

The seventh annual short story competition

The Mogford Prize
for Food & Drink Writing 2019

‘The Last Night at the Palazzo’

by John Simpson

Short List Runner Up

The judges for 2019...
Julian Barnes & Tim Hayward



‘The Last Night at the Palazzo’

You don't want to know the sordid details of why I've got to leave this place tomorrow, but the basic fact is that twenty years ago I converted the palazzo into a five-star hotel and now I've simply run out of cash. It's been in my family for eight hundred years. But there are so many better-run places along the coast here at Amalfi, and most people prefer good plumbing to glamorous history. A big international chain takes over at 11 a.m. tomorrow morning, and the money it's paying me will settle my debts. Well, some of them, anyway.

So, I'll be the first Marchese in the family to be forced out of the house since the high Middle Ages. That's why I'm writing this, I suppose: it's my way of trying to deal with it. I've been sitting here for hours in my private quarters, staring out over the sea and trying to come to terms with it all.

We're technically still open for one last night, so there are just a few hotel staff left. Half an hour ago Giuseppe, my ancient head waiter, knocked nervously at the door.

‘There’s a guest, Marchese. She wants to have dinner and stay the night.’

‘Well, give her Vittoria Carambona.’

The best set of rooms in the house. After all, why not? We’ve lost money for years; offering up our finest suite for the price of a single won’t be noticed.

‘Yes, Marchese. You should come and see her, Marchese. She’s worth a look.’

Poor old Giuseppe, hobbling away on the sides of his shiny little shoes. Still, he’s saved up twenty years of tips: he’ll be all right.

I suppose I’d better go and inspect the very last guest that the Palazzo will entertain in my family’s history. I’ll come back to this letter afterwards.

She wasn’t just worth a look, she was a vision: tall, willowy, blonde, and dressed in lapis lazuli blue.

‘I’m so sorry to inconvenience you,’ was all she said. I detected the faintest scent of jasmine.

Perhaps I should tell you that my wife died five years ago. I’ve had plenty of short relationships since then, but nothing worth remembering. So I’m vulnerable, you see.

And I could tell she liked the look of me. I may not have been much of a success, but I am most people’s idea of an Italian Marchese: tallish, reasonably well dressed in the English style, and I’ve managed to keep the weight off. Marcello Mastroianni would have played me to perfection.

I coughed. Even after fifty-five years of complex social

existence, a woman’s attractiveness can make me feel awkward.

‘Would you like dinner?’

She would. Which was awkward, since I’d let the chef go that afternoon. Still, I’ve cooked all my life: I’d prepare her meal myself, and the others would help me.

She went to the Carambona suite.

‘Such a woman, Marchese.’

‘Yes, well, we’d better bustle around, you and I. Go and see what we’ve got, so I can make something out of it.’

We have our own cuisine here on the Amalfi coast, but I learned to cook in Naples, at our city house. Naples was founded by the ancient Greeks and is older than Rome, so it has one of the oldest food traditions in Europe. And of course, it was occupied and influenced by the Spanish and the French in its time. Thank God the English didn’t succeed in taking it over.

‘Bad news, Marchese. Giorgio has used up most of our supplies.’

‘Meat? Fish?’

‘Just one spigola. The boy brought it back this morning and I was planning to cook it for you tonight.’

Spigola is sea-bass. Most of the restaurants along the Amalfi coast get theirs from fish-farms nowadays, but I’ve always insisted on using proper wild fish from the sea, so I’ve sent in one of the young chaps from the kitchen to the old part of Naples, by the harbour, to buy them from the fishermen at five in the morning. Maybe if I hadn’t done this kind of thing,

I would have gone bankrupt a little later than I have.

‘Pasta?’

‘Yes, plenty of ziti, in particular.’

Ziti are one of my favourite types, long, darkish yellow tubes that some of the local women specialise in pulling and rolling out and tearing off by hand.

‘We must have lots of other things as well.’

The old boy scratched his bald head and thought. I knew that look in his mild greenish watery eyes so well. Did I tell you his great-grandfather had come to our house as an orphan?

