

7. A MOTHER'S LOVE

Luisa Verrazano was third-generation Italian. Her father had been a laborer who migrated to England before the Second World War. His son worked hard at school so that he could avoid the back-breaking life of his father. He became a Professor of Literature at Manchester University. Luisa took a cue from her father. But she also dreamed of palaces and princes.

She had foresworn the Keynesian turn of Cambridge. She was afraid of the radicalism of her mother country. Even with her soft heart, she was grounded in a cold self-reliance. Her neoliberalism made her somewhat a maverick at the London School of Economics. She might have been more at home at the University of Chicago and its bent towards monetarism.

She met Tony's father Terry Richmond Duke of Warwick at an economics conference. He was working for the Tory government. She saw herself as part of an enterprising wing of the Labor party. She realized that it would be a crowning achievement on her own dreams to capture this prize. Her sultry Italian beauty and wile were the perfect tools to ensnare this noble. Their wedding was a glorious affair that satisfied all the ambitions of Luisa. Once they had children, it was clear that their education would be supervised by the wife.

More for her son than for her daughter, Luisa had a dream that would impress his nobility on the world around him. She saw him as an heir-apparent to the family legacy. Nothing would stand in her way for those dreams. Even his impending marriage with Vanessa was an exercise in the mother's power. Vanessa's father was a shipping magnate. His wealth could be a valuable connection for future political or business ventures. Vanessa was from great stock. She was a lovely girl who exuded class. She could party with abandon and still not relinquish her patrician loyalties. Even Tony could not radiate such natural allegiance to wealth and privilege. Almost without trying she was a slap in the face to girls like Helena. She might even seem an affront to Luisa's own background. But the mother had done everything in her power to erase her lowly origins. Luisa saw herself in the vanguard of a new royalty, one that had purified itself of its former inbreeding. In its invigorated form, it could assume the destiny that was meant for it.

Luisa had planned out her son's prospects as if she was auctioning off a fine Arabian thoroughbred. Given Vanessa's evident charms, he was only too happy to oblige. Even the heavens apparently blessed their union. When Luisa learned of Tony's escapades in Corfu she was aghast. A fling was all part of his growing up. But a true romantic affair was that she needed to upset the apple cart. She had previously used the diary incident to shift blame to this American upstart. This was only another occasion that Tony's wandering eye had been his undoing. Luisa recognized the kind of girl that Helena represented to her aspiration, how she was a threat to her son's well being. She needed to sabotage their love before it had a chance to become more developed.

The full press of a mother's love needed to be urgently applied. The fact that Helena represented an impediment to the mother's plans was testament to Helena's stunning appeal. Despite his devotion to Vanessa, Tony could not get over his time on the island. He needed to be reminded on how much was riding on his commitment to his family. Luisa could hardly offer the door to her pride and joy. He needed to come to the realization himself. So the mother's love pervaded his being. He followed her wishes naturally. His casual demeanor was his nod to his class. He really had no worries. Pleasure was always in arm's reach.

Tony had learned from his mother and from his grandfather. He was a gifted student. He had a mind for numbers. He spoke fluent French and Italian. He could read Latin. He would often skip a night out to devour a novel. With great flourish, Tony was ready to extend the family title. Now he stood in waiting as the Earl of Warwick. Due to his breeding, he may have been too independent even for Luisa's tastes. He had appetites that he could not easily satisfy.

Tony had spent his life having servants do everything for him. He relished any moment of independence that he could attain. Luisa knew this. At the country home, servants seemed a necessity. But she would often dismiss the servants from the London place so she wouldn't have any witnesses to her schemes.

He spent nights awake wondering if this was the right life for him. In his dreams, he would wander the world in an elegant sail boat. He couldn't look back. His life was too planned out. That was why he was so attracted to Helena. She had found her direction on her own. She lived the life of an artist. She was a child of her creativity. He had read about such spirits. But he couldn't let himself give in to those whims.

