

## Elvira Seminara, *Excuse my dust (Scusate la polvere)*

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English sample translation by Isobel Butters

(pp. 79-85)

### 20.

Ok. Hold it. Summary of the previous episodes.

You have to every so often, Alice recommends it, but so do normal psychologists. You settle down somewhere, ideally legs crossed on the mat in silence, and you take a really long breath, paying careful attention to what is happening: the air being drawn in, in, through the organs, slowly, flowing-flowing and then out through the nose, while the whole world, islands as well, sets up home inside you. And you sigh in unison in cosmic harmony.

Or so they say. Huh. I find it unbearable. It gets on my nerves and brings spastic contractions to my colon.

However, breathing normally and without paying particular attention, you summarize your life and legend, but before getting to the end (never seen a legend yet, anyway), in fact when I'm still on the first episode, the phone rings with that grating, piercing sound that only my mother can make.

I knew it. It *is* her. I know too because she is one of the few people who call me on my landline, because she does not know how to dial all those numbers in a row on a cell phone. Anyway she has not got a cell phone. Actually she has not even got a cordless, because when she used one she could never remember where she had left it, and would look for it all over the house, shouting and calling it by name. Sometimes she would go for days without being able to communicate with the world.

That is why, a few months ago, I gave her two corded phones with large keypads and I installed one in the kitchen and the other on her bedside table. "What a wonderful invention!" she exclaimed giddily, touching the grey plastic lead. "Now they will keep still and stop running around!"

She spent the whole day excitedly staring at the phone, waiting, and making calls. Then in the evening she announced with emotion: "It is incredible how technology is developing, quel progrès merveilleeeux! le téléphone fixe!"

Anyway, back to the present, it *is* her on the phone.

She wants Andrea's recipe for Sacher torte. She has become obsessed with cakes in her old age, and fortunately it has stopped her pestering me about records that did not play anymore because her old record player has long since been turned into a plant pot. She has a mile of records. Especially a lot of opera. When she did the washing up as a young woman, she used to sing *La traviata*. It got on my nerves because I hate opera, but I have to admit she had a beautiful voice when she yelled.

I reckon she likes making cakes now because they have specific quantities, which are a means of regulating the universe. They help you feel settled, so tidy and fixed.

“Mamma, Andrea never made a Sacher”.

“Je me souviens a cake au chocolat très Bonne. Wake uuuuup, try and remember!”

Droll, my mother adamant with the verb “souvenir”.

“Mamma, Andrea never made cakes! We bought that chocolate one you are thinking about in a cake shop!”

“D’accord, call him then, I’ll teach him a gateau, with pears and chocolat. You know mon voisin grows peers, and he gives me all sorts of peers, and now I make les confitures? Call Andrea and I’ll tell him, they are all organic, no conservatives, just how he likes!”

“Mamma, it’s preservatives, and anyway Andrea is dead, he is not here!”

She was silent. I had told her right away, at the time, about the accident but she had already forgotten.

“È décédé, vraiment?! When?”

“Mamma, two months ago! Mamma what are you doing, can you hear me?”

There was a very heavy pause, like a truckful of pears on your stomach.

“What awful news,” she said. And then added in a different voice: “And here I am, far awaaaay from it all! I write all the quantities down, but you can’t write everything, there are so many things that get left out of the amounts, off the pieces of paper!”

I could hear paper being shaken. She must have had some sheets in her hand... the recipes. She was getting into a panic. Starting to tremble.

“Mamma? Is everything ok? Shall we speak later?”

I hung up and went back to the mat to breathe cosmically, to blend in with all the world’s chaos and vanish down the universal drain.

## 21.

“No! Enza, peach nipples no. That’s going too far!”

“But I can just picture them, set on the plate in pairs: two semi-spheres of pink peach jelly with a walnut in the centre, just like a nipple, with just a hint of a wobble, like real tits! Delicious, believe me!”

