

Empatia Interuptus

John Wood

The hills near Rome are veiled by blue haze that has drifted up the soft valley of the Sabines. Across the plaza the sagging terra-cotta facade of the village storehouse blushes in the late afternoon sunlight. On the cafe's terrace, sweet drinks are being sipped reflectively. Cigarette smoke curls silently. The normally impatient weeping willows on the avenue are motionless. The land is still, expectant, as if on the verge to speak. It merely listens.

Sabini? It is the mountainous country east of the Tiber and north of the districts of the Latinos, in the heart of the central Apennines. Tradition allies the people of this region with the beginning of Rome. The Sabines gave Rome the "populus Romanus quirites," the individual citizen as contrasted to the community. In return, the Romans stole the Sabine women.

Quirinis, the Sabine deity, never attained the first rank, but did get chummy with Jupiter who guarded the path of duty and right doing. Jupiter's wife Juno stood for the female principle of life. Every man had his "Genius," every woman, her "Juno," divine double. The broken silence, wrongdoing, and a divine double are elements in this story.

At the retreat center, in a lounge off of the dining room, an internationally known expert in "cross-cultural counseling" is holding forth in an encounter group. Although he does not become romantically involved with his female students, his grey-templed charm and the promise of earning psychotherapeutic skills have attracted a large following of Italian women. They are mostly psychologists and have enrolled in a course of training in sensitive and empathic listening. In this group, they will learn from practice. The famous North American psychologist listens intently to each participant as she reveals some previously guarded fact about her life. Other members of the group make comments that are tolerated patiently. Then the psychologist contributes his observations, at times impressively capturing the exact sentiment the speaker intends to convey. Often the American offers homegrown wisdom or relates anecdotes from his university days which are received appreciatively.

The moment has arrived for a woman, who has been serving as the great facilitator's translator, to tell of a long kept secret. Irani says she wishes to reveal "something that she has held within her and is bursting to come out." She says it "frightens and excites her at the same time." There is another woman present, Juliana, who has also translated the American. He knows them both well. Both are middle-aged, not unattractive. They live in industrious northern Italy; that is, they tend to be less talkative and more practical than their restless younger colleagues from the south.

It is decided that Irani, who has been translating, will speak directly to the American in English. Juliana will take over the task of translating Irani's words into Italian for the others. The psychologist lights a cigarette and examines his fingernails while this detail of procedure is settled. He doesn't understand one word of Italian but prides himself on his "sensitive listening" and his ability to reflect deep feelings, even through a translator. When the professional moment arrives, he will be ready.

Irani begins her confession. Squeezing her hands together, as if praying for the right words (or perhaps hoping that awkwardly chosen or even wrong words will not be judged harshly), she begins to tell the psychologist how she feels about him. Over these years, as he worked, she translated. Through devotion to the message, she had become more and more close to the messenger. She does not hide her present disappointments with life. She admits that she may be feeling a bit more vulnerable than usual. In any case, she respects the way the facilitator conducts psychology. She has even applied his techniques effectively in her own modest practice.

Irani speaks in English. Juliana repeats in Italian. English to Italian. English to Italian. Fighting against the final assault of emotion, Irani wonders, "Is this real? I don't know what to say." Finally, she surrenders, "Not only do I feel close to your work, I feel close to you! As a woman."

English to Italian, English to Italian, to English, to Italian, to English. The faces of the group members veer from Irani to Juliana to Irani to Juliana. Feeling both guilt and passion, Irani declares, "What is to become of me?" With tears running down her cheeks, she leans toward the American, her arms open wide, her voice broken by sobs, and says, "I love you."

Irani's intimate feelings are naked. Her final words echo in a sacred silence. Juliana, choked with emotion, is unable to translate. Then the master of understanding rises, holds his arms out wide and, as if greeting his favorite aunt on her birthday, announces, "Of course, I understand; and I love you, too." He then flings himself into the arms of Juliana who, terrified and speechless, is incapable of explaining this incredible act to the astonished group.

Irani's words were understood, they were accepted, yet an unthinkable tragedy has occurred. The psychologist listened as he was accustomed to: English words which translated and followed, not preceded, the incomprehensible Italian. He attributed the words of one admirer as expressing the feelings of another. Irani, realizing what has happened, begins repeating, as if to clasp the fleeting reality, "It's okay. Yes, it's okay. It could be her, yes."

The dumbstruck Juliana, in the arms of the American, her dream come true, filled with both indescribable pleasure and immeasurable embarrassment, screams, "Oh, my God! It's all wrong. It's all wrong." Members of the group, their mouths agape, are frozen with horror.

The master of understanding is reassuring, "There, there, of course it's wrong. But that's okay, too." After the appropriate interval for such embraces, he glances at his wristwatch and says, "Well, it's time to end this session. I'll be seeing you all next month." As group

members file numbly from the room, the bewildered psychologist shrugs his shoulders. "What's the big deal? All I did was hug somebody."

Trying to do good had resulted in harm. Disaster was avoided, and perhaps even a good outcome was achieved by virtue of the decent and pure intentions of these two women. Alone, they stare at each other. Irani rises slowly and tenderly embraces the shivering Juliana. A summer shower has begun. Hail stones splatter on the red tiles of the balconies. Rainwater refreshes the air. Splashing along the gutters of the tile roof and cascading onto the verandah it seems to applaud the greater event, the effect of a genuine, warm and supportive empathy.

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