

# An Italian Lunch (II)

*by* Cherise Wolas

I took a room in a tiny hotel in Talamone. At the top of the steep steps leading up from the cove, I whisper in Gabrielle's ear and my heart contracts, expecting nothing, hoping for all.

She looks deeply into my eyes and nods. My heart expands. Side by side we walk in silence through the town, to the hotel. She walks up the hotel staircase ahead of me. I turn the old-fashioned key in the wooden door and push it open. The room is small, the furniture delicate. The bed is pure white. She walks to the large picture window, sees the view of the Tyrannian Sea, and gasps. In that silence, her gasp is volcanic.

The lock clicks behind me.

She beckons me to see the view with her. I like the way she feels against my side, the way she tucks herself into me. I place my arm around her waist, then around her slender back, and it finally comes to rest around her neck. I place the palm of my hand against her cheek and her head tilts against my life-line. The two of us gaze at the sea.

From out on the street, we hear music, a tune I know but can't immediately place. It's a haunting guitar strum, a young Italian man sings beautifully in English, singing words I once knew so well, words I once knew by heart. Then it comes to me: *Wicked Game*.

I used to sing out loud to that song in the dark early dawn as I drove my old Ford Escort from my home to the hospital for early morning rounds after I had married for the second time, and was then the father of not only Mark, by my first wife, but also of two little girls with Helen, my second wife.

I heard the album for the first time at one of those neighborhood step-parties: appetizers and cocktails at one house, cheeses and pates with champagne at the next, and so on. I had been refilling Helen's glass when the song came on. My eyes suddenly filled, catching me wildly off-guard. I topped Helen's glass off too quickly, the liquid splashing over the sides, sprinkling her new sandals. I had

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to get away, to be alone. I spent a long fifteen minutes in the guest bathroom of the house we were in, sitting on the edge of the toilet seat, my fingers dug into my eye sockets, feeling my wet cheeks.

I secretly bought the cassette soon after, a far cry from the rock and roll I had grown up on. I played it for months. Rewinding repeatedly.

*The world was on fire and no one could save me but you. It's strange what desire will make foolish people do. I never dreamed that I'd meet somebody like you. And I never dreamed that I'd lose somebody like you. No, I don't want to fall in love. What a wicked game to play, to make me feel this way. What a wicked thing to do, to let me dream of you. What a wicked thing to say, you never felt this way. What a wicked thing to do, to make me dream of you, and I want to fall in love. No, I want to fall in love. With you.*

When, finally, the song no longer made me cry, I tucked the cassette under my seat and never listened to it again. I was not then, nor am I now, a man who cries. Did I already know, way back then, in the early years of my second marriage, that, once again, I had selected incorrectly, haphazardly. It wasn't something I would let myself consider, not seriously, but I must have already felt I had missed the target I had long been aiming for.

Standing in this hotel room with Gabrielle, our first hotel room together, the lyrics immediately confuse me: telling me to turn away, to run, to stay close to what I already have with Helen and our daughters who are now fully into the teen years, and urging me forward, to reach for what I have yearned for, what I feel with shocking awareness, with Gabrielle.

I turn to Gabrielle and kiss her, deeply and fully.

Within seconds, I strip her free of all that she wears. Her toes are polished the color of plump pink tulips. Gabrielle moans as I make my way up her tanned thighs and find she has what I've read about in the fashion magazines my daughters leave lying on the kitchen counter, a Brazilian bikini wax. Women in Columbus, Ohio rarely wax, at least Helen rarely does, though I have tried subtly to encourage it. Seeing Gabrielle this bare, clean, open, willing, I feel

faint. All I want to do is bury my face in that pure, sea-soaked skin, her inner fleshy folds, find that pearl that once eluded me when I was young and green, eager but inexperienced.

The only good things to emerge from my first marriage were my son Mark and a thorough understanding of the mechanics of oral sex. She taught me to crave it and the better I got, the more I adored the power I had over her in that position. The way I almost still loved her when I was going down on her, how hard it made me each and every time.