For his consolation, he was the wild partygoer. He recognized how his desires had already put him in a few scrapes. As he became older, he tried to reform his ways. But when he fell off the wagon, the crash was much worse than before. Drunk and spending money like there was no tomorrow, five in the morning seemed like an exile from which there was no return. In this state, his eye often wandered. Vanessa learned to tolerate this side of him. She chalked it all up to youthful exuberance. She assumed all his dissipation would disappear by the time he hit thirty. Occasionally she would try to accompany him on his jaunts. But they always ended up in a fight. Tony would get caught staring at a girl. Or he would say something nasty to Vanessa.

Vanessa had all the cards and could have easily walked away permanently on any of these occasions. But Luisa's understanding influence kept Vanessa in the fold. This is why Helena's presence was so disturbing. She threatened to destroy years of work. Luisa could sense the house falling in ill-repute. Luisa had read the same novels as Tony. Nobles in the nineteenth century clung to their titles as their financial empires crumbled. In such desperate moments they were the victims of confidence schemes as they tried to turn a quick pound. This was hardly the fate that awaited Tony. But it could be the beginning.

Tony felt like he himself had chosen Vanessa. He had gone to Corfu to blow off steam with his mates. The lads seemed to engage in contests with the girls that they met. But Helena had been different. She was the perfect foil to his youthful bravado. He was absorbed by her poetic existence. It even provoked a creativity in him. He was finding something in himself that had little to do with his mother. Even his rebellion was only the flip side of her control. She had given him a long leash. But he had been so loose with his adventures that he could feel it pull against him. This was his one opportunity to break the chain.

Luisa was wise to her own shortcomings. She felt that a little extra caring could compensate for Tony's scepticism. It was not enough to let Tony figure things out on his own. A mistake on his part and the engagement to Vanessa would be a thing of the past. For Luisa, there was no other girl like Vanessa. Even the gossip columns supported her claims. She was a sweet girl who was at the center of an economic transformation of the nation. These new financial empires could root the new nobility for centuries to come. Luisa had prodded Terry to enhance the marital union with a number of financial connections with Vanessa's father. There

was a contemplated oil deal in Bahrain that held in the balance. The betrothed bathed in the black gold. Luisa looked on like a goddess who granted special powers to her serving nymphs.

Helena was like a sorceress who had been robbed of her own legacy. Her magic was an affront to the modern culture espoused by Luisa. The mother needed to stifle this superstition if her machinations were to take hold. She herself had never given in to passion in this way. It was the one weapon not at her disposal. She saw it as almost a weakness. She had a sexual side. And she could experience pleasure. But everything about her physical being was so calculated. A misstep and she would be walking the poor streets of Rome. She needed to bring all her powers to bear on this urgent matter.

Bertie seemed the perfect ally in this situation. She almost saw the impending marriage as her own. Bertie didn't want the fairy tale to crumble. She had never accompanied her brother on one of his benders. But she knew of his erratic side. In being with Helena, he was giving in to that side of himself. Where her mother's scheming had its source in her appreciation of Italian intrigue, Bertie was more the daughter of British pragmatism. There was no mystery at all in her appeals to Tony. The marriage was simply the right thing to do. Where she could hardly influence him to change his ways, he could reinforce with reasoning her mother's more subtle approach. She hoped that Tony could grasp the natural course of things.

Bertie had subsumed her own emotional life to her brother. While she bore some of the striking appeals of her mother, the edges had been rounded. She never seemed quite ambitious and was forced to settle with boys who were her clear inferior. She had nothing to sustain her more challenging associations so her years had been marked by a particular frustration. She also had none of the intellectual facility of her mother or her brother. For her lack, she substituted relentless application. She was always studying. For her lot, she was a little resentful. More than her mother, she truly knew what Helena meant. Ultimately, Luisa could not contemplate the fragility of her own scheme. But in her blood, Bertie knew the problem. Helena was everything the opposite of Bertie. Luisa had needed to use her own supernatural illusions to penetrate the upper reaches of nobility. Bertie's skills were fundamentally conservative. She extended the lessons in the blood that had been passed on through her father. This protectiveness was even foreign to Tony. It made Bertie's efforts all the more necessary. She knew her father would do nothing to dissuade his son. And Luisa observations were limited. Bertie was essential as the last piece in the puzzle.

