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About 3100 words

A TOUCH OF JOY

by Joseph Gueron

It was a late afternoon at the end of August; Spoleto was overrun with visitors attending the art festival of "Two Worlds". The sidewalk café attached to the Hotel Charleston in Piazza Callicola was packed. The joyful words of a Cirque De Soleil song, "Alegria", coming from hidden speakers, served as a splendid anthem for that place at that moment. A cacophony of conversations in Italian, English, French, Spanish and Japanese filled the air, playing a perfect counterpoint to the music.

Regardless of language there was a kind of festive excitement in their tone of voices, even elation. It was justifiable, their senses and minds had been jolted by their recent exposure to thrilling and eclectic panoply of

music, paintings, ballet, opera, flamenco, and photography exhibits.

Amid the festive crowd the lonely figure of a young woman sitting in solitude stood out. A carafe of white wine almost empty, a small plate with olives pits and lupini beans, and an ashtray full of cigarette butts indicated she had been there for some time. She would glance at her watch occasionally and then go back to writing on paper napkins.

Lynn, 29 years old, was petite, with nice bronzed legs she loved to show and very small breasts she liked to hide with oversized peasant blouses. Her dainty feet were encased in sandals with long, wrap around laces, gladiator style. Her ever-present sunglasses rested over her hair ready to cover her eyes as soon as the need to hide her feelings was required.

In somewhat affected English, with a slight accent difficult to pinpoint, she asked the waiter for more lupini beans. She loved their salty semi-bitter taste and the pleasure of unwrapping their thick skin with her teeth and tongue.

Her studied indifference hid an incomplete education punctuated by bits of knowledge harvested randomly from her different lovers, and whatever books they may have recommended to her. She liked to write poems on paper

napkins, and since she seldom shared them, no one had ever told her they were mostly bad.

While close to her mother as any good Venezuelan girl should be, it was with her American father, whom she only saw at random, she dared to share some of her thoughts. Even that with a sense of reservation, knowing well it was his sense of guilt rather than love that motivated and fueled his sporadic attention.

Bored, Lynn started one of her internal monologs.

I loved those red shoes; I may let him buy them for me. Would he have picked the hotel just because of the name? Typical of Charles, always playing with names, I wonder if he does the same with his wife. Charleston, what a stupid name! How can I tell Molly, where we stayed in Spoleto? I know I will say it was the San Carlo, sounds better, she will not know...

Lynn's thoughts were interrupted by the change of beat in the music, and a group of young people. They carried small gym bags and appeared to be dancers waiting to occupy the table next to her. One of them, a girl, with a Roman nose and large mouth glanced at Lynn, smiled and then turned to speak to one of her companions. Lynn was somewhat mesmerized by the graceful movement of the young woman's hands as she spoke in Italian.

Lovely hands and a nice body, it is a pity, she should not wear those pants so long, so unattractive the dirty ends. Nice tush though. Her mouth reminds me of Laura's, but Laura's breasts were larger. Sweet Laura, sweet stupid Laura; I wonder if that conceited pillow queen is happy now, with that bitch, that despicable bulldyke... God I hate her, I despise her, well they deserve each other... The sun feels so good, I just feel so...

Lynn's attention shifted to the beautiful young man sitting two tables away, holding an open newspaper which he ignored as his attention wandered around studying some of the people sitting on nearby tables. He wore designer sunglasses resting on his head, and a light sweater wrapped around his shoulder.

God he is almost a caricature of a beautiful Italian man, but his eyes are amazing. I'm jealous, why couldn't I have those eyelashes! I want his eyes... I want his mouth. Why is he not looking in this direction? I bet he is a good kisser. I want him to notice me. These stupid chairs, I cannot cross my legs. May be I open a little my legs, no I can't, I am not wearing the right panties. God, I miss Charles' hands. The bastard, I'm going to teach him a lesson, how does he dare to think I'm at his call."

Lynn reached for another liupini bean.

I should not have agreed to meet him this weekend, but Robert was gone anyway. I'm glad I came anyway, it's a lovely town, and so many great shoes, and such gorgeous men and lovely women Ah at last! He is looking at me. What a lovely smile. Yes, Charles, I'm going to fuck this lovely man, you bastard. Yes Charles, you pompous ass, I'm going to fuck this young man with the gorgeous eyes and lovely smile. Yes Charles, I'm going to do it, because I love you, because I want you, because I need you... And because you always make me wait for you, and I hate the waiting, and I hate myself for waiting."

She rose from her chair, and methodically took small steps following the beat of the music, slowly, ever so slowly approaching the entrance of the café, searching for a toilet, while continuously looking at the young man, smiling and murmuring softly as a mantra " *yes Charles, yes Charles, yes Charles...*"

On her return Lynn waved at the waiter as she started rummaging through her purse. The young Italian man rose and approached her table. Suddenly he stopped and stood still. Lynn was surprised, she was getting ready to welcome him when she felt a hand lightly touching her shoulder, as she heard Charles' voice:

"Sorry, we started lunch very late!"

