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Franca Cavagnoli

Water is Safe in Milan

Give me a thousand kisses, and then a hundred, then a thousand more, then a hundred again, and then one more thousand in a row, and then a hundred. *Da mi basia mille, deinde centum, | dein mille altera ...*

Laura sighed, opened her eyes and looked at the book she was holding. *Margaret Torrence was fourteen; a serious girl, considered beautiful by a sort of tradition, for she had been beautiful as a little girl. A year and a half before, after a breathless struggle, Basil had succeeded in kissing her on the forehead.*

Tommy would never engage in a breathless struggle to kiss me on my forehead, Laura thought with a frown. No way. Hardly on my lips. And Tommy surely doesn't think he's wonderful, she muttered to herself.

No, Tommy wasn't at all like Basil. She put the book down on the little table by the armchair.

The first time she saw Tommy he was playing football, and that day he wasn't composed at all. He was running, shouting and even screaming. He was all red and excited and in a sweat, and when he scored he yelled and jumped, and was wonderful to look at. She had a crush on him at once.

Like Basil, she'd imagined a typical unwinding of facts: Boy and girl meet, fall in love, maybe have to fight some life's adversities, and live happily ever after. But after a couple of weeks, seeing him always so self-possessed, she realized, as Basil had before her, that *life for everybody was a struggle, sometimes magnificent from a distance, but always difficult and surprisingly simple and a little sad.*

You shouldn't get so fresh all the time!

She wished she could tell him so ... but there was no chance – Tommy was never fresh: he was always so respectful. So composed. Sometimes after school she went to the bike stands and waited for him next to his bike.

Hallo, Tommy. Shall we ride home together? she asked him.

Tommy looked up and smiled. Sure, he said.

That was all: calm, composed, gentlemanlike.

She was waiting for Sabrina so they could work together on the Latin translation, as they did once a week. One week they met at Sabrina's place and the following week they met at Laura's. Laura lived near Porta Venezia, whereas Sabrina lived near Castello Sforzesco. It was just ten minutes away by bike. Sabrina knew Latin grammar better and Laura understood Latin better. She grasped the overall meaning while Sabrina checked with scientific rigour whether all the cases and declensions confirmed what Laura thought the text meant by reading it aloud a few times.

When she heard the bell ring, Laura shook her head clear of both Tommy and Basil. She went and opened the door.

Laura's mother came out of the bathroom, her face half white and half made up.

Hallo, Sabrina, how are you? Laura, I took away all my stuff from the lounge table so this time you'll have plenty of room for your dictionaries and books and the two laptops. The table in your room is too narrow. Then she disappeared in the bathroom again.

Laura led the way to the lounge.

What would you like to drink? she asked.

A glass of water, please.

Sabrina eyed the book on the little table near the armchair.

The Basil and Josephine Stories, she said. What's it like?

Good, said Laura. In the first few stories Basil is eleven but then he grows up and I know he'll be seventeen in the last stories. I'm looking forward to it, she said from the kitchen.

She came in and put the two glasses of water on the table.

In the story I'm reading now he's about our age, she said. Well, shall we start with the Catullus excerpt?

Their teacher at St. Louis International School was unconventional: she followed the programme – the usual Virgil and Cicero expected from her age group –, but she also liked go off the beaten path. Just a few lines – nothing extraordinary –; or a very short passage from a harder author. This time their translation was very similar, at least as far as the first lines of the *carmen* passage were concerned. They always did a first pass separately and then discussed it.

“Da mi basia mille, deinde centum, / dein mille altera, dein secunda centum, / deinde usque altera mille, deinde centum”, read Laura aloud.

“Give me a thousand kisses, then a hundred, then a thousand more, then a hundred again, then one more thousand in a row, then a hundred”, read Sabrina aloud.

Mine isn't very different: I have “then” twice and “and then” three times.

Sabrina looked at her.

Yes, Catullus writes *“deinde ... dein ... dein ... deinde ... deinde”*. There's variation: it gives rhythm to his lines. After that he has one more *dein* – *dein, cum milia multa fecerimus*, – that is, he changes again. I think it's important to keep the variation in our translation too: “Give me a thousand kisses, and then a hundred, / then a thousand more, then a hundred again, / and then one more thousand in a row, and then a hundred ...”

Is that tap water? asked Laura's mother in the lounge doorway.

Yes, mum.

Why? There's fresh blueberry juice in the fridge, and mineral water if you'd rather have water.

Why do you drink mineral water, mum? Water in Milan is safe, Laura said watching her mother unflinchingly.

As you like, my dear. Well, I'm off. I have a meeting – Faculty Board. I'll be back by half past seven. Ciao, belle.

