

Bravo, Scrittore!

“*Scrittore?*” said the brown-haired girl at the desk of the *pensione* in Naples, with a trill of joy in her voice.

“Bravo!” she sang, the first syllable sliding down the scale, the second a note that bounced at the bottom of the run.

“Bravo!” she sang again, beginning the chord on a little higher note. Her large brown eyes looked at me with adoration.

“Romanza?” she asked hopefully, eagerly.

“Si,” I admitted, “anche romanze.”

Yes, novels too, is what I meant to say. Why “too”? As though to say that my fiction was less important than my other writing. Clearly, here, at this moment, with this girl, that wasn’t true. And it wasn’t true for me either. It was just that, living in the States, I had become accustomed to being embarrassed to admit that I did something for art and not for any practical purpose such as earning money. Perhaps in Naples it would be more embarrassing to admit that you did something for any reason other than art, or honor, or *amore*, which are pretty much the same thing.

I hadn’t yet assembled enough pieces of Italian to explain any of this, but it was hardly necessary. The fact that I was a *scrittore* in a language foreign to her seemed to make me especially fascinating, as an object to be admired if not as a conversation companion. I did manage to ask her, in something close enough to Italian for her to understand me, if she was a student, and yes, she was. Of literature, of course. I think what she said was that her field was comparative literature, including Italian, French and Spanish.

My wife’s suitcase had burst open, pulling its zipper from the stout canvas, and the girl was helpfully expressing grief and fluttering her hands. The only other staff person present in the *pensione*, a young woman in the white uniform of a chambermaid, thought that a shoe repairman might be able to fix it.

At that suggestion the comp. lit. co-ed sprang to a little cabinet where she found a business directory, announcing she would find a *calzolaio*. Humming to herself to keep her concentration, she batted the pages randomly. She seemed unsure where to find “c” in the alphabet. After a few minutes with no success she looked up and smiled. It didn’t matter, she said cheerfully, because there was no point in calling because stores didn’t open until ten a.m., which was still two hours away.

There! Problem solved. Or rather, dissolved, because if there is no solution possible, why, then what we have is not a problem. It is simply an irremediable situation. God’s will. We just live with a broken suitcase.

She didn’t actually say such words, and I wouldn’t have understood them if she had, but something like that is surely what she thought. That things may have no solution and must simply be tolerated is a common point of view in Southern Italy. Irksome to certain foreigners, perhaps, but then I realized that I had been paying a high psychological price for my American pragmatism. It had made me embarrassed to be an artist.

No matter. What, after all, is a broken suitcase? She had said “Bravo, scrittore!” That was enough.