Her lover, a man in his mid-forties, was dressed in a well-cut dark gray business suit, wearing an exquisite red silk tie, and carrying an expensive leather briefcase. He planted a kiss close to Lynn's ear as he continued:

"I could not be the first to leave. You understand, don't you?"

By coincidence the music suddenly stopped while Lynn did not respond. Charles took the chair next to her, and tried to hold her hand. She pulled her hand back and in anger very slowly in a very low tone of voice, almost whispering responded:

"No, Charles, I do not understand... I don't want to understand! You said you were going to take the 2 o'clock train. I wasted a lovely afternoon, just waiting for you!"

Charles, smiling hesitantly, extended his arm in a silent plea to hold Lynn's hands. Lynn reluctantly allowed him to do so, but kept her eyes focused elsewhere, refusing to return his glance.

"I'm so sorry, Lynn, please, look at me.

You know I love you. I'm crazy about you."

Charles brought his head very close to Lynn's and murmured in her ear.

"During the whole lunch, it was so difficult to focus on the conversation and look interested. I kept thinking about you... I had a terrible hard-on."

Lynn reclaimed her hands as she rose from her chair, and for the first time since his arrival looked directly at Charles and slapped him on the face. He looked at her in surprise, mouth lightly open. Lynn bent over the edge of the table holding her weight with both hands, bringing her head very close to Charles and murmured,

"I am not your whore, you bastard,
You know what I'm going to do?"

Lynn pointed at the direction of the young man she had been flirting with.

"You see that beautiful man? I'm going to join him,
and if he is nice I'm going to seduce him."

Charles, in disbelief with Lynn's unexpected outburst and not knowing how to react, exclaimed with some impatience,

"But what about tonight, don't you remember I got the tickets for the new Japanese opera?... They were quite expensive."

Lynn responded with indifference,

"You can go."

She turned her back, walked away, her hips swaying to the rhythm of the music. Simultaneously both men stood up from their chairs frozen in suspension.

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The name of the young man was Benedetto. Lynn liked the piney smell of his aftershave, even though it did not cover a faint smell of garlic. She was surprised that his first suggestion was to visit one of the specialty shops dotting Spoleto.

The high-end deli shop shelves were full of small expensive bottles of olive oils as pricey as Chanel#5. Exotic looking bottles of Balsamic vinegar, and packages of multicolored pasta looking like fancy French bonbons, ready to decorate the perfect kitchen and never to be cooked.

Lynn was awed by the astronomical prices for prosciutto and black truffles listed on a blackboard in exquisite calligraphy. Benedetto offered her a small comfit fig dipped in chocolate, and then softly cleaned with his lips a small smudge Lynn had on one finger.

They continued exploring the town almost in silence. Lynn, realizing his English was minimal, and her Italian non-existent, decided to let their pheromones carry their communications. The result was pleasant for both.

As the sun was setting he suggested to go see a modern dance group at the old Roman Amphitheater, one of the highlights of that summer art festival. Lynn, not feeling like being a spectator, and sitting for hours, suggested she would rather go dancing.

Benedetto asked the taxi to take them to a small hotel bar overlooking the Roman Aqueduct outside the medieval wall of the town.

As they entered the bar, it was dusk. A large window offered a spectacular view of the lighted aqueduct. A small number of couples occupied diminutive tables admiring the view. One couple was dancing to the soft sound of a bolero on a miniscule dance floor.

Benedetto ordered a bottle of Prosecco. Inspired by the new song being played, Lynn extended her hand to Benedetto inviting him to dance.

He held her keeping a certain formal distance; she was slightly taller than him. Lynn laughed, and in a brusque movement, wrapped her arms around his neck, while firmly pressing her body against his following the music.

Their bodies slowly swaying to the rhythm, his arms were around her waist, while she caressed the back of his head. Benedetto slowed down and was getting ready to speak, but she quickly put her index finger on his lips and shook her

head commanding him not to say anything, while smiling and looking intensely into his eyes. Slowly he smiled back as he began to understand the rules of the game she had set.

One of his hands began caressing her neck close to one of her ears, as the other hand migrated below her waist. Lynn sighed. The music had stopped, but they continued dancing.

As they returned to the table, the music resumed, an old song from the 70's, Jane Birkin and Serge Gainsbourg singing "Je T'aime, Mois Non Plus". The syncopated beat of the song inspired Benedetto to caress Lynn's legs timidly at the beginning, gaining courage, as she did not push him away; instead she slightly opened her legs.

As the song progressed, so did his caresses, and her response, both following in perfect harmony the beat of the music. Lynn abruptly brought her head down, resting her forehead against the top of the table, unable to repress a climatic moan, her hand grasping the border of the table. Both remained silent, as Lynn slowly regained her composure and Benedetto smiled pleased with himself.

Lynn, thirsty, emptied the glass of Prosecco. Then she raised Benedetto's hand, still resting on her thigh, and very gently kissed the tip of each finger, catching a whiff of her own smell. She raised her head smiling with the shy

smile of a young girl, showing a mixture of embarrassment, and tenderness. For the first time in the whole evening she uttered one single word.