“Enzina, I said no, it’s too much”

It was the first time Mia had opposed my wording on the menus. And I think everyone was listening to us because she was talking too loud. It was midday and rain was in the air. At that time bar Due was always full of idlers with unbelievable palmtops or 12 cm heels. In other words, lawyers, bank employees and marketing experts (in the shopping sense) having an aperitif with an air of smug self-satisfaction, convinced they were the basic modules for the entire social mechanism. And then they left the ashtrays full of chewed gum and the coffee cups full of lipstick, or even lipstick-covered chewed gum.

We were at our usual table at the back, next to the dying fern. She was organizing a banqueting event for a convention of plastic surgeons, and had already bitten through her whole battery of nails.

I wasn’t expecting it. I had gone to a lot of trouble writing this menu, carefully avoiding bloodthirsty words like seared, blanched, minced and filleting (inappropriate at a meeting of aesthetic plastic surgeons sponsored by a cosmetics company). Instead I had called to mind a world of firmness and tonicity with “TONIC à la menthe serene”, “Supple tuna soufflé with rum”, “Lithe champignon mousse”, “Volupté of plump truffle” and “Dorian Gray honey cake”.

I had renamed her disgusting Chinese wines “Elixir of fox grape wine”, “Nectar of

Panarea”, “Distillation de Saintblum” and I was expecting nothing but compliments. But no, she was eating her nails.

“So what’s Saintblum?” she asked when I had finished reading them out.

“It is the surname of my mother’s next door neighbour, in Paris.

It sounds great doesn’t it? He grows pears”.

They brought us coffee and glasses of water.

“All ok,” she said. “Except for the jelly nipples. Does that bother you?”

What the hell. I had no intention of fighting over nipples, neither hers nor anyone else’s. Besides, I couldn’t wait to tell her about the lawyer Mabbie-Mann’s shocking news. But she kept on chewing her nails and staring murkily into the distance.

One biological indicator of Mia’s state is her make-up.

When it is heavy and overflowing, with black spilling over from her eyes, and her complexion looks like a well-cooked lump of meat (because of the three layers of blusher), she is not relaxed.

The second indicator is her nail biting. She becomes voracious on these occasions.

“You should stop,” I told her, “It is not appealing for the queen of catering to devour her nails”. I was sharp, I know, but she had been odious.

She was so indifferent she wasn’t even offended.

“You know something, Enza? I started again when I gave up smoking. You’ve got to do something, after all, otherwise you end up eating crackers all day...”

“But you still smoke!”

“What has that got to do with it?” she retorted, staring randomly into space.

“What I do now is hardly smoking. It’s quite different, something totally different. I have kicked the smoking forever”.

“Aren’t you going to ask me how it went with the widower yesterday?” I wanted to say.

“Oh, yes of course!” she would have replied. “Will you tell me later, because I’ve got to go now?” Which is why I didn’t say anything to her. She gathered her scarf like a river and wrapped it six times round her neck, then ran off.

“Sorry Enzima, I’ve got to rush off to do the shopping at that Chinese wholesaler’s. Will you pay? See you later!”

Then strangely she came back.

“You want to know something?”

Of course I wanted to know.

“With this universal obsession with manicures, a person can’t bite their nails in peace anymore. It’s a curse! You are all obsessed, now, even men!

Everyone looks at your nails, not your legs!”

She gave me a sort of kiss and was gone. Thinking I could not see her, she lit a cigarette.

Oh, I had forgotten. Enzima instead of Enzina was another of my names, and she had invented it.

Outside the bar the air was all dark, swollen. The sky seemed beaten black and blue, with certain purple clouds that looked like the bruises the day after.

Just as well I like walking. It relaxes you. And even better if it is windy too. It dusts your thoughts, along with your hair. I let it down specially, to let it get the air better.

And walking helps you get ideas. Three came to me. The first is to change “Nipples” into “Peach skin sorbet” and “Ivory skin sorbet”. That way the sponsors will be happier and will sell face cream. The first with peaches, of course, and the other with lemon.

Idea number two. All I needed was the right student.

*From Satyricon to Catering, food in literature. From macro to micro via McDonald's.* I had everything in my head for a fantastic thesis. It was a pity so many lecturers were behind and so many students dumb, all so scared by my innovative theses.

The third was the utility room. My utility room. I had to carry out an inspection. I had found a reason for going home.