

Milena Agus, *While the Shark is Sleeping*
(Mentre dorme il pescecane)

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English sample translation by Brigid Maher, © Telegram 2014

Doctor Salevsky

I reckon though that it'll work out with the South American doctor. He's started coming to our house and Zia says it's very important for a man to become fond of his girlfriend's family. He likes Mamma's food, flowers, stories and paintings. He wanted to buy one of them but Papà told him that unfortunately he'd already sold them all. But no one thinks that he might like Mamma, so awkwardly wrapped up in all those layers.

Not him who, as Zia puts it, has swarms of women buzzing around him and keeps condoms all over the place, in the car, in the dining room, in the bathroom, as well as, obviously, in the bedroom.

Papà says that Mamma and the Argentinian doctor have founded a kind of Mutual Aid Society. He's been far away from his family for years and though he talks to them every day – 'Mamina! Papino!', Papà imitates him answering his mobile phone – it's clear that he misses them terribly.

Mamma, of course, is trying to recreate his missing family around him. The doctor, when he sits down to talk to her, doesn't notice the passing of time and then later on he might phone her up and I guess he must say funny things because sometimes she laughs and laughs, pulling out her handkerchief, and then she asks him if he's ever tasted Sardinian *fregola* cooked this way or that other way, or the fennel and cheese soup Nonna makes, and what with the laughter and the recipes, they stay on the phone forever, because then the doctor explains to Mamma how you make broth from sweet potato, corn and veal. But then, when he finally comes over to taste these dishes, the two of them never eat anything, because otherwise they'd have less time for talking.

Their meals are left untouched, they'd be the joy of any restaurant, if they ever went to one together.

They've only ever walked a short way together.

Mamma had to pop out so she asked him if he had a problem heading out with her. He almost started shouting and said, 'Why would I have a problem with that?' He'd understood that the real question was, 'Are you embarrassed by me?'

Mamma got back all excited, because the doctor had got her to accompany him to via Manno to buy clothes and had asked her advice and then they'd gone into the

Sant'Antonio church where the doctor had knelt down and prayed, but then he'd confided to Mamma that he wasn't at all sure that God exists, in fact, he was leaning more towards a no than a yes. And then, in the little piazza at San Sepolcro, beyond the portico of Sant'Antonio, he'd seen all the graffiti on the walls and after making the sign of the cross because he was in front of a sacred place, he'd said that he'd cover that graffiti with the blood of whoever had done it and make them pick up all the litter off the ground with their mouths and then clean it with their tongues.

Mamma reckoned the doctor was just saying that and really he wouldn't hurt a fly and Papà got annoyed and kept saying, 'Oh, the wise, perceptive lynx has spoken. The eagle, who sees everything and misses nothing, has spoken. If it weren't for your mother, how would you protect yourselves?'

My brother wants to know how come everyone in this house, except for him, has this obsession with talking about their own shit. Why didn't Mamma just keep her walk to herself?

Zia's boyfriend seems to love eating if Mamma's not around, but he's not fat. In fact he's very handsome: very tough and very dark. Four generations back his father's great-grandfather migrated from Russia to Argentina and married an *indio* girl, that's why he has such a strange name for a South American: Salevsky. Doctor Salevsky. Mamma says it's like he has two kinds of physiognomy: that of a savage, and that of a soldier at the court of the Tsar. She says that his eyes are the colour of the Atlantic and Pacific oceans when they do battle at Cape Horn and even though she's seen none of all that, it's her favourite blue when she's painting.

Mamma says the reason he's not fat is that his hunger for food is only homesickness, and it's a homesickness that not even all the women he's lived with have been able to take away.

When Doctor Salevsky arrives for lunch, or for dinner, he clearly doesn't want to let her down in Society so, knowing how much Mamma loves growing flowers, he brings her dozens of plants from the nursery, in the same colours as the tubes of paint she'd enthusiastically showed him.

They're not doing anything wrong and none of us thinks they might like each other, or rather that he might like Mamma, so skinny and scared, with her floral dresses hanging off her in summer and her deportee's overcoat in winter.

Mamma must have told the doctor that she's never travelled. It's true that Papà's always off somewhere, but never with her. Papà loves travelling alone like a missionary, even though he's married, and Mamma understands this.

One day Zia's boyfriend arrived with a heavy package tied with a bow as red as Mamma's face when she saw it. No one ever gives her anything because she says gifts embarrass her and she doesn't enjoy them. Inside the package was this: *Earth from Above: 365 Days*, by the photographer Bertrand. With that book, Mamma can visit a different place each day. She was careful not to put it on the bookshelf, where anyone could get at it. If I ask to travel with her for a bit she goes and gets it from a secret place in her bedroom and she strokes its pages with the same love Rosso Malpelo felt, in Verga's story, when he stroked the trousers that had belonged to his dead father, the only person who had ever loved him. Her gestures, as we turn the pages, remind me of when she used to read fairy tales to my brother and me.

Today my favourite fairy tale is a little island in the Sulu Archipelago, nameless, because it would be impossible to give names to all 7,100 islands that make up the Philippines. It's isolated in an immensity of blue and a long way away from all the other islands, which are in turn a long way away from our world. And the photograph's been taken from up high, so high that it can only be an angelic perspective. Before travelling to other places, Mamma and I always pass by the Sulu Archipelago and caress our idea of happiness.