On the day of the fated meeting, Tony had been thinking about nothing but Helena. He had foolishly agreed to her plan not to exchange numbers.

"If you really love me, you'll be there no matter what."

What had intervened in the form of a job. Luisa had arranged an interview for Tony with a brokerage house. There were other job, but none with the potential of this one. With the family connections, he was a shoe-in. All his work in school would be rewarded. He needed to prove to his mother that he was not the playboy that she dreaded. He knew the love of his life would be waiting under the worst of circumstances. He needed to get Bertie to follow through for him.

"I need a favor."

"Tony, I've got a life of my own. Surely you can phone this girl."

"That is the problem. I never got her number."

“That ought to be a clear sign that she isn’t worth it.” Bertie’s practical side was manifesting itself.

“We were on the island. It seemed the natural thing to do. Going native. Dispensing with all this modern garbage for something real.”

Bertie felt insulted as he had something that had nothing to do with her. The Vanessa engagement was part of the history of the family. Helena was an insult to their well-being.

“Tony, it was cheap fun. Just a physical thing. Take it for what it was. You can always do the same thing with another girl.”

Even in making her argument, Bertie gave short shrift to the marital union.

“What are you saying, Bertie?”

“Have fun when you can have fun. And when you have to be serious, do the right thing.”

“But I thought the family always argued against fun. That can be the undoing of the plan.”

“Do you really want to turn out Vanessa for some little chippy?”

“It wasn’t like that.”

“What was it then?”

He didn’t want to insult his sister by implying that she had never felt such a love. He was aware how the family ventures favored him over her. He didn’t want to test her loyalty.

“I can’t explain.”

“What do you mean, Tony? You don’t want to tell me.”

“I can’t figure it out myself”

Down deep, he knew full well what had taken him to this point. The niceties of the conjugal bed would never be as gratifying as those days with Helena.

“You are living a silly romantic illusion. No one kiss is that different that you risk your fortune on it.”

“You don’t know Helena’s kisses.”

Bertie smiled. She caught the humor.

“I hope I never do.”

“That isn’t what I meant. If I give up on this, I give up on everything.”

“You have your appointment tomorrow. If you miss it, Mother will think that you’re back to your old ways.”

“That’s precisely the reason that I need Helena. Only she can make it all seem worth it.”

“You’ve been with many girls.”

“But not this one!”

Tony’s arguments were going nowhere. He was even frustrating himself. He went up to his room in the hope that it all might become clearer. This job was hardly the be all and end all of his life. He was going to become a cog in the larger machine. But this was his destiny. He could use the opportunity to connect to something bigger and brighter. He could feel the sun setting on his time in Corfu. He wasn’t supposed to think this way. It had been temporary. Nothing held him to Helena. He knew that this was the time to be the responsible son. Immersed in an orgiastic excess, Tony often lost himself. He had little control over these moments. He hoped that his mother’s plan would be the restraint that he needed.

“You can’t stop a runaway freight train,” his friend Chris once admonished him.

“I feel like my body’s been hit by that train.”

“The perils of the good life.”

He was willing to give up all those perils for one spark of decency. Perhaps that was why he needed to head to Bessborough Gardens. His mother’s plans couldn’t sustain his instincts. Maybe he could follow Helena to America. There, he could find an ease that he never had in England. He had been living through his mother. Now he could live for himself. His skills were developed. He was a catch for any company over there.

Tony had visions of himself reclining in the Miami sun.

“They get hurricanes in Miami.”

Who was this interrupting his dream?

He went back downstairs to greet Bertie taking morning tea.

“I thought that you were going to a lecture.”

“Tony, I thought that I’d do some reading at home. Don’t you have your appointment.”

“It’s a dinner meeting. That’s the problem.

Bertie tried to be diplomatic, “You could change it. Then you wouldn’t miss your precious Helena.”

