

**Elena Gianini Belotti, *The Long Wave, (L'Onda lunga)***

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English sample translation by Anne Milano Appel

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This morning, as I was making my way down the steps that lead from the front door to the street, a fine-looking woman in her forties, wearing jeans, tee-shirt and tennis shoes, came up to me with a friendly smile and asked me:

“Are you Signora Pompei?”

“Yes, I am,” I said impulsively.

I really don't know what I was thinking. Why had I lied so shamelessly? Had it been a sudden fit of madness, an urge to be defiant, or an uncontrollable desire to escape the routine of endlessly similar days, where virtually nothing ever happened? Did I unknowingly harbor a wicked need to ridicule others or actually scoff at life itself, to reshuffle the cards, to be theatrical and recite a script? Or was some remnant of adolescent idiocy blooming again at nearly eighty years of age? I was astounded at myself, at that irrational burst of impudence, an aspect of my character that was completely new to me. It took me a fraction of a second to think about it and establish that there was no Signora Pompei in the building in which I lived. The woman must have gotten the street name or building number wrong, which meant the real Signora Pompeii must be waiting for her around here, somewhere.

“Oh, I'm really so pleased to meet you!” she exclaimed, shaking my hand warmly. “May I? Alberta Viviani. As I told you on the phone, I'm genuinely very glad that you've started to cultivate the same interest I have towards a problem that is truly dear to my heart. I am very

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grateful to my friend Susanna for speaking to me about you. Unfortunately, there aren't many of us who want to delve into the matter more deeply, I assure you that there is a total indifference, if not hostility, toward the subject. Yet the issue really deserves greater attention, more involvement, especially among young people, though also among those of my generation."

It could be a judicious, roundabout way to allude to my advanced age, her regret at having to deal with elderly people like me, nearing the end, rather than young people in their prime. Who knows. I didn't much care about what she thought, I had plunged headlong into this reckless adventure and I was simply curious to find out how it would end.

"Oh, really? Such a shame," I answered arbitrarily, since I didn't have the foggiest idea of what problem she was alluding to. Since I had wormed my way into that story with a sensational lie – downright identity theft, in fact – I had to at all costs avoid the pitfalls littering the path, keep my answers vague, ask questions that did not betray my total ignorance of what we were about to embark upon, and at the same time gain some information that might enlighten me. In short, I had to conceal my deception no matter what, if I wanted to avoid making an ass of myself.

"The field isn't far, Alberta explained, we'll be there in no more than fifteen minutes, if the traffic isn't too bad. I'm parked right down the street from here."

We set out for the car. What field? I wondered, puzzled. Given Alberta's sporty outfit, I wondered if we were going to visit a tennis court or a soccer field or a golf course. There are all three not far from my neighborhood. Or was it a wheat field, a sheep pasture, a vegetable garden? Even a vegetable garden is a field, isn't it? But how could these fields be a problem? She started the car and we took off.

"Have you been interested in this for some time, Signora Pompei?" she asked.

"No, my interest is rather recent and fairly theoretical," I replied, "but I'd like to approach the topic in factual terms. You certainly know much more about it than I do, I'd like to hear about your experience."

Alberta began talking: "Well, I started a few years ago, almost by accident. A friend had mentioned it to me and I was curious. I went with him a couple of times, I formed some personal relationships and so I continued on my own. It was a dazzling discovery and a thrilling experience. This situation is present everywhere, and conspicuously so, but no one seems to

notice it. Or maybe we do everything possible to avoid it. Better to look the other way, life itself is already so complicated and demanding, why get involved in matters we can easily avoid.”

What the devil was she talking about? I wondered, more and more intrigued, though I had to pretend I understood.

“I assure you that you are an exception,” she went on, “I often speak of the matter with friends or colleagues, but no one wants to come with me. They take me for a madwoman, obsessed and a little eccentric. Some think I have nothing better to do, but I guarantee you that’s not it. I have an undergraduate degree in sociology, I earned a master’s degree in London, I teach at the university, I do consulting for the city and the region, in other words, I work like a horse.”

“Do you have a cell phone?” she asked me soon afterward. “I forgot to ask you for your number and give you mine. We only spoke on an ordinary landline, a rare occurrence these days!” she laughed.

