

Into the sweet

“There, good as new. Well, good as 1921. There’s always a way, *ragazzi*. *A chi vuole, non mancano modi*.”

She stepped back, admiring the barley-twist decoration she had sawed and filed to replace the old split one in the display cabinet, an imposing edifice built originally by her grandfather from salvaged furniture.

Applause and whooping greeted her handiwork.

She laughed and pulled out the manilla envelopes from her vast apron pockets and presented her Saturday workers’ wages. It was touching that they had waited to see the repair.

“There you go. Have a good weekend and don’t–“

“Don’t spend it all at once, *ragazzi! Arrivederci!*” chorused Angus and Jen, rushing out the back door of the little shop. They heard her say it every Saturday. But they were kind-hearted teenagers, hand-picked from the many hopefuls who vied to work surrounded by sweets. These two had started a guessing game for Maria at the start of the year – they would put on their white starched aprons (made many years ago by Maria’s mother, Bianca, from inherited linen sheets, pristine beneath their yellowing wrappers), and would pose the question: “Foo’s yer?” Maria then had to guess which item from the shop had been picked by the youngsters to replace “doos” and point to it. She had casually challenged them to come up with a new item every Saturday; that meant they would also spend more time learning the names and position of stock. Today, it had been “Foo’s yer Berwick Cockles?”. They promised that if she ever guessed correctly, she would be awarded an edible rosette.

She knew Angus was quite a star at the high school for his baking. He often brought in his experiments, but blushed to the tips of his ears if anyone praised him. Maria hoped a sincere girl would catch his eye. He was almost too gentle for these hard times.

She turned back to the cabinet. The strut of the broken chair she'd found in a skip was indeed a good match, maybe a little staining to bring down the tone and it would be a perfect. Maybe Aldo had re-purposed a bit of chair all those decades ago. What would he have achieved if he had been equipped wood glue? He would have been amazed that with all the labour-saving devices these days that nobody mended anything, never mind made their own furniture.

Of course, Maria was guessing about Aldo's views, she had never met the man who had made the ornate shelves and mirrored cabinets of the confectioner's shop which still bore his name, who had lain on scaffolding, like Michelangelo, and painted scenes from his homeland on the ceiling – the mountains, green fields and deep blue lakes, the feasting and dancing, the costumed villagers from Northern Italy. He had extended his mural to the thin band between the ceiling and the tops of his display shelves, although you had to stand on a ladder to see them – here he had depicted his childhood friends climbing trees, chasing girls, eating fruit from the orchards, playing soldiers, singing while they worked in the fields, and swimming. He never spoke of his wife, who died days after Bianca was born, but always carried her photograph in a tiny leather case in his breast pocket.

Bianca inherited the shop and toiled with, but mostly without, her Scottish husband, Dod, trying to build the family concern, part of the great tradition of Italian cafes, ice-

cream and confectionery businesses, Luca, Visocchi, Crolla, Valerio, Verrecchia and so many more, beacons of sunshine along the Scottish coast.

Bianca would tell of how, when she was a *bambina*, too small to even reach the shop counter, she would ask her father what made his ice cream better than anyone else's. He would say, "Oh, it's just cream. The finest cream, mind you, because the silly *Scozzese* don't like our Italian *gelato*, made with the finest milk. Oh, and the finest sugar and the finest eggs and the finest vanilla and...a little something."

She would hop, foot to foot, demanding to know the final, the secret ingredient.

When he was happy, he would say "a kiss", or "naughtiness", or "a *bambina*'s smile".

When he was tired, and he became so tired before he died that he could hardly lift the containers of cream in the back room of the shop, he would shake his head and say the *Scozzese* should be grateful he had walked across whole countries, all the way to this miserable land of rain and grey seas.

Dod had worked on the rigs and loved the grey seas. He was a quiet man with an aching love for his one child. He would bring her small things from the rigs, unwanted bits of tubing, lumps of metal and chain links, and explain how they were used. He would let her climb into his old red dungarees, which smelled of chemicals and his sweet tobacco, and they would play at drilling oil in the sitting room. They would construct platforms from stale pink wafers, cocktail sticks and the coloured spills he used to light his pipe. It would create a great mess on the carpet and Maria would pretend to be very cross and menace them with the Bex Bissell. In the summer, Dod would be her helicopter, hoisting her onto his shoulders when they'd reached the beach, then racing along the sands and into the water, bending and twisting to mimic the perilous trips and hearing her shriek with excitement. Once, he tripped and she

flew from his grasp and landed flat onto the shallows. He scooped her up before she had time to react, wrapped her in his windcheater and carried her back to their flat above the shop, sand and shreds of seaweed falling from her hair as he ran.

That same year, his helicopter ditched coming into Aberdeen. His body was never found. For months, Maria disappeared too, into herself, and when she came back, she and Bianca were living in a big granite end-terrace, bought with the compensation money. The flat over the shop had been filled with stock. Bianca had become old.

Last week, Jen had asked Maria the question that had been asked by others, year after year, and Maria gave the same reply, "I'll get round to it, nivver fash." Maria had never been to Italy. She had almost gone on a school trip to Rome and had attended all the after-school Italian lessons, but every time her mother urged her to take the signed form and the deposit, Maria would look at the dark circles under those pleading eyes and shake her head. Maria was only twenty when Bianca died, but she had been running the business in between studying for her higher grades, and had met all the suppliers, knew how to balance the books, who to trust and where to find help. The work took up every minute and her only outings were to trade fairs. She would stay for a day and resisted the calls from the other shop owners to make a weekend of it. If she couldn't countenance a day or two in Glasgow, how could she spare the time to visit Italy? The longer she left the decision, the harder it became. She had spoken to travel agents and taken away brochures full of sunshine and buildings the colour of puff candy. When computers came along, friends had helped her look online, but there was always something to prevent the booking of flights.

Maria sat on the little stool she kept behind the counter. She sat on it more often, although she told her Saturday *ragazzi* it was there for old folk and pregnant ladies. And now Maria knew she would be neither, it was on the letter from the hospital, on thin, recycled paper that had buckled under her tears.

For thirty-one years, she had served locals and holiday-makers, the ones who spent a hundred pounds in a careless moment and those who whispered a request for boiled sweets by the number, not the weight.

She had watched the boy who always asked for a single liquorice Catherine Wheel on the rare occasion his mother could afford pocket money, grow up to own a football team whose strip had black stripes. She had seen three almost-husbands go away, none convinced by her dedication to the little shop, the months she would spend perfecting Aldo's vanilla ice cream recipe, then over the years creating a mouthwatering array of flavours long into the night, as the cold sea battered the harbour and the booming waves drowned out her mother's old cassettes of Tino Rossi, and supermarket lorries full of frozen tubs of air and powder and E numbers thundered by her display windows and made her pyramids of fine chocolates tremble in their boxes. When each almost-husband left, she would look at Aldo's ceiling and think *Chi fa da sé, fa per tre*, she who works by herself does the work of three.

Sitting in the dark now, resting her head against the wood-panelled wall, she looked up again, slowly breathing in the bounty of sweet scents of orange, almond, rose, vanilla, chocolate, caramel and pistachio, and the painted boys of Aldo's youth reached out their hands to greet her and she joined the dancing villagers in their constant sunshine.