

Fanny & Medusa

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*"The frozen hand of death shall set its seal,
Yet fear, the curse, though hating the disease,
The one is man that shall hereafter be;
The other, man as vice has made him now."*

From Queen Mab
(Percy Bysshe Shelly)

Francis Goldsmith was piss'd off. She had been working for the advertising firm in London for seven years now, & she couldn't remember the last time she had a holiday. The people who worked at her firm in London's West End were, if the truth be told, pretentious wankers, despite several of them being accounted among her best friends. She spent so much time with them, in fact, from work to after work drinks to weekend socialite parties, that she was slowly turning into a pretentious wanker herself.

She knew she would be going to Italy. When she was young her father had taken her & her sisters there every summer, from Florence to Rome & just about everywhere else in that wonderful, sun-soaked country. He had been an artist, but the untimely death of her mother meant he had little time to indulge in his passion, & found himself caught up in the London rat-race. However, he would always put aside a couple of weeks each year to go to Italy & paint. In her own way she was emulating him - but she wouldnt be painting, god forbid, she was absolutely terrible at it. But she would be there for the food, the scenery, & above all the *tranquility*. There was only one choice - Scopello. It had been twenty years since she had been there last, but the memories of the place still fluttered thro her dreams. For her it was just about

as far away from London as possible, at the western tip of Sicily, closer to the shores of Africa than the Italian mainland.

"How long are you going for?" asked her friends at the obligatory leaver's drinks in Soho. They used the same bar for any 'formal' occasion. In fact, they used it for *any* occasion. Before answering Francis looked around at the place; neo-nineties decor & comfy sofas, the social trappings of those who had supposedly made it.

"I have bought a one way-ticket."

"O we are so envious," replied her friends.

As she flew at 25,000 feet she was half-tempted to flush her mobile-phone out of the toilet. She was prevented at the last minute of doing this by the thought of it possibly landing on some poor Frenchman's head, or the fact that she might need it an emergency.

Following the formalities at Palermo airport, she caught a westerly train that was soon rounding the Golfo di Castellamare, a spectacular mountain fringed bay where the tyhrannean sea was a deep & brilliant azure blue. There, in the hazy heat, the first thing she wanted to do was swim in its cool depths, losing herself on the gentle sway of that watery mass.

The train from Palermo dropped her & her italian phrase book off at Castellamare. Back in the fifties men with lowered hats had hung round the town, rifles poised under long overcoats as they smoked strong tobbaeco and cussed in heated voices in the afternoons haze, waiting for the local mafiosa to creep out of the splintering woodwork in a splattering of ricocheting bullets. In those days living in Castellamare was like playing Russian roulette - for every

three families, at least two would have the men in prison or dead. But now it was your typical Italian town, young immaculately-dressed men buzzing around on mopeds while old women did their shopping.

She eventually managed to flag down a taxi, the gruff-looking driver, a man in his late forties, speaking thro all of their ten kilometre journey. She had only understood about two percent of what he had said, but encouraged his monologue - after all he did have a beautiful voice - with the occasional 'si' & nod of her head. After dropping her off at the charming hamlet of Scopello, she left her bags in a bar & wandered around a little, the scenes from her youth being replayed in her mind. On returning to the bar she found a man was sat at a table drinking a beer, someone she instantly recognized.

"Dino!" she shouted. It had been twenty years, but the face was recognizable. He stood up, thought a moment, then opened his arms in greeting.

"Francis!" his voice melted her heart at once. During that memorable summer, as her father painted & her elder sisters sunbathed, they had been inseperable play-mates. They embraced with the fervour of long-lost friends re-united at last.

"What are you doing here?" he asked in his suave Italian accent.

"I though I would come for a holiday," she replied.

"That is wonderful - where are you staying?"

"I don't know yet, I was going to look at the hotels.

"Nonsense, I have three apartments that I rent out - you can have the best one gratis... come I will show you," & with a beaming smile had picked up her bags & began to lead her through the little, idyllic streets of Scoppello. As she followed she took stock. Twenty years ago she had been just on the verge of puberty, & him a fully blown teenager - but now she had overtaken him in the height stakes by a couple of

inches. He was a few years older than her, & when she had been ten & him thirteen his lithe, dark body and beaming smile had somehow made him timeless. But here he was now, approaching middle-age, the gruelling farmwork etched into his deeply tanned cheeks. Yet his smile was still as big as she remembered; very large indeed & proportionally out of place with the rest of the fellow. She actually find him rather cute - she had always had a thing for shorter men, & wondered if what her friends back home had said about men with big noses was also true for men with big smiles. Dino led her to a lovely apartment perched at the end of a quiet terrace with a view of the sea & a feeling of absolute serenity. He had also invited her to his farm a couple of kilometres out of town, nestling beneath a mountain, for dinner.