I experienced a joyous jolt since I deduced that the real Signora Pompei was incapable of communicating with her; for a few hours at least Alberta would not be able to discover the hoax and I could rest easily. I told her I rarely used my cell phone, when I go out I forget it at home, when I’m home I leave it turned off or uncharged; all in all, I find it an unbearable nuisance. “How did we manage before they invented it?”

“You’re right,” Alberta laughed, “we’ve all become slaves to this device, we can’t live without it. In reality it’s robbed us of our peace and quiet.”

Spitefully I pictured the real Signora Pompei pacing up and down the sidewalk in front of her building, irritated by that inexplicable tardiness: she regarded every woman who passed by doubtfully, kept checking her watch, and snorted more and more impatiently. How long would this foolhardy performance of mine go on? Not very long, maybe only until that afternoon, when poor Signora Pompei, incensed and fuming, would finally reach Alberta on her home phone. Alberta, stunned, would reply that she’d been right on time, and had duly picked her up at the appointed spot. I chuckled to myself at the thought of the incomprehensible discussion that would ensue.

Still, there was a chance the scam might be revealed before that, maybe as a result of my own negligence, a slip of the tongue, a careless comment or whatever. If the fraud were to blow up, how would I justify myself? I had to come up with a credible excuse, but I couldn’t think of

one. Maybe I could tell her I was a bit deaf, given my age, so I hadn't clearly understood the name of the person she was looking for. But how could such an explanation make sense, when so far I had shown that I could hear quite well? Pretending to be deaf from that moment on didn't hold up. I racked my brains looking for a way out if it should come to that, but to no avail. I'm not in the habit of lying, so I'm not sufficiently well-trained to tell a fib and sustain it to the very end. At that point I gave a start: how come Alberta hadn't had any doubts about my identity, considering the difference there must certainly be between my voice and that of Signora Pompei? It's quite possible that she'd noticed it, but had attributed it to the effect of the telephone.

"A friend I once tried to involve," she went on, "said she wouldn't come because she was afraid of catching some disease. True, there can be a risk when you visit certain places."

"Of disease?"

"Yes, it happens sometimes in these camps. It's difficult to maintain acceptable sanitary conditions outdoors, you know, you're in direct contact with the ground, with soil and dirt, the protections are insufficient, there are invasions of insects which in the city are kept in check, there are various kinds of creatures running around, mice, foxes, gulls, crows, that are used to poking through garbage and spreading it around everywhere. But those aren't the real problems, they're just excuses."

Where on earth are we going? I wondered, flabbergasted.

"Oh, really? Those aren't the real problems? What are they then?" I asked her warily.

"I think the risk of disease is a facile excuse, and those who claim that may not even realize it. Whereas if you ask me, what keeps people away from these places is diversity. Diversity is frightening."

What diversity is frightening? I was more and more perplexed: it was difficult to see how this statement corresponded to a tennis court, a golf course and much less a vegetable garden. Maybe a garden where unusual exotic vegetables were grown, whose uncontrolled origin might well be a source of disease. Maybe Chinese vegetables? Fertilized with sewage sludge from black wells, like at one time – the best way to spread typhoid or cholera.<sup>1</sup> However, I didn't know if the black wells still existed.

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<sup>1</sup> According to LEAD Action News, vol. 10, no. 1, June 2010: "...farmers in China have used human waste to fertilize fields for more than 4,000 years. After thousands of years of cultivation, China's soil is still fertile and suitable for farming, and soil erosion is not yet common" (<http://www.lead.org.au/lanv10n1/lanv10n1-4.html>).

“Yes, of course,” I nodded uncertainly. At this point I prudently decided to remain silent so as not to give myself away. The real Signora Pompeii must have a very clear idea of what Alberta was referring to.

We were heading towards the outskirts of the city, an area intersected by the consular roads,<sup>2</sup> and having gone a ways on Via Olimpica, had come out on Viale Tor di Quinto.