‘Some zucchini, some peperonchini and five whole jars of Gaeta olives, Marchese.’

‘Cheese?’

‘Ah, yes, we’ve got some lovely caciotella fresca from the village. And there’s something else, Marchese.’

I looked up.

‘Chef’s wife made a sfogliatella Santa Rosa for you as a going-away present.’

Calling sfogliatella a cake is like calling the Amalfi coast the seaside. It is – but it’s also probably the finest confection of its kind in existence.

I grunted.

What else? Our wine-cellar, I knew, was still pretty well stocked: another thing I’d spent unnecessary amounts of money on. My family wines were separate, and I’d smuggled them out already, in case the unlovable French company I’d sold the hotel to tried to say it had purchased them with the house. It had already announced it was changing the hotel’s

name.

‘All right, we can do it,’ I declared. It felt like staking everything on a poker hand. ‘Tell the lady she can dine at eight o’clock on the terrace.’

That gave me three hours. There was a tough, clever young woman in the kitchen who had stayed, for some reason: she probably wanted to loot the place before she left. If so, good luck to her. Apart from our wine, which I’d sold separately, I was leaving everything behind – all the family portraits, all the landscapes, all the silver, all the furniture. Some of it dated back to the thirteenth century. So, it didn’t exactly matter to me if she wanted to take a few pots and pans and set up her own little trattoria somewhere.

‘Claudia,’ I called.

‘Si, Marchese.’ She stood up quickly, looking guilty.

‘I’m going to need your help. One last dinner, for our final guest. A lady. I’ll do some of the cooking, but I’ll need you to grill the spigola. I want you to do it as though it’s the last and best thing you’ll ever cook in your life. Understood?’

‘Si, Marchese.’ Her eyes glittered.

‘Everything simple, everything local, everything of the finest. It’s the last dinner the Palazzo D’Avalos will ever produce. Tomorrow this place will cease to exist.’

I’d thought she was excited, but I realised now, as her eyes moistened, that what was moving her was the death of our house and our dynasty. Well, well.

‘Good girl,’ I said. Not politically correct, of course, but what can you do? She didn’t seem to mind.

I had it all planned out. I'd prepare the pasta and the vegetables myself, Claudia could grill the sea-bass, Giuseppe would wait at table. And all this would mean that I could sit and dine in some style with the final guest the house of D'Avalos would ever entertain.

Now, though, I had to get to work. I took off my jacket, the one I'd bought at great expense in London, and put on the chef's big apron. I salted the water in the great copper saucepan with unusual care, and when it was just bubbling brightly, I fed in the long pipes of ziti which I'd broken up by hand. Nowadays most pasta is factory-made, but ours is still produced by hand in Gragnano, a small village up in the mountains. The locals like to say you can taste the thyme in it, but maybe my palate isn't good enough to tell.

Making sure that pasta is cooked properly *al dente* is an art in itself. You can keep testing it, of course, but the danger is that by the time it seems right to you, it'll be just too late for the rest of the pan-full. I always do it by timing, naturally – depending on the heat of the stove it's usually around four minutes after the final strand goes in – but also by the look of it. The instant it takes on the colour of decent well-salted butter, you must take the pan off the stove and get the pasta out of the water as fast as possible. Forgive me if I get a bit worked up: pasta that isn't *al dente* has no reason to exist, and should be destroyed.

Before cooking the ziti, I turned my attention to the zucchini. I selected the largest flowers, dressed them in vinegar, not Balsamic which I have never liked, and my finest

cold-pressed oil, and set them on to fry. Since I was cooking them in my favourite way, *alla scapece*, I added in some fresh mint, finely chopped. The act of cutting up the mint leaves seemed particularly therapeutic: maybe I felt I had my crooked Neapolitan bank manager on the chopping block. After that, keeping my eye very firmly on the colour of the ziti, I took the risk of preparing the little green peppers we grow around here, *peperoncini verdi*: harder and harder to find in these days of big, industrially grown red and yellow ones.

Before I'd finished, instinct rather than strict observation told me the critical moment for the ziti had arrived. I poured them out and permitted myself a quick test. They resisted my teeth to precisely the perfect degree, which made me yell with savage joy.

