

Days with Antonio

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DAYS WITH ANTONIO

(Diary of Adriaan ten Holt.)

by Wolfgang Cordan

Antonio has gone out on the sea. When evening came the wind went to sleep; strange how soon the sea was smooth again, after it had laid siege to our coast for three days with rash wild waves. When dusk fell there remained only the wide-curved bands of foam; from our cliffs to the Southern Cape with the grotto of Tiberius they were rolling. In the intervals, when the sea drew breath, the pebbles could be heard faintly rattling. It was like a small thunder under the sea. I was afraid. Why? Why?

Antonio went. I looked after his retreating figure. Then I went to the window. But it was too dark already. I could not recognise him any more. I only heard the noise of the boats, wood striking against wood, and the voices of the fishermen. Once I heard his voice. He was angry and was scolding someone else. I understood one word. «Stupid» he said in his dialect. That belongs to 'stupido asino'. So he has called the other one a stupid ass.

Now he is pushing out into the calmed sea. One of the many stars. For it is the night of the New Moon tonight, the night of the successful haul of fish. So there are only stars, stars on the sky, stars in the sea. There is no edge to the horizon, the world has become one.

The stars in the sea, on the sea, are the lights at the bow of the boats. With the lights the fish are tempted in such nights. Others are caught during the day; but lovely silvery ones with beautiful names are caught by the deceiving fire. Antonio taught me all this. All this and many other things. Everything.

Now one of the stars in that sky and sea night is borderless. Which star is it?

Since I tried to recognise him in the dusk I have been sitting at the window. I alternate between writing and looking out. I have decided to go on writing until he returns. That will be around dawn. He will enter with a happy laugh. He will carry the smell of the sea, and the taste of seaweed and fish will be around him. He will look at me closely and blow out the candle he gave me for a present. It is a church-candle, yellow-golden and heavy with those blood-red rings at its base and a multicolored picture of a Saint attached to its stem. The Saint has already been charred by half, a real martyr. But I must not take him off, for Antonio would be hurt if I did. And so the Saint is smoking, with the smoke from the wick when I watch Antonio's face in his sleep. Tonight will be the Saint's last night. He is smothered in smoke, but I do not take him off, for Antonio is near. Am I not writing about him? Don't I think of him who changed my life? Into what regions am I losing myself? How shall I stand this night? How stand it till morning?

The candle was Antonio's first present for me. Far away from all the comfortable devices of the world we have no electricity here. Our room has no glass window. Where I am sitting there is a square hole in the wall, whitely chalked like the room and now glittering in the light from the candle. It almost never rains here. And there is never any snow. Only in August we shall have to put up the reddish nets to save us from the flies.

Out of this white and glittering opening I look towards the beach, to the blue sky, to the crowns of foam. Now I am looking out to the stars which in this night will wander slowly. Or look to the deeper stars on the sea which move more

quickly, form constellations, leave them, and create new figures. Which one of those stars is called Antonio?

I know every single one of his movements. I know how he pushes the boat forward. I try to guess which one of the shimmering stars could be he. But by favor of the sea they are too far away. They have gone to the high seas, to the most promising places for the haul, to that point where the sky above and our own earth become one. I can't make out anything any more.

Old legends tell us that special people, and they were always beautiful ones, could be changed into stars. How would it be when this bright light which I think might be Antonio, would never return? When it went across the edge — which is no edge tonight — and high up into the sky?

One man on this earth would be happy, later, and would lift his eyes night by night to a star which would give itself away by its glimmer and flashing. But before this might happen a man would fall in despair from this straw-colored chair, near the glass-less window. He would fall down on the gray floorstones and shriek like an animal. I must speak of Antonio, that's why I am sitting here at his candle. *Forza! Forza!* — pull yourself together, he would say if he could see me now. I shall pull myself together.