"Will your wife mind cooking," she asked.

"I am not married," he replied, a fiery spark gliding across his eyeball, "But I am an excellent cook!"

Francis found it hard to contain a flirtatious glance.

Half an hour later she was stood on a little wave-washed hill above the beach - but this was no ordinary ordinary 'spaggio.' The searing Sicilian sun beat down on the pumice rockface and the pungent aroma of wild thyme intoxicating the morning heat. Fanny scrambled down the worn path between spiked bushes, her bare feet clinging to each jagged rock with the nimble step of a mountain goat. The sand was a myriad of tiny white pebbles, as different as snowflakes, & the sea was totally crystalline, revealing the rocky formations under the waves almost as if they were above them. The beach was part of a little cove, where rocky islands jutted up out of the water & a little tower watched over the scene - & she was the only one there.

'What a relief,' she thought as she slipped on her costume. Her figure wasn't that bad, but a semi-alcoholic & definitely-

chocaholic lifestyle, plus the fact she used her gym card about once every month - & that was only to use the jacuzzi - meant her figure was positively plumpy. But paranoia is paranoia & before she left the cover of the rocky formation that had served as her changing rooms, she looked again around the cove, but there was no one in sight. This was the cue for her to step toward the inviting waves. At the waterside she meticulously took off her newly acquired Mediterranean frock and stepped into the breaking waves. But this was Sicily, not Southend, & the summer sun had warmed up the water so much that it seemed to entice her in. The water was delicious, sliding up her legs as she knelt down beneath the surface, one moment suspended in weightlessness and peace, then with a delicate spread of her arms the first of several breaststrokes cast her forwards.

Her memories drifted back to childhood days and Dino. They would meet each day by the burnt out cypress tree and scramble along the coast, exploring the wonderful coves of Scopello. This one she remembered in particular & they would come here most days like secret lovers defying authority. She remember'd him laughing as he tore off his worn shirt, tied his home-made bamboo harpoon around his waist and lunged into the cool nectar of the ocean hunting for swordfish, the glittering prize. The local fishermen cursed them as some foul pest for they would catch in their nets, and then stealthily slice their way out, shredding the ropes that once held them. The only way to catch them was with a harpoon, by hand, face-to-face with the aquatic sword of a warrior. But worth the duel, as their huge bulk fetched a handsome price at the market and their flesh was tender as a baby`s bum. Dino used to swim far ahead, ducking beneath the waves for long periods of time before surfacing with a splash, his dark hair streaked across his beaming smile. He was the hunter, fearless and bouyant. He was the

one who usually made the kill, if any, yet he always shared the profit. They would often struggle back to town, lugging some slippery heavy fish between them, & he would marvel at how well they had done. *They*, never him.

Not long after her birth her mother had called her Francis, after Francis of Assisi, she had loved animals & had conceived her new-born baby in Poppi, just a few miles from the monastery where he lived one sultry summers night in the seventies. Francis had inherited her mother's fondness for animals, but not all, not all of them at all. She had seen the one thing that could completely shatter her serendipity, the tiny, transparent form of a jellyfish had just floated past her. 'La medusa' the Sicilians call them and rightly so, with their locks of limbs waving weightlessly through the water, floating gentle as a butterfly with the sting of some cruel bee. Francis flapped her arms and treaded backwards, then consumed again by the demon fear flailed and flapped like a drowning cat, and in a frothing splash, clambered and clawed her feet across the shingle, dragging herself onto land. She gasped for breath to calm her thundering heart and even in the morning sun a scathing chill bit through her to the core. A tiny tear of relief and embarrassment trickled down her cheek.

Now the jellyfish had been one of the psychological banes of her life. It all stemmed from some moment in her childhood, when after being told a bed-time story by her mother concerning the great Kraken of the deep, dragging down entire ships to their doom. The nightmares she had had that night, of tentacles & drowning, were so vivid that they were still painted in her mind as though done so by a master painter. Ever since, her darkest moments contained all things 'tentacle-y,' & now here she was, a few feet away from one, bobbing mindlessly on the tide. Panic gripped her as she realised just how close she had been to actually

touching one. She knew it was all perhaps a bit silly, nothing that a good harley street shrink couldn't cure, but they were expensive, & living in the city the nearest thing she got to tentacles was when a friend ordered squid in a restaurant. She was now faced with a terrible dilemma. This swim, this swim in particular, had been one of the drives that got her out of London in the first place. To be gliding through the gentle waters while her work colleagues were sat at their computers - she just had to have this swim.