The door slammed shut.

Sabrina was still looking at Laura.

Variation, rhythm ... I'm completely deaf to it. I tried to convey the meaning. By the way, when is your final cello recital?

Next Thursday. Let's not stray from this now. How did you translate "*conturbabimus illa, ne sciamus, / aut ne quis malus inuidere possit, / cum tantum sciat esse basiorum?*" This is the hardest part of the translation for me.

"... let's mix them up, in order not to know, or so that nobody will bring us bad luck, by knowing how many our kisses are", said Sabrina in a faltering voice.

Yeah, "mix them up", I like the spoken tone. That's very Catullus-like here; our teacher insisted on that. But there's more in that *conturbabimus* ... In Italian there's the word *conturbare*. What I see is something shaking, violently shaking, like the wind does with sea waves. Rough waves. I think the meaning is: let's ruffle our kisses up so that nobody will know their exact number, especially people who are jealous of our many kisses.

Sabrina looked puzzled. Then she blushed and smiled.

And then, we're always being told about the power of the eye for Latins. Our teacher insists on that, too. The way one looked at other people. I agree – it's a question of bad luck; but we should say it in a different way, I think. Maybe "so that nobody will put the evil eye on us" or "nobody envious will put the evil eye on us", or do you think it sounds redundant if we add "envious"?

I don't really know. We do have *inuidere* in the text ...

They went on discussing the meaning of *conturbabimus* and *inuidere* for more than an hour.

I need a break now, said Sabrina.

All right, let's have a break. Anyway, so far my translation sounds like this: "... let's ruffle them, / so that we won't know, / and nobody will put the evil eye on us by knowing, / how many are our kisses". But I still have to think about it. The best ideas dawn on me when I wake up. But one thing is for sure: I like the line ending with "kisses".

Sabrina didn't look puzzled anymore. But her cheeks were still flushed and she was still smiling.

Would you like anything else to drink? Laura asked and stood up.

I'll have a glass of juice, please.

Laura went into the kitchen and came back with two glasses of blueberry juice.

Last night I saw *The Little Princess* on Netflix, Laura said.

Not too grown up to see a movie for kids?

It was one of my favourite books when I was seven or eight. My mother insisted on me watching it. She had just seen a movie called *Roma* by the same director and she was enthusiastic about it.

Roma?

Yes, Roma – the Mexican one.

What do you mean?

La Colonia Roma. It's the name of a borough in Mexico City. That's what my mother said.

I wonder how you can like *The Little Princess*. I found it so boring and pathetic I had to stop reading it.

I envied her special relationship with her father. And the movie is moving, but not sentimental, Laura said languidly. He must be a good father.

Who?

The movie director. I'll see *Roma* too, now. Although my mother says I should wait a couple more years before watching it.

They sipped their juice. Silence fell for a while, interrupted only by the buzzing of a fly. Suddenly Laura jumped up.

She's stuck on the window pane.

Who?

The fly. We must act quickly if we want to get rid of her. Flies are a nuisance but I don't want to kill them.

Oh, right. Sister Fly.

Stop being sarcastic and help me.

Laura went into the kitchen and came back with a glass. Then she picked up a notebook, tore away the cover and crept to the window. She cupped the fly with the glass, and while the fly ran amok in it, she glided the notebook cover along the pane under the flipped glass, then lifted the glass and the cover from the pane.

Open the window, quickly.

Sabrina acted quickly. Laura removed the notebook cover and the fly flew away.

How do you know it was a she?

I don't, but I like to think she was.

Silence fell again. That was the problem with Sabrina, Laura thought. They weren't really friends, just classmates. They met only once a week for their Latin translation. It suited them both. But there was no room for conversation between them. No room for shared secrets. No real friendship. Every time silence fell, Sabrina would text madly. She was always chatting with someone on Whatsapp. That was her idea of having a break. Or she'd pop in her airpods and listen to 21 Savage, Post Malone, Drake, and occasionally Murracash on Spotify. Or Sabrina would stop for a couple of minutes and ask her about the very things she didn't want to talk about, like that stupid question about her final recital. She only asked questions that made her anxiety worse. Every year the cello recital threw her into a state of dejection. She didn't want to talk about it.

Once Laura had tried to tell her about the magic she felt when she was on the lake, especially on a misty day. The lake had charms and spells to enchant her, even incantations on a very windy day. Only 60 minutes from Milan, and everything was different. Eerie. But the chill it sent up her spine was so pleasant. An ordinary early morning seemed mysterious to her when she awoke before seven o' clock. It was just like being in a Leonardo painting. Right there, beyond Mona Lisa's shoulders.

