

PHOTOGRAPH WEDDING

Flick, flick, flick. Valentina shook her umbrella and little rivulets of rain ran onto the platform. One stray spot spread and darkened the pale cotton of her dress as she clambered awkwardly onto the train. It was full of steaming, excited soldiers going home on leave and they did not give her a second glance as she clumsily negotiated the overcrowded corridor. Just a plump, middle-aged woman with white hair and a pleasant, rosy face carrying a cardboard suitcase and a wet umbrella.

After five minutes of ungainly progress, Valentina finally found what she was looking for; a seat on one of the hard, wooden benches. She thankfully threw a small cushion down onto the polished wood and heaved her suitcase onto the rack. All she had to do now was wait.

This morning, early, it had been fine with no premonition of the coming storm. She had got up as usual at six, thrown out yesterday's pasta scraps to the ecstatic, lean cats who wound round her ankles and looked regretfully at the geraniums, vivid against the snowy, white wall of the cottage. She would have liked to have planted roses too. She had walked easily down the road in her faded apron and looked out at the deep, turquoise waves and jagged black rocks. The beauty she had shared with Antonio. But now it seemed such a long time ago and she had no regrets.

Valentina sat upright on her wooden seat, full of trepidation yet determined on her folly. The train jerked into motion, the sun came out and the soldiers cheered as she reflected that, incredibly, it was only one month since the first letter had arrived.

It had all started far away in a small village near Rome. On that wartime morning, the bar was crowded with workers drinking coffee "corrected" with cognac before going off to the fields. One man remained seated, staring morosely at the sawdust covered floor as he smoked a cigarette. This was Aventurero. Aventurero was as fine

a figure of a man as you could hope to find in the village bar of a morning. Although well over sixty, he was stocky and tanned with thick, grey hair. A white string vest revealed powerful shoulders as he finished his coffee. May 1st should have been a good day for him. He had heard from his son saying that he was neither dead nor imprisoned but coming home on leave from the army. But it seemed that nothing could cheer Aventurero up, not even the news of his son's return. And the beautiful spring weather outside just made him more melancholy than ever.

His nephew, Donato, wandered through the brilliantly lit rectangle of the doorway and cheerily greeted his uncle, "Beautiful day..", he started. But Aventurero was in no mood to talk about the weather. "How's Assunta?", he demanded ferociously. His nephew had recently got married. The younger man picked up the resentment in his uncle's voice and said sympathetically, "Still missing Aunt Novella, are you?". It's been three years now and you're still young. Why don't you enjoy life a bit more?". Aventurero remained stubbornly silent so Donato continued in a more placatory tone, "Tell you what, this morning my mother was telling me about a cousin of hers up in Liguria who's in the same boat - you know, up North. You two would make a fine pair!". "The very thought!", said Aventurero angrily. "Come on uncle, I was only joking", pleaded Donato. But the older man went on, "And anyway, Liguria's at the other end of Italy". Laughing, Donato called, "But you could always write her a letter, Uncle", as Aventurero clumped bad-temperedly out of the bar in his working boots. Later, though, as he saw the first signs of blossom on his neighbour's cherry tree, his face broke into a smile for the first time in weeks.

Valentina had not been able to believe her eyes when the letter arrived. She had read it through three times, almost frightened by her own eagerness, and in the end had confided in a neighbour. They both sat on an old bench in front of the white wall surrounded by basking cats, budding geraniums and the heady smells of the sea. "But Rome's so far away, they practically speak a different language - a different dialect anyway - you wouldn't even be able to understand what he said to you!". And

