

The background of the cover is a photograph of a river scene, likely in Venice, Italy. In the foreground, the dark, rippling water of the river flows. On the right side, a long, multi-story building with many windows and balconies sits on a raised platform or embankment. To the left, a stone bridge with several arches spans the river. The sky is filled with heavy, grey, and white clouds, creating a dramatic and somewhat somber atmosphere.

Immortal Venus

A Novel

CYNTHIA ANN BALDINI



Megan Eston, distraught about her husband's infidelity, goes on a tour of Italy to gain perspective. With uncharacteristic impetuosity, she stays behind in Florence, where she becomes haunted by visions. Suspecting that she is the reincarnation of a Renaissance painter, she begins to develop her own artistic talent and becomes enmeshed in a 500-year-old mystery. She discovers a treasure and the origin of her marital problems, and finally understands what true love really means.

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“Stay here? Are you crazy?”

“Maybe.”

“What are you thinking? What’s John going to say? I know things are tough between you two, but running away isn’t going to help.”

“Coming to Italy was your idea.”

“For two weeks, Megan, not forever!”

I cringe as heads turn our way. “Shhhh!”

“You can’t stay.”

“I’m going to.”

I feel an unfamiliar weight in the back of my skull. Stubbornness, I think. This is what stubbornness feels like, and even though Rhonda’s pained expression makes me feel like a deserter, I know I won’t change my mind.

She’s shaking her head. “Megan, I know it’s nice here; I like it, too. But you haven’t seen the rest of Italy. You’ll miss Venice ... the gondolas, the canals. If we all just stayed in the first place we liked, I’d still be in Rome.”

“I’m sorry. Thank you for asking me to come. You’ve always been a good friend. But I have to stay.”

“Why?”

“I can’t explain. I don’t know why. I just can’t leave.”

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Chapter Four

I know immediately this is the wrong street because there are no cars parked in the usual hodgepodge. The only other pedestrian, a monk, disappears around the corner a block ahead of me, his brown cloak flapping in a sudden burst of wind.

Shivering, I move under the wide overhang of rooftops, hoping my street is just ahead, not understanding how it could turn so cold in Italy in the middle of summer. I look for someone who might speak English, but there is no one else and no shops, only the blank façades of medieval *palazzi* with their massive doors and their barred, shuttered windows.

And then something shifts; the scene's perspective changes and the sidewalk is subtly askew. The buildings begin sliding by at a speed that seems too fast for my pace, as if I'm traveling on that moving sidewalk in the airport, and the pain in my knee has disappeared. I want to wonder why, but can't seem to focus my mind.

My disorientation grows as my surroundings take on surreal clarity. Each irregularly shaped stone in the pavement stands out in perfect detail. Fat droplets of rain bead on them, quivering. A lone sapling a block away sways; thin red veins on its fluttering yellow leaves stand out with impossible precision.

I reach up instinctively and fumble when my hand doesn't find my eyeglasses. I'm not wearing them.

"But I always—When did I ...?"

Suddenly, I recognize the door in front of me.

Here I am.

In my mind a weak voice says, "This isn't my pensione," but just then the rain begins in earnest, and a more compelling thought tells me I'll find a nice fire inside. I feel myself anticipating the warmth of it; see in my mind's eye blazing logs and glowing embers against gray stone.

I reach for the door. As the latch clicks, I notice my hand—

Wide splayed fingertips and broad knuckles.

Shock stops me abruptly. It isn't my hand!

I drop the hand from the door handle, shrink away, and stumble off the step. My arms flail, but somehow the walking stick keeps me from falling, and I spin around, and flee. Water splashes my ankles as my feet slap the pavement and heavy rain pounds me, instantly soaking my clothes. Cringing from the sudden onslaught, I turn the corner and bounce hard into a short, stout woman.

The woman screams and her string bag flies into the air, spilling potatoes and bundles wrapped in newspaper.

I begin stuttering apologies, but then gasp and stare in bewilderment.

Two teenage girls sitting on steps stare back at me. Knots of pedestrians move in all directions, threading their way around me and the crouching woman.

"*Porca miseria, ma che stupida!*" the woman grumbles, glaring up at me as she rolls potatoes together on the sidewalk.

I stand open-mouthed without offering to help.

The sidewalk is dry.

I stagger, and the girls snicker. One of them leans forward saying, "*Troppo vino, eh?* Too much wine?"

I bend over, resting my hands on my knees, and take a deep breath. Then I stand back up, lift trembling hands to my face, and bump the frame of my eyeglasses.

My glasses! I have them. Where were they?

I take them off and look down at the woman, still stuffing packages back into her bag. Her head is a fuzzy mass of gray.