With Gabrielle, it feels like I know every crease, every spot, her timing, as if we've done this endlessly, and I slowly settle in.

Okay, none of that's true. As Filan, my therapist, would say, I am romanticizing reality. I could argue with Filan right now, about this moment, that my dream of being in that Talamone hotel room with Gabrielle naked on the bed is not about my romanticizing reality at all. It's about the reality I actually want.

The only thing that is true is that Gabrielle sits across from me at a small square table in a Talamone café called Il Mare that has a large picture window open to the air and a view of the Tyrannian Sea. Walking up the steps from the cove, Gabrielle said if we were to eat lunch together then it couldn't be at a touristy place, not at one of the places recommended by the guidebook or our Italian biking shepherders.

"If we are to eat together, Cameron, it must be in real Talamone," she said. "I'm here for my own reasons, and I'm not interested in a place that has divided its menu half in Italian half in English. I have a need for reality, truth."

"Gabrielle," I said, "It's food, how much truer can food get?"

"It's not the food that must be true, it's the experience. Cafes with multi-lingual menus are never the real thing. You don't have to understand my reasoning, just respect my parameters." She smiles at me, softening the blow she knows she's just delivered.

I don't understand, either the experience she is hoping to have or the parameters I am to respect. But I desperately want to eat with her, sit across and see the emotions she thinks she's so good at

hiding play across that beautiful face, watch her sip at a glass, her lovely full lips wrapped around the glass ledge, drinking the water in small sips. I want to experience all of that. So perhaps watching her drink from a water glass, that is the true experience I need to have.

Gabrielle met me at the stairs leading up from the cove, dressed back in her biking shorts and shirt, her bikini stowed in her yellow bike bag, my own suit stowed in mine which I had slung across my shoulder, but she was still wearing her flip-flops, her biking shoes tied around her biking bag. Flip-flops make me crazy when I see my sixteen and eighteen year old daughters wearing them, but Gabrielle's were sexy, dotted with sparkling rocks.

All I kept thinking about as I walked up the stairs behind Gabrielle was fucking her. It's true. I just wanted to fuck her. Okay, not entirely true. I am using the word 'fuck' to keep at bay my feelings. I think if I say I want to fuck her, that ameliorates the feelings I already possess for her. Fucking her, the concept of fucking her, makes me feel I will be free of that encumbrance; though I think I want to be entwined to her forever.

So I find us Il Mare. It is past three when we sit down at the table. The hour in which everything usually closes in Italy, but for some reason Il Mare is still open. Gabrielle and I are the only ones in the place. The hostess pretends she isn't keeping the place open for us, that we aren't keeping the staff from their Italian long lunch. It makes me feel we are special.

Gabrielle looks at the menu and immediately puts it down.

"Do you know what you want?" I say.

"Yes," she says. "I don't see it on the menu, but I'm sure they can make it."

"Are you sure?" I ask.

I don't like having to make special requests of any kind, certainly not at an Italian restaurant that clearly wants to close but won't because of the American tourists who will be paying in dollars. We will be paying in dollars because I'll be paying with my American Express card, and I have been assured that I will get the best exchange rate of euros to dollars during my trip.

But still I am concerned. Why I am concerned is ridiculous. I make real money. I have real money socked away. I have real money socked away that Helen knows about, our money, and money she doesn't know about, and that account holds real money too.

So why am I suddenly concerned that Gabrielle wants to order off the menu. Is it that I will see the entry for this lunch on my credit card statement when I am back home, where I supposedly belong, and I will think back to this day, to having lunch with Gabrielle, and will wonder why I didn't take the actions I know I want to take. That I will have to review that bill sitting in my study, in the room that all the children, and Helen, too, know is off limits, the one place in my home where I can go to be alone.

I know that's what it is: that Gabrielle and I will part after this lunch and she will go on to experience this biking trip on her own, and I will experience it with my wife, and Gabrielle and I will never have another chance to be alone, and in a month or so from now all I will have of this afternoon, of she and I on a rock in the Tyrannian Sea, and this lunch, is a credit card receipt.