*

It is complicated to reach this place. It is still undiscovered but that's why I found it. I had bought a large map of Italy; after dinner, when our little Beatrix had gone to bed, I opened it up across the table and followed with my fingers the lines of the coast. Never passed Dutch winternights so quickly before! Yes, there were nights. I had to send my wife to bed, because otherwise I would have sat there without realizing her presence. She was always sitting opposite, with her needlework; now and then she looked up and asked this or that. Later on she became quiet. And sometimes I realized by the quick hard clicking of her needles that she was angry and would soon drive me away.

Of course she was right. I had to get up at 7 a.m., shave, dress correctly, and take the number 24 streetcar at thirteen minutes to eight; had to let myself be jolted through the rain of Amsterdam to Herengracht, take my seat at the polished table in the office and start making additions. Incredible that I spent my life so far in adding up gallons, sold by the «Koninklyk Nederlandse Petroleum-Mij».

But that is why one squanders the short span of one's life on earth if one does not know otherwise. At that time I did not know otherwise. And Corrie was right in admonishing me — my additions had to be correct the next day.

All the same she did not drive me on only for the sake of solicitude. There was jealousy as well. Women have an unerring instinct. She smelled danger. Later at night, she nestled close to me when the light was switched off.

Already then I was a traitor when embracing her, though I did not know it myself. I embraced a yearning which had as yet no form and no name either.

Antonio does not care about the way I look. Sometimes I forget to shave. The other evening I thought of it. When I poured water into the bowl and reached for the razor he intervened.

«Why?» He smiled. «I like it that way.» And at the same time he was fondling my chin with its reddish stubble which I don't like at all. But he told me he liked it.

Those two words only: «Mia piace —» tell all of the chasm between Amsterdam and Sperlonga. I'm trying to think how to translate them. But it's impossible.

Clumsiness makes me shudder. That Antonio bears with my clumsiness is one of the wonders of this summer.

I prepared this summer on winter evenings. With my finger I followed the map down along the coast; southwards of Rome I was travelling with my thoughts, for I had made up my mind this time to touch Italy's heart. It has now taken hold of my own heart and keeps it strongly between two muscular young hands.

The hands touch my stubbly chin lightly, and they like it. I also do not have to care about the way I dress. To tell the truth — I have gone to rack and ruin. Why ties? Why creases in my trousers? I am wearing khaki trousers and a blue undershirt. Neither is quite clean any more. I have also learned to walk in 'zoccoli', these wooden sandals tied by a leather band to the toes. There was a pair of them here with a Nile-green band. For sheer fun I bought them. Antonio also bought himself a new pair. The leather was as brown as his body. There is no part of his body which is not brown, chestnut-brown. I know that. Honestly, I do.

But what did I know in Amsterdam? Only this one fact; that I finally wanted to experience Italy, the true Italy, not those half-Swiss mountain lakes, where only the first faint breeze of the South makes itself felt and where it can rain so ceaselessly.

During the two weeks we spent there last year we had had sunshine only twice. We had to stay indoors at Como. The rain was pouring down onto the palms and Corrie knitted. Only Beatrix was happy — she played with her toys on the carpet — toys I had got for her quickly. What did she understand about the weather? It was exactly like home.

Yes, it was like home, that time at Como. And I think the idea struck me then to break out on my own once and into the real South.

For a long winter I prepared myself. Twice a week I learned Italian at a Berlitz School. And in the evenings I read my map. That's how I found Sperlonga at Amsterdam.

For I was looking for bays and small harbors. When I had found them I looked them up in the guide-book. There was only one place not mentioned in it, and it was called Sperlonga. I made up my mind to try it there.

It is rather complicated to get there. You have to take a slow train at Rome which stops at Fondi. The little town itself lies some kilometers away from the station. It has many towers, walls, and old churches because in the Middle Ages a ducal family resided here. The Americans made short work of it all during the last war, but since then it has all been repaired with the aid of American money. It was probably better-looking before. I know Fondi because I go there on Saturdays to the movies with Antonio.

Is it due to the illustrious past of Fondi that mostly historical movies are shown there? Movies full of armored knights on horse-back always bent on ravishing beautiful maidens.

