

The reader will find much to ponder regarding the redemptive power of love and the equally powerful dark force of its absence. It is a rewarding, moving journey to that dark place of longing, where love's yearning-reach exceeds its grasp.

Fast Forward and Other Stories

By Delia De Santis

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***FAST
FORWARD***

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“*This?*” She raises the envelope up high with excitement. “It’s the letter he came to bring you.”

I have locked myself in the bathroom and I am sobbing. Eufemia is on the other side and she’s crying too, but for a different reason. She’s scared about me, and she won’t go away. She’s afraid I’ll do something crazy. I reach for a towel and make myself bite into a chunk of terry cloth, to choke my sobs down. And after a few minutes I finally reassure her that I’ll be all right. I tell her that slashing my wrists is the last thing on my mind.

“If that’s true, swear on it then. Please, Gina,” she begs.

“There’s no Bible in here,” I say, trying to make her laugh—and maybe myself too.

“Swear to anything... the toilet bowl... the sink. Just do it. Make a promise.”

“You never give up, do you? Okay, I promise. And now you promise me you’ll go to the store to buy a bottle of wine. I suddenly have a great big desire to get drunk tonight.”

“Whatever was in that letter really got you upset, didn’t it, Gina?”

I’d like to hit her over the head. And I will if she doesn’t stop it, if she doesn’t go away soon. “The wine,” I say, “Merlot.”

“I know... I know you don’t want to talk about it.”

“I didn’t say that, Eufemia. You’re just a pain in the butt. You need to learn to give people time, space... My God, the first day I met you, you even told me the spelling of your name, as if for some strange reason I was going to have to spell *Eufemia* the very next day.”

“Well, what about you?” she retorts. “You even told me the *number* of times your husband had cheated on you... But never mind our personalities... I’ll get two bottles instead of one, and I’ll join you.”

“Thank you. You’re a real friend. And I am not being sarcastic.”

“But you’ll have to come over to my place. I can’t hold *vino* the way you do. After two glasses, I won’t be able to find my way home.”

Home. That’s what I had once. A home. But Carlo wrecked it. He spoiled the sacred institution of our marriage... and now he wants the structure too, the mortar and the bricks.

Over my dead body.

Later that evening, after wending my way back from Eufemia’s house, feeling maudlin and not as drunk as I would have liked to be, I phone my mother. When her answering machine comes on, I hang up. But after a minute I dial again. I do that a few times, until the blessed woman answers.

“What’s so important?” she complains. “I had to come out of the tub. Do you know what time it is?”

“Midnight. And all the good women should be in bed.”

“I don’t know what that is supposed to mean, Gina. Have you been drinking?”

“Drinking, yes. But not drunk enough. Of that I can surely assure you. Surely *shirly*.”

“*Va bene*. What’s wrong then? *Che è successo?* Something is wrong. I can tell.”

“Mama,” I suddenly blurt out, “I want you to come back home.”

“And where is that?” she says quietly.

“You know where home is. Here in Canada. I want you to come back. I’ll take care of you...”

“I am not sick, Gina. And to your surprise, I may still have quite a few years of good health.”

“That’s the whole thing. Where are all the friggen’ mothers of the world—tell me that? They’re all down in Florida when you need them.”

“Okay, Gina. Spit it out. Why are you in such an emotional state?”

“I am not in an emotional state!”

She gives a deep sigh. “All right, I’ll come home. Obviously, it’s something serious. I’ll check on a flight tomorrow. I’ll come as soon as I can.”

“Forget it. I’ve changed my mind!”

“Okay, let’s put it this way then... what has he done this time—Carlo? And anyway, whatever he’s done shouldn’t matter anymore. The two of you are divorced. You should have your separate lives.”

“It’s never over, Mother. Guess what he’s up to now? The nerve of the man! He wants to buy the house back from me. He came around today... brought a written offer.”

“Uh,” she says calmly, “I hope it’s a good one. How much?”

“Seven hundred—thousand.”

“But the house isn’t worth that much, or is it?”

“No, Mother, don’t you see? He made me an offer I can’t refuse.”

“Well, accept it then.”

“I can’t. I won’t. It’s my house. *Mine*. I designed it. I picked out the tiles and the carpets, the cupboards, the counters; I sketched the fireplace mantle—everything. It’s all me in that house. I will not let him have it.”

“Take the offer, Gina. The house is too big a responsibility for you. I know the lease gives you a good income, but when that house starts needing a new roof, when things start going wrong with it—not just the money but the hassle... And what if when this lease is over, you can’t get another one right away? What then? You’ll have to pay taxes even on an empty house. How are you going to pay?”

“I’ll get a job.”

“A job, doing what? A part time Thanks-for-shopping-at-Kmart...? You will be in the poor house. I don’t know why you didn’t settle with cash. You’ve let pride put a big burden on your shoulders. But this is your chance to get out of it, so get out of it.”

Suddenly I feel really weary. The weight of what my mother is saying is starting to settle over me, and I feel as if I am about to be buried under rocks. I take a deep breath; I need to scramble free.

“Well, if I have to sell it, I will. But damn it, Mother, I’ll demand as much money as I want. I’ll get everything I can out of him. I am not going to let that tramp he’s going to marry benefit from anything that was mine.”

“The girl is with child, Gina. Let things go. And let Carlo have his child in peace.”

I dry sudden tears from my eyes and gulp the lump in my throat. “Yeah, but the bugger couldn’t get me pregnant once in twenty-seven years. And it wasn’t my fault!”

“Oh, Gina.”

“Yeah, and you can’t imagine how much I wanted that man’s child...”

I can’t believe I’ve said that—and to my mother of all people. The revelation leaves me with a strange feeling in my chest, as though I have been emptied by being turned upside down.

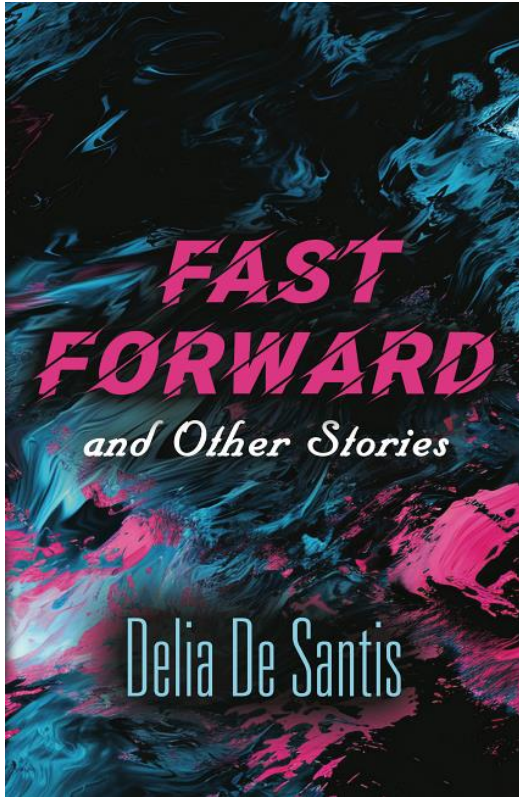
Mama is silent on the other end. She is silent for a long time. But when she speaks again, she’s still gentle. She says: “Gina, what are mothers for if not to be with their daughters...? You’re right. It’s about time I came to spend a winter at home.”

After Mama hangs up, I press the phone to my cheek, as if the instrument were the dearest of objects.

I have seen the boxes in Eufemia’s basement before, but this is the first time she has opened one to show me what’s inside.

“Hats?” I say, surprised. “For God’s sake.”

“Yes, hats.”



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