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Wounded

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Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"The train station was cold, damp, and very crowded the day Gianni Roselli left. People, young and old, were huddled together in a vain effort to keep warm while waiting for the 5:45 to make its regular stop. Most of them were jovial on this Christmas Eve because they were waiting to be reunited with their friends and relatives. Some were parents anxiously awaiting the return of their sons from war; other parents weren't so happy because their sons weren't coming home."

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Wounded

by Carmine Paris

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Gianni and his family were standing in a circle quite a distance from the chaotic clamor of voices. The Rosellis were saying good-bye to their eldest son, a task which for an Italian mother is almost impossible to accomplish without considerable weeping. Gianni was on his way to war, something which he had been prepared for some fifteen of his twenty-two years. He stood silent in his dark overcoat with one arm around his mother and the other tightly around his fiancée, Karen Williams.

Karen was one of the very few girls Gianni had met who understood him and his Italian background, both of which, at times, he had tried to conceal. Karen was

everything he was looking for and dreamed of. Her hair, long, black, and silky, hung loosely over her shoulders and sometimes hid her prominent cheek bones, which gave her a mysterious and Oriental look. She was a soft-spoken girl who giggled whenever she smiled. Most important, Karen was anything but Italian.

The Roselli family was very Italian and Mrs. Roselli tried very hard to keep it that way. One means was to deny the English language. On Sunday, before she and Mr. Roselli walked to church, she rose very early to begin the initial preparations for the Sunday meal. She made the spaghetti sauce, then left it simmering until they returned from early Mass. Every Sunday morning Gianni woke up with the smell of spaghetti sauce in his room, and turned over in bed hoping to fall asleep again.

When they returned from Mass, Mr. and Mrs. Roselli could smell the spaghetti sauce a block away. Mrs. Roselli, shorter and stouter than her husband, walked slowly by his side. As they neared the house and the smell of the spaghetti sauce grew stronger, she lengthened her stride. Mr. Roselli, however, maintained his slow pace, eyes downcast, watching each foot bring him closer to the house.

"Ah, Joseph, the spaghetti sauce! You smell it?" she shouted to her

husband who lagged behind.

"Yes, Mamma, I can smell it." His eyes remained fixed on each step he took, rarely looking at his wife who motioned to catch up to her.

"Joseph, Cammina! Cammina!" she called in a very authoritative voice ahead. But Joseph remained silent and disregarded her petition.

The very first thing Mrs. Roselli did after Mass every Sunday morning was to make a pot of strong black coffee. Then after having a cup, she resumed cooking the main course of the day to Italian music blaring from the radio. The meal consisted either of spaghetti and meatballs, baked lasagna, or rigatoni. Several side dishes would also be included: eggplant, zucchini, or green beans.

Helping in the kitchen which, during the summer grew unbearably hot, would be Gianni's younger sister, Carla, who was ten years old, and Maria, the eldest, who was fifteen. Mrs. Roselli constantly reminded them that they must learn everything she taught them, just as her mother had taught her: to sew, iron, cook, and clean the house so that when they grew up, they would be proper wives and mothers. Above all, she didn't want them to be "lazy American wives" whose only interests were in wearing makeup, going out every night, and

leaving children at home unattended. No, Carla and Maria would learn how to make spaghetti sauce early Sunday morning as she did, after returning from Mass. For them, the age at which they dated boys would be postponed, and when the time came to choose husbands, Mrs. Roselli would find the best and most responsible Italian boys for them.

As Gianni stood between the woman he loved and his mother, he thought of what his mother meant to him and how much Karen had come to mean.

"Is the station too damp Karen? If it is, I'll tell them to take you home. I can wait for the train by myself."

"It's not damp. Your mother doesn't have to take me home. Tell *THEM* to leave! I want to stay with you alone!"

"I can't. They're my parents!"

"What you say?" Mrs. Roselli asked, pointing at Karen with a firm finger. "He's a my son!"

"Mamma, now don't start an argument before I leave!" Turning to Karen, he continued: "Don't pay attention to her. You know what she can be like sometimes."

"Okay, but don't expect me to be this quiet when you get back!"

One thought was in Gianni's mind. Would she be waiting for him when he returned? He had wanted to "make Karen his" before he left, but realized that it wouldn't be fair to her. She loved him and he loved her, but he couldn't agree with her to get married before he left. Would this love last was what Gianni wanted to find out. His mother approved very much of that decision. Gianni waited, not for his mother's satisfaction, but for his. He had heard stories of how many men, when they returned, found that the women who professed an undying love for them before no longer loved them. However, Karen was different; he knew she was not one of those.