"Grazie!"

Benedetto held Lynn's hand and smiling responded,

"My pleasure..., vieni mangiare, we eat, then go to mia casa... in Monteluco, magnifico view of Spoleto, and domani... and in the morning you will see la bellezza da Umbria."

Lynn stood up, and tenderly caressed his cheek, as she responded

"No, I can't, I must go now. You will meet me at the Charleston for brunch tomorrow?"

Lynn offered him a kiss and walked away, turning her head almost sang,

"Shall we say 11?"

Lynn asked the taxi driver to rush to Hotel Charleston. Upon her arrival, Charles opened the door, surprised.

She wrapped her arms around his neck without saying a word and started kissing him deeply.

Charles was torn between anger and desire but could not resist her, and allowed her to take the initiative.

He lifted her blouse over her head and an image flashed in his mind of the Italian boy sharing her small eager breasts. He was overcome by rage and took her forcefully, breaking the bedside lamp, plunging the room into darkness.

Afterwards, at last sated, they smoked in silence. Charles rubbed out the stub of his cigarette and spoke at last,

"I guess your Italian lover came short of expectations."

Lynn, ignoring the comments, walked away to the bathroom. On her return, as she got in bed, she asked,

"Did you enjoy the opera?"

"No, it was Japanese dodecaphonic music, you would have hated it, I walked out after the first act", he responded.

"Well I'm glad I missed it, by the way I invited Benedetto to join us for breakfast tomorrow."

"You are such a bitch."

"Yes I know, and you like it, good night love," she responded as she deposited a light kiss on his cheek and turned off the light.

The next morning Lynn, Charles, and Benedetto were eating a large American Breakfast. The two men having a macho confrontation, most of it wordless, almost subliminal, as they made an effort to be civilized with each other for Lynn's sake and failing.

Lynn ignored them, while she was furiously writing on a paper napkin. Suddenly the barking of two dogs on the street overcame all conversations, as a waiter tried to separate the two dogs. The silent confrontation at their table continued until Lynn, impatient with her two companions, forcefully slapped the top of the table. She held the napkin she had been writing on with both hands, and in a dramatic gesture declared,

"I want you to listen to my new poem."

They both looked at her in rapt attention, as she started to recite in a somewhat theatrical fashion,

"You silly, silly men
you equate penetration
with possession, and mistake
my moans of pleasure as
an affirmation of your
masculinity..."

The men looked at each other in embarrassment, as they continued listening to Lynn's words, both putting down their butter knives as she continued.

"When a dildo
brings me as much pleasure
if not more
And even your touch,
and words of love
do not smother the fire
in my loins,
nor the loneliness
in my heart"

Lynn took a pause looking accusatory at them, her head slightly bent as she leaned on the table, lowering the tone of her voice,

"You silly, silly men
you just try to make me wet,
when I want an orgasm of the soul."

With the last word, Lynn stood up, and slightly bowed in a dramatic way to indicate the end of her performance. Then walking away, she said,

"Please leave a generous tip."

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Lynn spent the afternoon exploring Spoleto's narrow streets. She discovered a small boutique selling earrings, tried on a pair of large gypsy style and bought them, wearing them as she left the store.

She visited the exhibit of a famous contemporary Italian painter in the basement of an old church. She was amused noticing the contrast of the colorful almost abstract images with the musky medieval surroundings, darkened with centuries old grime.

As she exited the exhibit she was lost for a moment. Meandering for some time, she at last found the shoe store where she had seen the wonderful wedge red shoes, with the perfect small bow. She put them on slightly lifting her skirt, and liked her reflection in the mirror. On an impulse she bought them, using a credit card so she would feel less guilty for paying so much for a pair of shoes.

Pleased with herself, she walked to Piazza Duomo. The late afternoon light reflected on the beautiful golden mosaic of the Cathedral as a group of young people played traditional Italian folk music.

She listened to the soulful sound of a bagpipe, played by a bearded, overweight young man. A plain young woman, with a bad case of acne, played the flute. The group leader, a skinny tall guy, played a lovely medieval-like

string instrument that sounded like a violin. And the last one was a lovely young man with dark curly hair, who could have been the reincarnation of a Roman painting from Pompeii, marking the beat by hitting a tambourine.

Lynn, seated on the steps of the small theatre next to the Cathedral, absorbed the whole scene. She felt lighthearted as she followed the rhythm of the music tapping her feet

People had gravitated toward the musicians. A group of young women began dancing traditional folk steps, simple, rhythmic, enthralling. One young man joined them; then other spectators followed, holding hands forming a disorganized moving line. Suddenly someone was heard singing, and then other voices joined in an old Umbrian folk song.

It was that perfect instance when by happenstance, a combination of location, people, light, color, music and voices combined to create a magical moment. Lynn felt overwhelmed by its beauty, and for the first time in many years she shed tears and started laughing in joy.