'Everything all right, Marchese?' The poor girl must have thought I'd poured boiling water over myself.

'Yes. I am imbued with the joy of doing something – something -- in my life with precision and daring,' I said grandly. 'And success.'

'Ah.' She turned back to the sea-bass.

I know I've gone on a bit about the pasta, so I'll spare you too much more cooking detail. It's life to me, but I understand that for most people it's a bit boring. They don't care how it gets to the plate, they just want to eat.

At seven-fifty, showered and shaved, I was waiting on the terrace. I know it's corny, but I'd put on evening clothes. Who knew when I'd be able to wear them again? Ten minutes later she appeared, and made me feel really glad I'd worn

my dinner-jacket. I'm not very good on women's clothes, but this sheath of silver-grey she was wearing, with a necklace of green stones which may or may not have been emeralds showed she wanted to make an impact.

'I don't think I introduced myself.'

'No, but the staff told me who you are. May I call you Beatrice-Joanna?'

She smiled a smile I could feel in the toes of my patent leather shoes.

'Bea, please.' Her low voice added to the intensity of my attraction.

Giuseppe came shuffling out in his best white coat, his bald head gleaming, and shepherded her professionally to her chair. He'd set the table magnificently: I recognised some of the D'Avalos silver. The old place was going out in style. There was even a new moon over the sea.

I told her what we were going to eat, but I don't think she listened. Still, the ziti were magnificent, if I say so myself, and the vongole set off the al dente texture beautifully. We sipped one of my best whites, a Falanghina from a mountain village not far away. She listened, her fine eyes shining, to my story of the Normans who built the original house here, and what the D'Avalos brothers did in the Fourth Crusade. I zhushed it up quite a lot, of course. She scarcely seemed to notice the sea-bass, which was curled up at the edges like gold leaf, but I knew it was magnificent. With it we drank Lacryma Christi from the slopes of Vesuvius.

She turned down the sfogliatella Santa Rosa, which meant I

couldn't have any either. But I was so enraptured by her that I wouldn't have cared about it anyway.

And then she started to tell me about her life. She was, it seemed, part American and part Argentinian. Success, happiness, failure, tragedy, survival; her life had followed the kind of parabola my Norman ancestors would have understood. She was rich and divorced: if she had come into my life six months earlier, everything would have been entirely different. We were talking now with the intimacy of lovers who'd been together for years, and I knew we would take this further. Maybe my last night at the Palazzo wasn't the end, after all.

We drank a glass of Nocello. She winced at the taste but had a second one afterwards.

'This has been one of the loveliest evenings of my life, Enrico. Thank you. Now I'm going up to that beautiful suite you've given me. Would you... would you join me in, say, an hour?'

I spent the time thanking Claudia and Giuseppe, and putting up with the old boy's rapture about Beatrice-Joanna's beauty and charm.

'This is the kind of woman you should marry, Marchese. She must be rich, too.'

'Yes, well, thank you Giuseppe. I always know where I should come for advice about my life. Now it's time to go home. And thank you, old friend, for this and for everything.'

I heard my voice cracking a little as I said it.

Before I went upstairs, I opened another bottle of Pol

Roger. The fine, rich flavour and the dark gold colour suited the occasion. I looked up at the magnificent old stone house, where my Norman ancestors had settled in 1229, and allowed myself to think for the first time that there might after all be a future for me after the Palazzo D'Avalos. Then I turned away from the sea and went indoors.

It'll only take a moment to describe what happened after that.

There was no answer when I tapped gently at the door of the Corombona suite, so I walked in. She lay there on the bed in her gorgeous silver gown. Her eyes were shut.

'I hope you don't mind my coming in,' I said quietly.

No answer.

A piece of paper lay on the bed beside her.

'I'm so sorry. I've taken a pill that my brother gave me. He's a doctor. He said it would act very fast. I'd be dead within six months anyway, but this way I can go at a time of my own choosing. And you made my last hours the finest and most romantic of my life. Thank you, my dear friend. Please don't forget me.'

I let it drop down beside her. Then I rang down for Giuseppe.