Antonio loves it all. «Che storia!» he keeps saying afterwards in the bus taking us back to Sperlonga, 'what a story'. I have already begun to see things through his eyes and I am deeply contented when at the end the ardent hero leads the daughter of the Count into the mansion of his ancestors.

Like all the children of the South Antonio has no eye for the beauty of the country. He just lives within it. My heart missed a few beats when, four weeks ago, I left the little station of Fondi for the first time. It was noon and the

sun was shining glitteringly on the yellow sand of the square. There were some houses on the other side, and one of them was a *trattoria*. I took a seat there and slowly drank of the red country-wine, a potent drink smelling of the earth. The bus was to leave an hour later.

I drank the wine and looked out into the country. Orange groves, olives, fig-trees, corn in between, and vineyards. The peasants were passing with their ox-driven carts, heavy white beasts with huge, beautifully curved horns. The men were wearing those sandals whose slight black leather-bands are fixed crosswise over the trousers of unbleached linen up to the knees. The peasants of old Latium were dressed the same way two thousand years ago. And the landscape also will have barely changed since then. When I forgot the station and the rails I could imagine myself being back in that old time. I had arrived where I had longed to be — deep in the Mediterranean world — in a spot of the world which is indestructible and imperturbable — dreaming on with plants and animals, poking fun at time, changing invading tribes — the Germans, the Saracens, the Normans. They all gave up their own customs for older customs, put on those sandals and crossed the leatherbands up to their knees. They also put the broad sickle-like knife into their belts — the knife already used by the Etruscans.

Those who passed along the lanes with their oxen were neither Normans nor Saracens. They were peasants from Latium. They carried the Etruscan knife in their belts. I was delighted to see it. Half drunk I stared out into the landscape over which the air was shimmering. I drank carelessly, and when the bus arrived I felt the wine. Already the contours of my destiny were showing themselves.

The bus was crowded with women. They had pushed their many bundles into the broken luggage-nets, and they put their boxes between the seats, and from the boxes came the clucking of chickens. Whenever there was a bit of bad road the bundles on their laps leaped — huge bundles full of useful purchases. It must have been market-day at Fondi, and the women of Sperlonga were returning. They were all dressed in black, with black headdresses, and quiet. Without speaking they had made room for me in that dreadfully crowded bus. There I sat, unable to move. The motor was sputtering, and it was terribly hot. I didn't see any more of the country for the road was lined with bamboo hedges, and behind us a thick cloud of heavy dust covered up everything.

Twice we stopped at farms. Some of the silent, black women got out. Then all of a sudden there was the sea, yet more blue than the one I had passed yesterday. The beach was utterly yellow, and now and then there were dunes, with pine trees on top, and in the hollows there was bamboo, slightly shaking in the breeze.

When we stopped at a couple of earthen huts where the nets were drying over the bars, and the red, green and yellow boats were resting on wooden pulleys, I was terrified for a moment. One cannot stay here, I thought fleetingly. Truly, that's what I thought. Then I turned round. And I saw Sperlonga.

It happened then. Right away. Like a tornado of the soul.

Out of the mountains accompanying the sea down to Reggio Calabria a cape pushes forward into the sea like a brown thorn. On the outer edge there is a yellow tower. Every pinnacle is sharply drawn into the cloudless sky. Below, the sea is worrying the cliffs; now and then the foam springs up into the blue. On the back of this stony thorn Sperlonga is situated.

In the Art Gallery of Amsterdam I have seen paintings of the modern school. White squares push into each other, wall to wall — or should one say: body to

body? — quiveringly white with the black holes for windows and doors. Those paintings must have dreamed of Sperlonga. For no one knows it, thank heavens.

If I were a painter I would paint it. If I were a writer I could describe it. All I can do, however, is to put down here what I thought during that first moment: 'Here I shall stay.' And: 'I shan't be able to find anything more beautiful.' And: 'How happy the people here must be.'

Well, they know sorrow and joy, like all mortals. But they are a bit happier than others. I feel justified in saying that.