It was an ideal autumn afternoon when Gianni met Karen. He was sitting underneath an aging oak tree which was shedding its colored leaves. The once-green grass was now yellowish-brown. Slowly, almost hesitantly, he opened his



ball sandwich!" he shouted. Is that all she can ever put in a lunchbag? he thought, as he bit into the cold sandwich.

"Hey, meatball!" a voice behind him called.

Angrily he turned and was faced by a girl he didn't know, leaning against the tree and smiling down at him. His anger swiftly vanished.

"I was trying to have lunch over there," she pointed to another oak tree, "but I heard someone yelling and had to find out who it was. So you got another meatball, huh? I never thought anyone had meatball sandwiches for lunch!"

"What's so funny! I'm not saying anything about your lunch..."

"...Karen," she introduced herself.

"...Karen!" Gianni finished his sentence. "If you don't want to sit down, do you mind if I finish my lunch?"

She knelt on the grass. "How's your cold meatball, 'Meatball'?" she inquired laughingly.

"Would you like a bite?" Gianni asked, laughing too.

"That I can do without! Is there another name you go by?"

"I'm usually called Johnny."

"I was almost positive it was Giovanni or Enrico." She giggled.

In class that afternoon Gianni's thoughts remained at the oak tree outside.

The next day was Friday and Gianni wanted to ask Karen out after school. He thought about it all Friday and had a feeling she would say no, but she didn't. When she asked if he would like to know

where she lived, he surprised her by saying that he already knew. This would be his first real date and he wanted everything to be perfect. He would take Karen to a movie, then maybe for a snack.

At home he ate dinner quickly, gulped down his wine and then, excusing himself, dashed upstairs. Within ten minutes he had showered, shaved, dressed and was back down stairs ready to leave.

"Gianni!" his mother shouted, "where do you go in a hurry?"

"Over to a friends' house."

"Si, but no comma home late. You help your fader tomorrow, early, remember?"

"Don't worry, I'll be home early."

It was fall and every year, much as he hated it, he helped his father make wine. The year before they had made three big barrels. Gianni told them that it would be so much easier to go out and buy it, but they wouldn't listen. Wine had to be homemade to be good. This year Mrs. Roselli would be doing most of the work.

In the movie theater Gianni continually thought of reaching for Karen's hand, but he wasn't used to being that forward. What would he do if she decided not to give it to him? Would he have to ignore her rejection? He looked at her hand, just lying there on her lap. Maybe she was waiting for him to reach for it? If he didn't, maybe she would think him strange. With a shrug of the shoulders and a quiet yawn he made his move as gently and casually as possible. Throughout the movie her hand squeezed his.

After the movie they walked to *GEORGE'S SNACK BAR*, located next door to *GIOVANNI'S PIZZERIA*.

"This looks like a nice place doesn't it?" he said sarcastically, pointing to the pizzeria.

"Looks very Italian anyway."

Except for one table near the door, the others were taken.

"Let's grab that table before someone else takes it."

"Is it this crowded all the time, Johnny?"

"No, not most of the time. I guess they must have heard we were going to be here."

While making his way through a crowd of people, he noticed that several of his friends were there, looking wide-eyed at Karen and smiling approval, but before they had a chance to "make their moves," he was back at the table with the hamburgers and cokes.

"Looks like *GIOVANNI'S* isn't getting very much business tonight," Gianni said grinning.

Then his grin was replaced by a look of terror. His mother was outside on her way to buy some bread dough at the only pizzeria in the town, *GIOVANNI'S*. Her stern expression told Gianni that she had seen him. At once he let go of Karen's hand and shuffled his chair away from hers.

"What's the matter, Johnny?" she inquired, a puzzled look in her eyes.

"Don't come in, Mamma! You'll spoil everything," he prayed silently. His hands began to sweat and seemed to generate more and more heat. A moment later her stocky figure stood towering above him. The noise in the bar suddenly stopped and he felt every eye in the room staring at him. Karen, completely stunned, was silent.

"You were going to your frenze house eh?" his mother said loudly. "You lie to me. Is that what you do to your madre, lie to her?" Her Italian accent was comic-strip Italian, but what she said burned his flesh. And her voice could be heard all over that restaurant. He heard snickers and wanted to hide under the table. After ordering him to get home immediately, ignoring Karen, she turned, and walked somberly out of the door and slammed it behind her. Gianni knew only that he

grabbed his arm and followed him outside. She was the first to talk. "What's wrong with your mother?" she asked.

"I probably couldn't explain it to you."

"Please try."

"First, I want to apologize for her, because I know if she embarrassed me, she embarrassed you too."

"She didn't bother me, Johnny."