“I phoned up to change it. He’s not going to be back in time. I feel like Mother arranged it this way,”

Bertie wanted to take some credit. She had warned her mother about the details of the proposed rendez-vous.

“I could help you out. I could go in your place.”

“To my job interview. How could you do that?”

“I could meet Helena for you.”

He felt perfectly trusting of his sister, “Would you do that for me?”

“You’ll owe me one.”

“Whatever you say.”

He was totally naive with regards to his sister’s intentions.

“Maybe you can have her meet me a little later.”

“You have that little matter of Father’s to attend to.”

“I’ll figure out something.”

He felt blessed. He was going to work it all out. He went back to his room ad la on his bed. This was going to be easier than he thought.

He had forgotten about Vanessa. He could balance the two girls. Not if he was going to be honest to Helena.

Vanessa had always been his shelter from the storm. Whenever he was in a muddle, he could run to her to sort things out.

“Tony, I need you to help me find a table for my flat.”

The two had spent an aimless Sunday wandering the stalls of Camden. They laughed at the punks that crossed their path.

“We could be like that.”

“We were like that.”

Vanessa summed it up, “I think that our problem is that our dreams are already real.”

He held her close. Again he forgot about a crazy Saturday.

Tony quickly returned to the present moment. He'd lose his focus if he left Vanessa. He'd be a victim of his stupid passions. How could Helena react to one of his nights on the town. She'd only want to punish him. Vanessa would let him have that other side of himself. It came with his title. How could an American really understand any of this. Especially Helena. She seemed determined by the rule of her heart. If she wavered, it was all part of her view from the heart.

Tony shifted his position on the bed. He could have been preparing for the interview. But he wanted the peace of mind. He wanted an excuse to turn his back on Helena. He only needed to look around him. He didn't want to give up the ease. This made him what he was. Luxury was not a goal; it was an assumption. He didn't want to contradict the most fundamental principles of his upbringing.

He had worked in school. It had netted its rewards. The world was his oyster. He didn't need to use his mother's love as a supplement for his own inadequacies. He thought that he'd go out for lunch. It might calm him for his inevitable decision.

His mother passed him as he headed out the door.

"Tony, you haven't forgotten about this evening."

"How could I, Mother."

"You need to get there extra early. You don't know what could go wrong. Remember that this is a family friend. Don't embarrass us."

His mother's warnings reinforced Tony's doubts. He was still submitting to her orders. He took lunch by himself. It was a short walk from their place in St. John's Wood. He needed the air to help him make sense of it all.

It was an American deli. He ordered a ham on rye. He washed it down with a Stella. He loved the way the mustard seeped into the bread. He let it melt in his mouth. The bread stuck to the roof of his mouth. He liked the feeling. He took another sip of his Stella. For the time being this was enough to preoccupy him.

He remembered a conversation that he had with his mates the night before.

"Hugh did you have one of those chocolate pretzels?"

Hugh looked over at Billy and laughed, "I ate the rest of them."

"You could have left few for me."

"We did, Tony. But you didn't take them. So I thought that I'd finish them off." Hugh had satisfied smile.

Billy broke in, "I think that they could have used a bit more chocolate on them."

"There was enough chocolate for my taste."

Tony wanted a pretzel now. He turned to a passing waiter, "You don't have chocolate pretzels?"

"Sorry, no we don't."

"You don't have pretzels?"

"We have pretzels. No chocolate ones."

"I'll have another Stella."

"No pretzels?"

"Just the beer."

The second beer was going to be his dessert. When it arrived, he took a sip. He swished

it around in his mouth. He still wanted a pretzel. He thought about ordering the pretzels and mixing them with some chocolate cheese cake. He was getting carried away.

After his lunch, he stopped by the news stand to look at the candy selection. Nothing crunchy for his taste. He walked slowly back to the house. His stomach was a bit upset. He thought that the walk would quiet him down. It didn't.

When he went inside, no one was around. Bertie must have gone out. He'd have to catch her later. He went upstairs to lie down.