Many of the black women got out. The chauffeur told me he was going on up. The road swung around the heart of the rock. In front of a huge tower the rattling bus came to a standstill. The tower was overgrown with dwellings but one could see that it dated from old times. One could also see that the old gate of the town had been here formerly. Just behind it there was the Piazza.

Since then I have learned to know every corner of the Piazza. On one corner there is the only bar of the place, but it's really a café. I take my morning coffee there and, returning from the beach in the evenings, drink the cool Campari. I know every single window, every single door. I know who is living behind them and I know also at what exact time the shadows of the steps meet the white walls. For the stairs lead outside to the houses; they are without bannisters and always immaculately white. The town employs a factotum, an old man who goes around with a brush and a pail of chalk and takes care that everything is blamelessly white. Some families add something else and paint a sky-blue strip on the verticale, just down there where one puts one's foot. They must do that by themselves; it's no part of the municipal duties. It looks lovely, that light blue amongst all that spotless white.

The Piazza isn't large. There is no space to squander away in this rocky fortress. It was a retreat from the Saracens who laid siege to the coast for centuries. They came from Sicily and Malta, and later — when they had been driven out of these places — from Tunisia. One of them, the ill-famed pirate called «Barbarossa» for his red beard, made a landing exactly on the yellow sands of Sperlonga to take away the beautiful Duchess of Fondi. But she had fled in time, on a white horse — exactly as in the movies I saw with Antonio.

This rock was a safe retreat. Near the tower where the bus drive came to an end, there was a thick gate of oak with iron; it was shut from dawn to dusk. One single man might have defended the lanes — without trouble you could put one hand on the wall to your left and the other on the wall to your right. There is a consciously developed pattern in the maze of stones and steps, of tunnels, passage ways, *sottopassaggi*, flying buttresses, ramparts, and high balconies leading into widely spaced corridors. And there is the same pattern in the labyrinth of lanes leading into other lanes, to courtyards behind other courtyards, onto the roofs, and unexpectedly into rooms where whole tribes while away the noon hour. The men are lying on the iron bedsteads; on the red tiles lies the young brood, girls and boys, head to head, shoulder to shoulder, peacefully breathing in their sleep and ripening into fertility. The fertility of Italy.

Those who give birth to all this — the mothers crouch silently in the corners. They make baskets, they take the kernels out of the nuts. That's Sperlonga, breeding hole next to breeding hole.

On the Piazza the shadowy lanes looked at me, in that first hour. There were boys around me, pulling at my luggage. But where to go? Into which one of the glens?

I asked the chauffeur. No, there was no albergo here. Maybe I'd better ask at the *Trattoria* — in that lane over there — he pointed towards a shadowy lane — maybe they would know there of a bed. He said bed and not room, the chauffeur. And he looked slightly surprised at me.

The boys carried my luggage away, into the lane in front. Across a blue-cornered entrance there was a time-worn wooden sign hanging askew. It bore the words «Trattoria Trani» in white letters, spelt with only one 't'. I entered through the glittering rows of glass-beads serving for doors. I couldn't distinguish anything at first, for there was nearly no light. In one wall there was a latticed window, more like a hatch, and its glass had never been cleaned. There was dusk in the room. I made out four tables of raw wood. The boys talked to an older man who had drawn a visor cap deep over his forehead.

«Buon Giorno», I said, and sat myself on a rickety chair.

The man was mumbling something. I paid the boys. Then I asked the man, who seemed to me to be the landlord, whether he had a room available.

«What do you want to drink?» he asked ungraciously.

«Vino», I said, «a glass of wine.»

«Red?» «No, white.»

The man shouted in his hoarse voice, «Cornelia.» And at the same moment I was thinking of Corrie. She was now on the island of Texel, and Beatrix would be looking for North Sea shells at the beach. But it would probably be raining there. And they would sit in the 'pension' as we had sat last year in Como. But I was right in the heart of Italy, right in the middle of adventure, and Texel was immeasurably far away.

From the pub room a couple of steps led to a kind of cellar. There heavy caskets rested on wood. A shadow was gliding along, in the darkness, which not even a sharp eye could have pierced. Maybe it was Cornelia.