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I replace the eyeglasses, and her neatly coiled chignon comes into focus.

I lower my hand and force myself to look at it.

My hand. It's mine.

I look again at the dusty sidewalk where the potatoes have fallen.

Dry.

I feel the legs of my jeans.

Dry.

In utter disbelief, I stare at the woman as she retrieves her last crisp packet of newspaper, and then at the shop window where our reflections are framed by blue sky.

I stagger to the curb and lean against the scorching roof of a parked car. When I've composed myself, I turn back to find the woman gone and the girls puffing on cigarettes, giggling behind a magazine. I see my walking stick on the sidewalk and I pick it up, raise it across my body defensively, take a hesitant step to the corner, and peek around the edge of the building.

The barren, wet street has vanished.

In this street people stroll in brilliant sunshine. A green grocery halfway down the block obstructs the sidewalk with crates of fruit and the woman I ran into is there, talking and waving her arms emphatically.

I pull back, frown, and look around the corner again.

The scene is still normal. There are cars in the road and people on the sidewalks.

I glance up at the street sign engraved on a plaque on the corner building. *Via del Porcellana* it says, and under that in smaller letters, *Già Via Nuova*. I step backwards to look up at the plaque on the façade above me. *Via della Scala*.

My street!

Limping, I make my way to my pensione. As I climb the stairs to my room I'm almost glad to feel the familiar pain. At least it's mine, I think ... in my knee.

I shut the door and bolt it, sit on the side of the bed, and shudder. What just happened? Am losing my mind?

I take several deep breaths and become aware of a faint scent ... the leaf. I look on the bedside table, but the leaf is gone.

There. On the floor.

I bend over to retrieve the leaf, now dry and brittle, and hold it to my nose. Its faint scent brings a picture to my mind, a reminder of the countryside where I picked it.

I want to go back there. Now!

I frantically retrieve the note I'd scribbled and find the phone number for Villa Bella. Using the pensione's phone, I call, and Donatella confirms that a room has become available. I arrange to go back in the morning.

"We will expect you for lunch," she says. "Are you taking the *Sita* again?"

"Yes. Can you tell me how to do that? Do I get it at the same place."

"Sì, at the station. It's the bus for Figline-San Donato. I don't know at what time. Tell the driver you want to get off just before Troghi, at Biglio di Corti."

I ask her how to spell those names and write them down. "Thank you. Thanks a lot. I'll see you tomorrow."

The bus arrives soon after I reach the station. I show the address on my slip of paper to the driver; he nods and alerts me when it's time to get off. I can see Villa Bella on the hillside in the distance. The uphill climb is strenuous and I'm breathing hard long before I reach the house.

Villa Bella is peaceful and still. The green Fiat parked in front is dusted with pollen, and a gray kitten, one ear twitching in my direction, crouches in a cluster of miniature daisies. Donatella welcomes me warmly, introduces her mother, Ornelia, and gives me the same room as before. I'm the only guest here now, so we eat together on the terrace.

"It's so beautiful here," I say to Ornelia. "Is this your family home?"

"My mother speaks little English," Donatella says. "I will translate." She translates both my question and Ornelia's response. "She was born here and so was her father—my grandfather. So was I," Donatella adds. Then, with what seems to me to be a touch of defiance, she says, "But I hope to visit other countries and see more of the world."

"This is my first trip abroad," I say, nodding to indicate solidarity, to signify that I'm not as world-traveled as one might assume of someone visiting from so far away.

Donatella and Ornelia disappear into the house, but soon Donatella reappears with a pot of fresh coffee, and her mother follows carrying a tray with cups, a sugar bowl, and a small pitcher of cream.

I take the cup Donatella offers, inhale the aroma rising from it, and sip.

"This is perfect," I say.

I take another sip and look around.

The terrace is edged by a low wall on which sit huge terracotta vases filled with geraniums, whose brilliant red blossoms stand out with vibrant intensity against a dark hedge. Beyond the terrace white petunias spill from urns scattered throughout the garden, and small silvery trees shimmer down the slope, rising up again toward a distant castle on the other side of the valley. The sky is clear, and details stand out sharply, almost magnified.

I feel pierced, as if the beauty of the day were a weapon that slices directly into my solar plexus. My inner pain intensifies and transforms into a pulsating throb of unfocused urgency.

The women seem to realize that I need time alone. Donatella tells me that I'm free to walk anywhere around there, but when she mentions that they usually take a nap after lunch I decide to follow their example, and with ease

Cynthia Ann Baldini

born of one who habitually represses issues she doesn't want to deal with, I try to forget what happened in Florence.



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