Shortly before reaching Via Flaminia, Alberta turned right onto a narrow uphill street whose name I was unable to read on the sign. After the initial paved portion, it turned into a bumpy track full of potholes, the edges bordered by a tall hedge of wild, dusty-white vegetation: dried out locust trees, gigantic ailanthuses, brambles, clematis and vines that in some places closed in at the top, forming a shady canopy. Maybe the famous field we’re heading for is behind the arboreal barrier that’s obstructing the view, I said to myself – a lush garden rife with unfamiliar species, filling the air with noxious effluvia ... Or maybe it’s the level surface of a soccer field with goal boxes at either end, or a tennis court divided down the center by a net. But what does diversity have to do with tennis, soccer and diseases?

Piled up along the sides of the rutted track we were driving on, continually shaken and jolted, were hunks of old peeling fixtures, a gutted mattress, a chamber pot decorated with little red rose buds, a broken toilet bowl, pipes corroded by rust, in short, a very dismal illegal dumping ground. Further on, in a clearing, a nauseating stench of something rotting rose from a mound of plastic garbage bags. Alberta held her nose with her fingers. A neglected, rundown area, not far from the neighborhoods northeast of the city, a rural plague somehow spared from urbanization, which sent its feelers out into the crevices between the city’s nearby offshoots.

A track to the left of the open space where the garbage was heaped up led downhill to a junk yard, a depressing expanse of decomposing auto carcasses. After a few hundred yards, on the right, an opening appeared in the tall hedge that concealed the view. Alberta made a turn and took a little dirt road which, after going a short distance through the undergrowth, ended in a flat dusty pasture. There she stopped, turned off the engine and I finally figured out what kind of a field it was. A gypsy camp. I was amazed at myself: how could I have been so obtuse as to not realize where we were headed? The clues were all there: the remote location, the bumpy potholed

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<sup>2</sup> The most important Roman roads were named after a consul, hence they are called consular roads: Via Appia, Via Aurelia, Via Cassia, Via Flaminia, and so on.

road, garbage, disease, diversity...

I looked around, aghast.

[...]

They embraced Alberta exuberantly, talking over one another in a very approximate Italian. She introduced me as Signora Pompei, a friend and neighbor – I bit my tongue, I was about to correct her, but I stopped myself in time – then we were led to sit down under the tarp of one of the tents. A woman brought a bottle of brightly colored orange soda and poured it into glasses for us. I didn't understand much of what they were saying, the subject was the wedding celebration of a daughter with a cousin.

[...]

The little girl with the feisty little toddler around her neck approached the table and stood there watching us. I smiled at her and said, "*Ciao*," and she, bashful, lowered her luminous black eyes; she set her burden on the ground and he immediately started wailing like a banshee. One of the women must have scolded her, but she ignored the little one's fierce protests, came a step closer, stared at me for a while and said, "*Ciao*."

So she understood Italian! I put my hand out to take hers, she hesitated a moment, smiled shyly and slipped her hand in mine. I was moved by the trust she'd shown me. I took to her at once and asked her: "What's your name?" She murmured something that I did not understand, and the woman with the gold tooth stepped in and said her name: Klaré. "She's her mother" Alberta whispered to me. The child was thin as a rail, a filthy, tattered smock hung to the knees of her crooked legs. She had an expressive little face with irregular features – the upper and lower arch of her tiny teeth interrupted by missing incisors – olive brown skin, a tangle of black curly hair and those big eyes, vibrant and ravenous, that took in everything and swallowed it all up.

"How old are you?" I asked her. She raised her hands, thought for a moment, opened one of them, closed the other into a fist, then stuck the thumb out and showed them to me. Six fingers, six years old. So little Klaré could count! I thought with a surge of joy. Who had taught her her numbers? I wondered if anyone had told her that there were schools where children of her age learned to read and write. And I wondered what the dreams of little gypsy girls were like, in contrast to the destiny that awaited them.

Translator's Note:

The excerpt is translated from the unedited manuscript of chapter 3 of Elena Gianini Belotti's *Onda lunga*, forthcoming from Edizioni nottetempo, November, 2013. The footnotes were added by the translator.

The title, *The Long Wave*, may be a metaphor for the waves of life and the peaks and troughs the protagonist has ridden in her "nearly eighty years." The beauty of it is that she has stayed on her board, weathered the rough swells and rollers, persevered and risen back up to the crest. What's more, she gives the impression of having relished every moment of the exhilarating ride.