When she brought me the glass — and it was a large one, such as you'd never see in the Netherlands — I saw that she was beautiful. The black hair lay smoothly around her bird-like head. She had long eyelashes, her eyes were black in her ivory face, and she had a small red mouth. She did not look at me and seemed to be shy. Right away she went back to the cellar-night.

The yellow wine was muddy. It tasted strange. Antonio told me later that his father mixed it with dirty water. At the time I did not know of this. All I was thinking of was: the wine is strange here, and put my glass down. I asked again about the room.

«Will you eat with us?» Signore Trani was asking. I should simply say 'Trani', for he is no signore, no gentleman; he is a scoundrel and a very bad host.

«But certainly — where else could I eat?» I answered.

Trani shoved his visor cap back and scratched himself.

«It'll be difficult with the room,» he said, «I have nothing. But I can try somewhere else.»

I acted like a layman. I am writing this now, during this night when I keep on looking out for the lights, for the star of Antonio to whom I owe everything. All that's valuable in me he brought out, to shine briefly like a comet before returning into limbo. Even a small substance can be made to shine forth brightly. I feel sure that I shall not survive all this, that I shall burn out. But this knowledge is only making me completely happy.

The oil company will find thousands of others to take my seat at the polished table at Amsterdam. I shall never find another Antonio again. He will never

find (and that's the only thing I know for sure) anyone else loving him as much as I do. I shall remain in his memory, as the plump Dutchman who became light-footed in his presence. This indescribable bliss has got to end some time, in a year, in two years' time, I don't know. I have no experience in such matters. Only — I want to exist in him.

I am drunk, even without wine, as I am expecting him. Around four o'clock he will come home with the smell of salt, of seaweed and fish on him. But there is a scent on his skin which changes even the smell of fish. I shall put my lips on his eyebrows and feel weak with bliss.

For that first hour in Sperlonga I was a long way off from the definitive meaning of what I have written down here. I hadn't even dared to think about it. And all this easy grace of speech and movement, all this that is so natural to any fisherman on these southern shores, they seem to have all the charm on their fingertips — I do not believe I have ever gained it myself. I have understood some of it, simply by watching Antonio. But on arrival I put on a poor show. Very poor indeed. Let me tell you about it all.

First I committed the typical layman's mistake by saying to Trani, «Well, try it then. I don't mind what it'll cost. I *want* to stay here. I like the place,» I added as an afterthought.

«You see, I'm an artist,» I lied.

The landlord got up and slouched away. I felt full of unrest. I did want to stay here, as a matter of fact. So decided I was on this that I even thought of sleeping on the beach if necessary. It is in such moments that fate makes itself felt. It is like summer lightning on the horizon.

Waiting became painful. I did not touch the wine any more. I looked around, and it was only then I discovered I was not alone in the room. In the deepest shadows of the corners on one of the four rough tables, a boy sat, no, a giovanotto, a youngster. His blue and white striped undershirt was the focus in the dusk. There was wild brown hair over his forehead. He had been watching me all the time, I felt sure of that, but when I looked at him he turned his gaze away. With his forefinger he drew across the table. No glass was standing on his table. Something told me he belonged here, The demon of the future drove me to seek his gaze but he withdrew it. No word was spoken.

Half an hour later the landlord returned. He went to his old seat near the steps leading to the wine-cellar, pushed back his cap and scratched his ears.

«It's rather difficult,» he said lazily. «There might be a room...»

«Where?» I cut impatiently into his words.

«But it would cost you thirty thousand lira,» Trani said instead of an answer.