"I really wasn't planning on having you meet her, and I'm sorry you did. She behaved like a monster, didn't she?"

"You can't say that about your mother. No one can, for that matter."

"Yeah, but she only likes Italians!" he said, throwing up his hands. "She hasn't told me, but I know she wants me to marry a 'nice-Italian girl.' I don't know what my father saw in her, but whatever he did he made the biggest mistake of his life. He knows that now, but unfortunately he can't do anything about it. She just ran him right into the ground. That's not going to happen to me though, I won't let it! Now, let me take you home."

Karen's hand gripped his arm, squeezing it gently with each step they took. He didn't understand why she held on. "It was my fault in a way."

"No, it wasn't. I'm glad she saw you 'cause I'm tired of it all. The sooner she realizes that I'm not going to listen to her crazy ideas the better! I only hope that she hasn't scared you away."

"After all the time I waited to get to know you?" she laughed. "No way!"

The year went by rapidly for Gianni, and for most of it Mrs. Roselli was unaware of his relationship with Karen. And that was the way Gianni wanted to keep it. Karen's family didn't act as if they resented him and Gianni was glad. He was invited to their house for dinner several times. Mrs. Williams liked Gianni very much because he was so well-mannered and such a gentleman. The food she cooked differed so much from his mother's cooking that he soon began to like it.

After graduation from high school, he entered a local college and began preliminary studies in architecture. He had wanted to go away to school but his relationship with Karen had grown too strong.

She was still in high school, a senior, and the following year she, too, would be attending the same college. Then he could spend three more years with her there.

It was past 5:45. The train was ten minutes late, giving Gianni a few extra minutes with Karen and his parents.

"Remember, now, Mamma," he said. "Keep your eyes on Karen until I get back. Who knows, maybe I'll even invite you to our wedding!"

"Gianni, Gianni," his mother lamented, shaking her head.

His father had been ill for several years. Gianni still remembered the strong and active father he once knew, the man he so often hated for being so ruthless in his punishment. But now his once strong and muscular body had been reduced to a decrepit old man's. He was only forty-eight years old. For an instant, Gianni saw himself in his father's place and realized that, if he wanted to keep his sanity, he would have to listen to his own conscience.

At Gianni's request, Karen wore the simplest dress she owned, not too short or colorful. Anything, just to keep Mrs. Roselli satisfied, even no makeup! She also learned how to say "Hello," "Good-bye," and "Thank-you" in Italian.

"It might be hell, Karen, but remember not to let what she says get to you."

"I'll just listen, Johnny, don't worry. The rest will be a snap!"

When Gianni opened the front door, everyone was in the living room waiting for them. Carla turned off the radio, then sat quietly next to Maria. They both smiled, hoping that they would be the first to be noticed. His mother stood up.

"Mamma, this is Karen, the girl I've been telling you about."

"Hello, Mrs. Roselli," Karen said politely.

Mrs. Roselli peered directly into her eyes, then after a heavy sigh, responded, "So you da Karen who change my Gianni?"

"Now, Mamma," he interrupted. "Be nice for a change!" he warned in Italian.

Then he turned to introduce his father, motionless on the chair, and Carla and Maria, who looked down shyly.

"Mamma, Karen and I are en-

gaged to be married," he said.

"Che? No! Impossible. Gianni!" Her anguish was evident in her wrinkled, distorted face, her dilated eyes.

"Nothing you can say or do that will change my mind," he added. His words were sharp, clear, convincingly forceful.

His mother stood for a minute staring at both of them in an unusually quiet manner. "Whatever you say, Gianni. You tink you make the right decision, eh? Go on, get married! Marry her!"

"Mamma, we're not getting married tomorrow. We're only engaged. We're going to finish college first."

"And her madre, her fader, you tell dem, Gianni?"

"Yes, we did. And it's about time they met you."

"Oh, Mrs. Roselli, I know you'll like them and I know they'll like you and Mr. Roselli!" Karen said. "Sì, Sì, speriamo."

As Gianni cupped each hand over her cheeks, he felt her warmth penetrating his icy skin. "I miss you already," he whispered. His arms held her body tightly against his. "I'll be back, Karen," he continued, as he heard muffled sobs.

Mrs. Roselli watched them with one hand clenched around her husband's arm, the other in her pocket. She too wanted to hold Gianni, but he had Karen in his arms. As the tears on Karen's face subsided, Mrs. Roselli continued to weep.

"Don't you start now, Mamma. I'll be back. Now smile, all three of you!"

"I hear the train!" Mr. Roselli exclaimed.