'And it is such a silly phobia,' she reasoned with herself, '& the wee creature was so small, & on its own, & you are now thirty-two years old.... surely.'

She flashed back to a similar moment twenty years ago, when she had thought she had seen a shark - which turned out to be a piece of driftwood.

"Dai! Dai!" Dino had called back from the waters. Dai meant 'come on!' in Italian & once again she heard his voice, surging forth from her memory vaults, urging her back into the water.

"Dai! Dai!"

Her mind was made up, if she wasn't to conquer her fear now, when the swimming of her entire holiday depended on it, she would never do it. She breathed with a cold calm, like a newborn hunter, fully conscious of her latent power. With a determined look on her face she returned to the waters, this time with a slight trot, & *dived* in! The water lunged up to meet her like the embrace of a long lost friend and she effortlessly dove down into the previously unknown depths below. She felt like a mermaid in a glorious aquarium. Wondrous colours reared up to meet her, saffron rocks glittered like gold and the webs of seaweed danced in the swell. A shoal of silver sardines darted in front of her and she followed them with the dexterity of a dolphin. A moment of heavenly peace and unity filled her, stretching back from eternity, and on the echoes of the waves she thought she

heard an angel softly cry..."Francissss..."

She calmly rose & as she surfaced into the bright Sicilian sunshine it was as though she was some resurrected messiah newly arrived in heaven, the dark demons in the corner of her mind banished forever. She began to swim again, soft strokes easing her thro the crystal waters. Then the jellyfish she had seen earlier, well she summised it was the same one, they all look'd very much the same after all, drifted closer to her. She held her breath as it passed her by, at a distance of about one foot, & waited, confronting her phobia. What was this beast that consumed her? Was it her saviour or her curse? Fear of the unknown crippled her, & even of the known. For all the talk she`d heard of those stinging whips of medusas hair, she had never in all her years in the water been stung. Why then did she spend all her life running. Fear was nothing she concluded in her fragile mind. She stood up to her full tiny height and faced the demon within her, positivly shunned it. Denied that part of her nature that she did not want, excavated it from her heart like some fossil remains....

Nothing happened. No sudden thrusting out of its stinging tentacles that paralyzed her so she could be drowned & safely eaten at the bottom of the sea. No, nothing of the sort. She was safe, & what's more, she felt safe! Glowing in elation she began to swim again, a little further out this time, admiring the cove behind her from time to time. Her thoughts drifted to Dino & to the coming evening, of whether to wear the tight blue skirt or the flowery dress, on whether he still had that old pony they used to ride, of whether he was good in bed!

Out in the bay a cluster of grey-red rock thrust out of the water like a stony-fingered hand, & she swam toward it,

completely oblivious to what was happening around her. She had noticed a couple more of the medusa, but in the warm glow of her epiphany she felt almost friendship toward them. Above, the sun was still shining brightly, so bright in fact that it burned, then stung, then scalded like boiling water over her shoulders, a searing injection of white heat, like that of a nettle, only stronger & more sickly-sweet. She looked around in the water to see not one, but many pulsing medusa congregating in a surreal subaquatic community, like phantoms drifting through the night sky.

'This cannot be happening!" she thought. They had not been there seconds earlier, but somehow, now, there were at least a hundred & the numbers growing all the time, on all sides. Now the sea itself was turning white, one huge fleshy, congealing mass of lard-like flesh

'I must get back to shore!'

Every fibre of her being was shaking in horror - & it seem'd as they did so the jellyfish could smell her fear. She began to swim toward the beach, scything through the medusa as fast as she could, one after the other brushing against her tingling skin, until, perhaps alarmed by her phrenzied splashing, or out of something evil in the see-through cores, they began to attack! Tangled tentacles lashed her back, singing flesh to bone. She lunged forward but they were all around, stinging her bare legs and flashing across her face like lightning.

'I must go deeper,' she thought, her body burning like neon, 'I must go deeper...'

Her body was washed up the next day, & the doctors at Castellamare found it to have two thousand stings on it. *'Tourist killed by Jellyfish,'* ran the headlines, both in the local press & the national newspapers at home. Following the death of Steve Irwin, who had had his heart pierced by a

stingray dart, deaths by marine creatures were very much in vogue. It was the biggest news for weeks back at the Advertisement agency where Francis had once worked. "I cannot think why would she go swimming in jellyfish-infested waters," said one of her colleagues in the Soho bar, finishing off the article in that days Guardian, "She so hated anything with tentacles!"

THE END