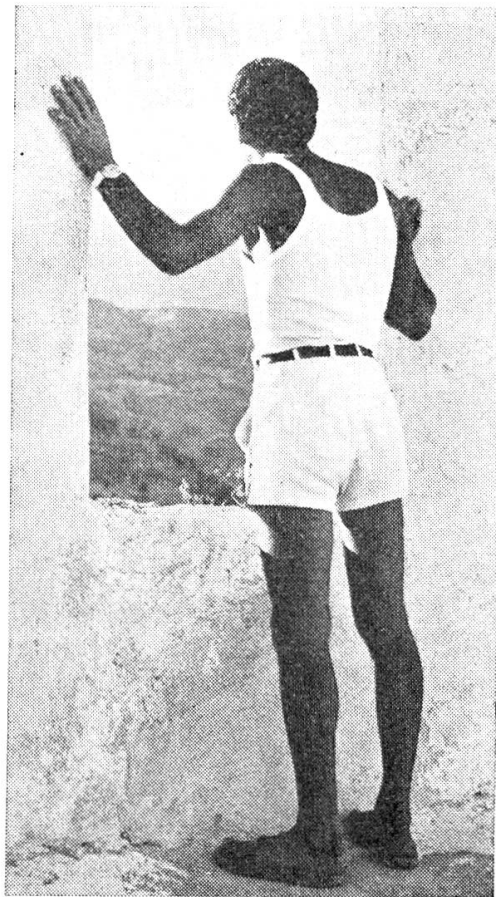


Foto Jim, Zürich

His bad manners infuriated me. And then I started counting and found out that this would come to two hundred Dutch Gulden. A horrific price, and in this godforsaken hole, an effrontery.

«Useless to talk about it,» I said sharply. I turned towards my duffel bag and that's when I met the gaze of the silent youngster. He looked straight at me. In this split second the change of my life began.

I took a step towards the other table.

«Senti, bello,» I said, «listen, beautiful one, there ought to be something cheaper in this place. Can't you help me?»

He did not give me an answer. Instead he threw a word across to Trani, quickly, between his teeth and in no way friendly. The host answered likewise. They started talking, madly, quickly, and in a dialect of which I did not understand a word. Only twice I caught the words 'questo straniero', the stranger, out of this torrent of words. The girl with the black braids reappeared on the steps of the shadowy cellar and looked from one to the other.

Finally the old man banged his fist on the table. The youngster rose suddenly as I had risen. He hissed a sharp word and then turned towards me.

«Andiamo,» he said, «Let's go.» At the same time he threw my duffel bag on his left shoulder and went away through the jingling chains of beads. Without a farewell I followed him.

He walked ahead of me. It was on this very brief walk that I saw him for the first time. I saw his long deer's legs, the play of the bronzed muscles up to his bleached, formerly heaven-blue linen shorts. I saw the way he sauntered along the cobblestones of the lane at Sperlonga with the clatter of his zoccoli. I saw the broad band of leather across his brown toes and the salt of the sea glittering on them. I saw that his hair needed a hair-cut badly and that from his ears a dark thick down drew luxuriantly down to his broad neck.

«I did not pay for the wine,» I said.

«You didn't drink the dirt,» he answered. Then he looked back over his right shoulder and laughed. That laugh displayed what the poets like to call a row of pearly teeth. But I looked only at his full round lips.

We had to walk only a very short distance. Then a couple of steps led down at the right, to a tiny piazza. We were standing in front of a house with a heavy door of wood. Without putting down my duffel bag he searched in the pockets of his bleached trousers and drew out an enormous key. We went up a white flight of stairs and entered the room.

As in the towers and fortresses of the Middle Ages, the staircase led directly into the room. The floor was laid with light pink tiles, the walls were whitely chalked. At that time the small room was nearly empty. There was a big cast iron bedstead with all the rings, flowers, and flourishes at the head so much loved in the beginning of our century. The flowers were rusty.

In a corner-niche there was a shaving mirror, cracked, and below were some toilet things. Behind the mirror there was the multicolored picture of a saint and some paper flowers. On a nail on the wall there was something under a cover. To judge by the trousers hanging out below, this was probably his Sunday-best suit. Carelessly thrown into a corner were old working trousers and dirty undershirts; spread out carefully, however, on a *Giornale di Napoli* was a rubber mask — that most treasured possession on these shores. Tjerk told me these masks could be found from the Aegean Islands to Gibraltar. Of Tjerk I shall speak later.

(To be continued.)

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(Translation by Rudolf Burkhardt.)

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