He just took his shoes off and lay on the bed. He wanted to relax without thinking of Helena or the job. But his thoughts turned to his time on the island. His stomach continued to feel uneasy. Maybe he shouldn't have drank the second beer. He got up to brush his teeth and then settled in again.

Her face dissolved in a haze. His head spun. He sunk into sleep. His nap made him feel rested. He hadn't done much that day, but the worrying had taken its toll.

When he woke, he was in a panic. It seemed like nighttime in his room. He had missed both meetings. How was he going to face his mother? When he pulled open the blinds, it was still daylight. His stomach felt better. He needed to leave room for dinner.

More than ever, he felt the need to see Helena. Maybe he could catch up with her later. Then he thought about his other commitments. The only way to see her was to damn the whole thing. Just go there and forget about his meeting. He was feeling strong. He was feeling self-destructive.

He sat at the edge of the bed, his feet touching the floor. He needed to get going. To make up his mind. But there was no clarity. He never thought of himself as a romantic. He should just take a shower and put his suit on. Then it would all make sense. He put his face in his hands, and just sat in that same position for a few moments. If someone had surprised him at this moment, they might have thought that he was crying. It was just his frustration.

In the shower, he realized that he didn't have to bring anything to resolution. He could go to the interview dinner. At the same time, Bertie could meet Helena. Above all he wanted a clear conscience. He didn't want to think that he had wrecked an opportunity. He didn't want anyone thinking bad of him. His mother's lessons had proved effective. He was a victim of his own public relations.

He was well-prepared for a life inhabiting the middle ground. He could avoid offending anyone. This seemed the perfect resume for his future job. He was living his ideals. It made him feel gratified that he had to give so little of himself for his desired end. There was still a dose of nostalgia remaining from the days in Corfu. He could savor the memory. It could bring a deeper hope to the modest promise of his future in London. He could pretend that his rebellious streak burned bright.

As he brushed his hair, he felt proud of himself. He had faced a dangerous situation and come through with flying colors. In his mind he imagined a parade to congratulate his brilliance. Once dressed, he donned his freshly-polished black shoes. He headed down to find his sister. He walked from room to room hoping to find her. But she wasn't anywhere to be seen.

Then he heard the door latch. He rushed to the entrance.

"Where have you been?"

"I was out taking a walk."

“I was getting worried.”

“What do you mean? It’s daytime. It’s safe out there.”

“I know,” said Tony. “I just need you to do something.”

“What’s in it for me?”

“You’re my sister. I need a favor.”

“And you’ll owe me big time.”

Tony started to sketch out his plan to Bertie. She made a face even though she agreed to do it.

“I need you to meet her at Bessborough Gardens. You know where that is.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“You need to give her my cell phone number. Write it down, and give it to her.”

“That doesn’t sound so difficult.”

“But you also have to explain things to her.”

Tony was telling himself just as much as he was explaining things to Bertie.

“I’m really sorry about all this. You have to let her know. I really like her a lot.”

“I can tell how much you like her. But what about Vanessa?”

“I don’t know about Vanessa.”

“Tony, that’s not good enough.”

Bertie protested, “I like Vanessa.”

“I do too. I don’t want to hurt her. I need to do what’s best for my life.”

“None of this is practical. You’re going to marry Vanessa. What are you going to tell this poor girl.”

“Her name is Helena.”

“Tony, what are you going to tell Helena when you get the chance. That you’ll marry her too. You can’t do that. You’re an adult now. You have to make a choice.

“You sound like Mother.”

“You need to heed Mother’s advice.”

Bertie seemed more stubborn than Luisa. Tony started to question whether she would actually do him the favor.

“Bertie, I can’t be in two places at one time.”

“I understand that, Tony.”

“So who is going to take care of this for me.”

“Tell me again what you need.”

He described Helena for Bertie.

“You need to look for her at Bessborough Gardens. It’s near Pimlico on Vauxhall Bridge Road. You need to be there at half 6. Don’t be late. You have to apologize for me not being there. Tell her that I had a job interview. She wonder why it was so late. Tell her that it’s a dinner.”

