat, that means it has no future.” Now tell me, after a gastronomic speculation like that, after such a trenchant political comment, do you really think Angelo’s happy making margherita?’

‘I’m only saying it’s crap to think you have to be happy to do something in order for it to turn out well,’ Gino says, as if he’s been cut to the quick. ‘Angelo’s a perfect example. He may not like making margherita, but it comes out perfect.’

‘That’s because he goes all the way to Mondragone to find ricotta,’ Titta says sadly.

‘The quality of the ingredients has nothing to do with it,’ Gino says artistically. ‘It’s a question of talent. I never said his ripieno was bad.’

‘I’d like to quote something,’ Titta says. ‘Something a Polish writer’ – there follows the impossible name I couldn’t possibly repeat – ‘said when he came to Naples for the first time: “Naples is built on layers. As with its subsoil, so it is above ground. Nothing here has a single facet, that’s physiologically impossible; the concave here is as deeply rooted as the convex, the two elements are inseparable, in other words, there is no room here for flat geometry, only curves can survive and have value.” Do you understand that, you imbecile? There can’t be any flat geometry, in other words the margherita, but only concave and convex curves, in other words the ripieno. Do you understand that?’ Titta is yelling at the top of his voice by now, and a couple of American waitresses turn and stare.

Gino calmly looks Titta straight in the eyeballs. ‘I don’t give a fuck what your Polish writer says, Titta, Angelino’s ripieno is shit.’

Titta pounds on the table with his fist. Rino reaches out an arm to calm him. Titta looks away, ashen-faced, all Actors Studio all of a sudden. Martire is laughing up his sleeve, as triumphant as a Thai mongoose defeating a snake.

I’ve been to Bangkok three times.

Now tell me, with idiots like these two, how did we ever end up singing in front of the Voice? A miracle. A mistake. What else can I say?