She tried to convey all her awe and excitement that time, but Sabrina just looked at her and smiled. Then she began texting like mad. So, she didn't tell her more. She didn't tell her how late at night, just before turning out the light, she'd stare at the international space

station in the window frame, or maybe it was the European space station – she'd never found out – right in front of her, shining bright in her face, above the hills on the opposite lake shore, just above Onno, like a handful of stars huddling together. The last thing she gazed at before closing her eyes. A giant star, glittering with hundreds of bright points of light, each one shining with strong emotion in her heart.

Did you know that astronauts can sleep upside down? she told Sabrina once.

Huh? she said removing her airpods.

Astronauts can sleep lying down, standing, and even upside down – they lose all sense of position. I'll show you the video on YouTube.

Sabrina looked at it out of politeness, but she clearly wasn't in the least interested. Laura, on the contrary, was enthusiastic about it. It was a very interesting video made aboard the International Space Station. It was sort of a tour, given by a woman astronaut, with her hair floating around her head. She also showed how she brushed it, and it was very funny, because nothing changed – her hair stood astray and kept floating around her head.

And how could she possibly tell Sabrina about her dream. She had a dream. A strong desire to come across aliens in a field, while walking uphill among olive trees on her own. I'd go straight to them, she thought, welcome them, try to understand their language or at least their body language, make myself understood. I'd do my best, I'm sure – I wouldn't be scared. And she'd ask them to take her with them – not forever, just for a couple of tours around the Earth. How she wished to see it from space, especially Italy! Astronauts always said that it was so luminous, you could detect the many city lights of Rome and Naples in particular, glowing down below. The whole boot was gleaming, dotted with lights, but Rome and Naples were so dazzling that they were hard to look at. They would come from the North, of course, from above the North Pole and then down, over Scandinavia and Central Europe. All of a sudden a blank, no lights because of the Alps, and then suddenly there it was, the boot, slender, stretching in front of her, and quickly, too quickly, the radiant beauty of Rome on her right and then the scattered, scintillating, ravishing luminosity of Naples still on her right, and then ever so quickly the heel on her left with its little spur and the toe on her right playfully kicking Sicily, and then the plunge into the Mediterranean darkness.

She loved going uphill, but she also loved going down to the lake, following one of the many paths along it, and sit down near the Lucia, the traditional fisherman's boat with its three wooden arches, sometimes whispering Lucia's farewell to the mountains, rising from the waters. Was Lucia in *The Betrothed* inspired by the boat or was it the other way round? She had to find out. But she was glad that Manzoni only imagined Lucia's thoughts and meditations. So she was free to imagine Renzo's and Agnese's own thoughts, while the boat approached the right bank of the Adda.

And she loved having a plain croissant at the local *gelateria*, having it while sitting near the little pond and looking at the tiny goldfish swimming among the white and rosy water lilies next to the pots of rosemary, thyme and oregano. The woman there was a relative of the local canoe world champion, and next year he'd surely win a gold medal in Tokyo, she told her. The village would be full of white sheets hanging from windows and balconies, with the red and green words ANDREA IL NOSTRO CAMPIONE.

She especially loved her solitary walks along the little stone paths on the hills, lined with blackberry bushes, the fields dotted with olive trees and old farmhouses, the occasional donkey grazing in a pen. In spring and summer, she'd wear her favourite pants – one white leg and one colourful leg with yellow, pink, blue, purple and orange flowers in full bloom. More flowers flowering on her feet – flowering on her sneakers. Her mother had brought them from Brighton, back from a long weekend spent visiting her many friends and relatives. Her solitary walks with the lake shimmering on her right, hurting her eyes if she looked straight at it. At every bend she wondered whether she would meet the *bravi*, sitting on the little dry-stone wall, waiting for her and scowling at her. Would they make her aware of her sloth?

A gentle voice coming from the open kitchen window lifted her from her reveries. It was lovely, chanting, puzzling Maria next door. She was surely working on her giant puzzle. Maria was only two years old.

I thought you were sleeping, said Sabrina.

No, only daydreaming. Would you like anything else to drink, or to eat?

No, thank you.

Sabrina paused for a second.

I thought you might lie on the couch: daydreaming on a couch is much better. I have to text a few more people and then I'm off, she said.