“She’s not going to believe any of this.”

“She has to believe for my sake.”

“What can I do to help?”

“You have to be convincing.”

“Tony, I’m not you. I can’t look at her with my puppy dog eyes and profess undying

love.”

“Would you quit being so damn cynical!”

“I’m only telling the truth.”

“Tony, I’ll do what I can.”

“Wait, I’ll write her a note.”

He sat down to write a quick note. He signed it, “Love, Tony.” He really meant it. This was evidence enough for her to despise the girl. But she had to be the good sister.

“Be sure to take this with you. Guard it as if it’s your life. Pretend that it’s five hundred quid.”

“So you’re putting a price on her head.”

“That was merely an analogy.”

“But an effective one. I’ll go buy her off for you.”

“I’m not giving her money.”

“Maybe you should, dear brother. It might make her disappear for good. I hear those Americans are gold diggers.”

“If that’s what you hear, it’s probably not true. That’s the last thing in this girl’s mind.”

“The last thing is often the main thing, dear boy. You’re getting silly over a trifle.”

“The trifle is the care that you bringing to the task. I need this to get done.”

“Whatever you say.”

“You need to do it.”

Bertie begrudgingly agreed, “OK. I’ll do what you say.”

He gave her a hug. “Thanks, I owe you.” And then he blissfully disappeared. As he drove off, he thought everything was safe.

Bertie, however, had other ideas. She immediately disposed of the note. Instead, she substituted a family address card. It bore no phone number. The girl would have to write. And time would pass. Tony would wonder about her interest. Even if he received a reply, the fire would already be out.

In her heart, she didn’t even want to make the trip. She could lie to Tony. Bertie was the only life line to Helena. If she didn’t show, that would be it with this terrible threat. As she was mulling over her options, her mother came home. She didn’t want to tell her what she was up to. But she knew it would get back to her. Luisa knew everything.

Luisa was furious, “You’re not going to go.”

“Mother. I’ve thought about it. But Tony will find out.”

“Go late. You’ve done your bit. And the girl can’t wait forever.”

She liked that suggestion. The new plot was taking shape.

“You have to make the girl angry. Bertie, don’t be nice to her. Make her think that Tony doesn’t care.”

They decided that Helena needed to know all about Vanessa. That would be the trick to send her on her way. She would realize that Tony was liar and say good by to her romantic dreams.

Bertie took her time as she prepared to go. She didn’t mind being late. Even later, and there would be no Helena. She even took the train to delay her journey more.

It seemed fortunate that the Victoria line was still out. As Bertie walked the distance, she

took her time. It wasn't her fault. It was fate.

As she reached Bessborough Gardens, Helena seemed to be in a trance. She didn't even notice Bertie. This was all the more reason to forgo the mission. But she had to take care of it. She knew that she would relish the look of fright on the poor girl's face. Maybe she would even have to administer CPR to the pathetic Helena.

Bertie's triumph was total. She was doing this for herself. She was doing it for her mother. Finally, she was doing it for Tony. It was what had to be done.

As she left Helena in the park, she started to question her own motives. This was Tony's chance for a happiness that had nothing to do with the family. But he had always been the chosen one. Bertie's actions could deny him the one crowning achievement that might make his life truly worthwhile. He already knew many business connections. He could have missed the interview and still had a successful career. Deep inside, she knew that she could have told him this. But it was all working as part of her plan, *her* plan. She even felt more powerful than the imperious Luisa. She could continue this genius in future endeavors. She had surpassed even the goddess.

Bertie came back down to the ground as she headed home. The train journey was remarkably short, but it gave her more time to reflect on her accomplishment. Tony had been under the gun. And he tried to have it both ways. Bertie didn't like that ambiguity. She wanted it all clear. Like the law. She had laid down the law. Now she felt content with herself.

As Bertie executed her plan, Tony waited for a call from Helena.

He had done well at his dinner. But he realized his mistake. He wanted to take it all back. He wanted to ditch Vanessa forever and run to his true love. At this point, it seemed too late.