In minutes the train pulled into the station and came to a sudden stop. A throng of men in neatly pressed uniforms poured out to meet their families. Gianni picked up his bags, placed a final kiss on Karen's cold lips. "Wait for me!"

Karen began to sob again.

"Mamma, take care of yourself and keep an eye on Karen."

"Be careful, Gianni, my son," she responded, and embraced him.

"Merry Christmas!" he called to everyone above the roar of the train.

The year went by quickly for Gianni and the letters from Karen raised his spirits greatly. In every

one she wrote how much she loved and missed him. The picture he carried of her in his wallet had become frayed with use. He looked at it whenever he read one of her letters. It was taken at his college graduation, and Gianni could still remember how happy he was then. He had everything he wanted, a college diploma tucked under one arm and Karen in the other. Then the war came.

It had been raining all day without a break. His hands and arms were bruised and the rain made him ache. They had walked and fought all afternoon. A single squad of *Panzergranadier* rearguards, fighting like hell to hold them up, and succeeding. They used everything: grenades, mortars, heavy machine guns, rifle fire, but nothing heavier. Gianni walked, ran, crept, crawled, and sometimes prayed during the firefighting. When evening came, the Germans had pulled back again, still another time. Gianni wanted to follow but he was exhausted. The rain was coming down in great sweeping sheets, soaking them to the bone. Sergeant Baylor called for them to dig in "...deep". He was sure the *Panzergranadiers* would be calling in heavier stuff on them during the night, 88's probably, and from the mortar fire, they had the range.

Everything happened so suddenly, Gianni didn't even hear the first incoming, or the second. Then the explosion shook the earth around him, heaving him up and over and a red pain ran up his legs into his groin before he fainted.

When they reached him he was unconscious still, his legs both smashed below the knees, and his pulse was faint. At first they couldn't stop the bleeding, because one of the femoral arteries was spurting and the medics weren't sure he'd make it back to the aid station. But they took him back anyway, and they left his boots, his helmet, and most of his legs behind.

Gianni remained unconscious for several days; when he awoke he found a doctor and a priest at his bedside. His left arm was bandaged securely against his body, the right was held up by a hook in the ceiling. The bottom of his feet itched, but he couldn't scratch them. His lips were chapped, his throat dry.

"Try not to say anything, soldier. Just think yourself lucky to be alive. Rest."

The priest made the sign of the cross, then silently left the room.

It took a while for his eyes to clear, then Gianni saw that he had no legs. He immediately began to scream and went on screaming until a nurse gave him a shot.

While in the hospital Gianni received two or three letters a week from Karen. For a few minutes her letters made him forget where he was and what had happened. He wanted to write back but couldn't because of the bandages. When they were removed several weeks later, Gianni wrote and explained every detail. In her reply she told him that she still loved him. Gianni



refused to believe that; she couldn't love him the way he was now. Nevertheless, letter after letter came, saying that she still loved him as much as she did before. But Gianni knew that the life he had dreamed of living with Karen could never come into being; he could not and would not commit her to a life with a cripple. He loved her too much to do that to her.

After three months of hospital they sent him back to the States and then after several months more he was released and told he could go home. But now he wanted to stay in the hospital forever. How could he face Karen half a man? The letters had stopped after he

had deliberately neglected to answer them.

The train made its final turn nearing the tunnel which led to the station. He hoped and prayed that Karen would not be there to see him. Then he thought of his mother. She had written him several letters in Italian, but he had never answered. Would she be there? Or had she abandoned him too?

Outside the snow was falling lightly and he remembered the Christmas Eve of two years before, so sad, yet so happy.

There were men who like him were going home permanently disabled. They all felt lucky to have escaped death, but Gianni did not.

The real lucky ones were the men in the refrigerator cars at the back of the train. At least they were relieved of the problems that he and the other men wounded would have to cope with.

The train finally stopped at the station. An attendant flung the door open, then walked toward his chair. Slowly he pushed it down the ramp, Gianni was the first one out. Crowds watched silently, as he sat waiting for someone to step forward. Then he heard someone scream and a commotion, a woman came rushing toward him, crying, shouting his name, "Gianni! Gianni!"

Gianni held out his arms and called "Mamma! Mamma!"

MYSELF

It is of myself
the stranger
that I am
of whom
I write these lines

And of the cryptic
life
that lies behind
whose impress
structures my
very quick

And gives me
such wearisome
puzzlement.

LINES

For him
at one time
Even the horizon
borrowed its line.

And the sky's
blue bowl
Was numbly lifted
from minds apart.

So that what he knew,
he knew
by other eyes.

And yet upon his life
there lies
the stamp of
Other quite different lines.



By John H. Liddle