Laura took her glass, went into the kitchen, turned on the tap, rinsed the glass and filled it once more with water. Then she went back into the lounge, put the glass on the floor and lay belly-down on the couch. Not a bad idea, she thought. Daydreaming on a couch is definitely better. But as soon as she lay down, she was caught again in the net that had imprisoned her for the past few weeks. *"You know something? You know you're the prettiest girl in the city?"* Just the thought that Tommy might say something like that to her was more than daydreaming – it was pure dreaming. And it was just ridiculous. Tommy might never say something so stupid. He wouldn't even say *"in the school"*. That would be ridiculous too. And besides, she knew very well she wasn't the prettiest girl in the school. *Fifteen is of all ages the most difficult to locate*. Oh, Fitzgerald might as well have written *"thirteen"*, or *"fourteen"*, for that matter ... Anyway, this steady competition between Tommy and Basil she'd engaged in her mind was absurd, and it was wearing her down.

Laura?

Yes?

Sabrina was sitting near her on the couch.

Just stay where you are and close your eyes.

Laura was puzzled but she closed her eyes. As soon as she did, a rain of little, light kisses poured down on her hair and then on her shoulders.

Don't move, Sabrina said in a soft voice.

She didn't move.

Presently, a new downpour of rain came down on her back, very slowly, very tenderly, then went up her back and down again. Not an inch of her back wasn't sprinkled with this

downpour of delicate little kisses. And then her shoulders again, her nape and head – light, soft kisses all over her hair.

What if they went behind the bike stands hut? Would he kiss her there? Nobody would see them. Would Tommy kiss her there? And would her eyes say: Again?

Laura didn't move but her mind was in ferment. Give me a thousand kisses, and then a hundred, then a thousand more ... And down came the steady downpour of light kisses on her hair and shoulders ... then a hundred again, and then one more thousand in a row, and then a hundred. And now on her back ... Who would you rather kiss than anybody? Tommy, Tommy, and Tommy again. Yes, *da mi basia mille, deinde centum, dein mille altera ... Have you ever kissed a boy? Have you ever been kissed? Pink but tranquil, she nodded, adding, "I couldn't help it". "Who by?" "I won't tell".*

The downpour stopped.

Did I hurt you? Why are you shaking your head, Laura?

Am I?

Laura opened her eyes.

Maybe it was a fly, she said.

I'd better go now, said Sabrina. Your mother will be back soon.

Sabrina stood up and packed all her things.

Laura stood up too, and waited for Sabrina to close her schoolbag. Then she saw her out. On the threshold she politely thanked her.

Thank you, Sabrina, for giving a structure to my vague sense of meaning in the whole Catullus passage.

It wasn't vague at all. The point is that you figure it out with your intuition, whereas I have to figure it out with grammar. We're just complementary.

Laura lowered her eyes.

See you tomorrow at school, she said without a smile, and firmly shut the door.

She went back into the lounge, packed her own things and took them into her room. Then she went back into the lounge, tidied up the table and the couch, picked up the glass of water from the floor, went into the kitchen and poured it out into the sink. Then she turned the tap, rinsed the glass and filled it again with water. She went into her room, and put it on the parquet near the carpet. Then she lay down on the carpet and shut her eyes. After a while, she took a sip from the glass. Presently, a tear streaked her cheek.

Maybe she misunderstood my reference to the fly as a she-fly. It's only a habit I have. I like to think of animals as "she". Maybe Sabrina is right. Sister Fly. Sister Wasp. Sister Butterfly.

She turned on her side and drew up her legs.

And then, all that talking about kisses ...

She took another sip of water, and hunched her shoulders.

I enjoyed all those kisses, but I constantly thought of Tommy. All the time, I wished *he* was there, kissing me. Is that betrayal?

She turned again.

And what about Basil? she thought. Am I also betraying Tommy by constantly comparing him to Basil? Is this serious enough to be called betrayal?

A second tear streaked her cheek.

Oh, I am so ashamed of myself – not because of the kisses, but because of my thoughts.

She lay on her back and opened her eyes.

My mind was full of kisses, while my body was also full of kisses, she said to herself. But the kisses in my mind did not match the kisses on my body.

She took another sip of water.

Water is safe in Milan, but my thoughts are not.

Franca Cavagnoli has published three novels – *Luminusa* (2015), *Non si è seri a 17 anni* (2007) and *Una pioggia bruciante* (2000) –, and two books about Literary Translation, *La traduzione letteraria anglofona* (2017) and *La voce del testo* (2012, Premio Lo straniero). She published her first children's book, *La Bocca dell'Adda*, in 2022 (special mention Premio Gianni Rodari). She has translated and edited works by J. M. Coetzee, F. S. Fitzgerald, Nadine Gordimer, James Joyce, Jamaica Kincaid, Toni Morrison, V. S. Naipaul, George Orwell and Robert Louis Stevenson. She was awarded the Premio Nazionale per la Traduzione del Ministero dei Beni Culturali in 2014. She is a contributor to *il manifesto*, *Alias* and *L'Indice dei libri del mese*.
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