

# Summer at a snail's pace. Days unbearably long,

twilight positively nauseating, sun setting never setting, light teasing darkness, light dissolving into darkness, hues of pink and orange changing to crimson and purple, memories of God the painter filling her canvas with sights just like this, then painting over them to start again from scratch, tabula rasa, clean slate, God eternally creative, God never repeating herself, the poem she had learnt at the nuns' college, the small man reading it aloud in class in his singsong metallic monotone, beady eyes behind thick lenses, white shirt and tie, impeccable pinstripe, well-greased hair pulled back from his bare forehead, reminding her so much of her father, same size, same looks, same kind of voice, her father a baritone who sang in churches at weddings and funerals as she sat on a stool in the organ-loft, listening.

She had sat for an hour on the veranda, sipping vodka and lemonade, watching the round shapes of the carob trees sink deeper and deeper into the landscape, merge into the fields, the steep sweep of field from High Ridge to Madliena Valley, down to the White Rocks at Bahar ic-Caghaq. On each side of the tarmacked road the soft contours of the earth were now brutally disfigured, permanently defaced by the chaotic sprawl of villas and terraced houses which had mushroomed in the prolonged building boom of the sixties and seventies, huge chunks of stone

springing haphazardly from the fertile soil, palatial staircases, mahogany doors, marble columns, arches and balustrades, the monstrous obscenities of the nouveaux riches.

As she rose from her deckchair and went inside, the telephone rang. She moved reluctantly towards the table. For a while she hesitated, then lifted the receiver.

"Hello. Of course I'm here. Where else could I be? It's alright, you don't have to apologise. I'm fine. They're going out, right now. To a party, I suppose. Mum is wearing pink. I hate pink. No, not tonight. Please don't come tonight. Nothing's wrong with me. Don't be silly. Of course I do. What? I just want to be left alone, that's all. I will. Give her my love. Good-night."

Doors slamming, engine revving, car reversing down the drive, turning in the open space in front of the villa, heading towards the main road. All quiet now, sea and land enveloped in an eerie stillness.

In her room, alone in the presence of Marilyn Monroe, "Some Like It Hot," a black and white poster given to her by her ex-lover, the disc-jockey who worked for Mediumwave, the first private radio station whose antenna pierced the sky a stone's throw away from villa M.

Putting down her glass she started to undress, stepped out of her jeans, took her top off, poured herself another drink. A cool gust of wind entered from the verandah through the net curtains and made her shiver. Claspings her shoulders she looked in the mirror, gazed at her body, tall, naked and sunburnt.

She had always wanted to be a model, a painter's model, always imagined herself sprawled on a big divan bed, like the women she saw in reproductions of Renaissance masterpieces, wanted to experience the thrill of undressing in front of a man she did not know, someone she had never met before and would never meet again. This, she thought, might still excite her, provide a break from her routine love-making with Peter, the pompous bank-clerk who bored her to death.

It was dark now as she lay on her back smoking a cigarette and watching the smoke rise in circles towards the ceiling. Her fingers searched in a plastic case by her head, picking up a cassette, fed it into the machine, pressed the button. For a

moment she tried to guess what it would be. Then the first notes of Mozart's clarinet concerto came crushing into the room. She stretched her hand over to the other side of the bed, reaching for a newspaper.

"We are not violent people", one of the young men replied. But just at that moment there was a high-pitched scream from across the road — a squeal of fear and pain — and a young woman clutching a baby ran into the street. She was pursued by three militiamen, one of whom smashed his fist into her face. She fell to the ground, dropping her shawl, but still clutching her baby, then picked herself up and ran.

The music was loud enough but she raised the volume even higher, tried to remember when she had last listened to that music, where and with whom. It was in moments like this that her mind went back to London, where she had spent two years living with an art teacher, visiting museums and art galleries and going to the theatre for a play or a concert almost every evening. Today those images came back to her in all their vividness, the lights along the Thames, the floodlit bridges and buildings, the beautiful theatres.

The three men were too quick for her, threw her to the ground and kicked her. As she screamed for help, another militiaman raised his army boot and brought it down heavily on her right cheek.

She could, of course, go back to London and stay there, for a month at least, fly to Heathrow tomorrow morning, take the tube to South Kensington, rush out of the station, bump into people on the pavement, look at the shops, take it all in on her way to his flat, ring the bell. Would there be anybody, or would they have gone out for the night, gone for a fortnight, or gone for ever and left the flat empty, and left her there, standing at the door, with one piece of luggage at her feet, her hand on the bell, pressing again though knowing full well that they have gone?

The woman staggered to her feet, still clutching her child, and was jeered by more soldiers, one of whom hit her on her shoulder with a rifle.

So she would decide to go for a walk. Everything would look familiar, the telephone box at the corner of the narrow street,

the Turkish cook making shish kebab, the Italian waiter in the pizza parlour smiling lecherously as she passed, the hair-dressing salon with huge aspidistras blocking the entrance, the scaffolding against the crumbling wall of the old bank, down this week, up again next week, the newsagent next to the sex-shop, the smell of cats hitting her nostrils as she approached the telephone box, though there was never a cat around, never one to be seen.

She stood there in the road, weeping with pain and humiliation, blood pouring down the right side of her face, her legs swollen with bruises, one of her eyes closed.

She would have a hamburger and coffee in the smoke-room of the dingy milk-bar, chat with the plump waitress in the red apron and white cap, wonder what on earth that ugly painting of green ducks on a frozen pond was doing above the juke-box, go back to his flat, press the bell again, wait desperately for somebody to open...

"For God's love, help me," she pleaded.

What would she do then? Where would she go? Full moon rising from the sea. Second movement just started, slow and peaceful, like the sea.

An old man gave the woman some money as she wandered in a daze to the main road. And was this, we asked, how the soldiers behaved in the camp?

Vodka bottle empty, no cigarettes left either. It's getting late now and she must sleep. Help herself to a pill or two, switch off the light, and sleep. Not that easy, though. Limbs numb, brain wide awake, ticking away like a bomb about to explode. She must have more than two tonight. Four at least. Perhaps six.

Her head turning now, spinning and turning like a wheel. The room spinning inside her head. A purple sun rotating violently around a pale moon. Bed shaking, sheets flying out of the window, slippers floating in mid-air, walls spattered with blood. Two more will do it, she thinks.

Walls caving in, feels like an earthquake. Can't stop the shaking. "You must sleep," she tells herself. "Try, try to sleep." How many had she taken already?

The darkness outside has crept into the room. The blurred

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**Joe FRIGGIERI**

*Malta, Fully Detached*

images have disappeared, gone in a flash. No gradual blending of hues, no unnecessary lingering of light and shade, no procrastination, only a sudden darkness.

She could have gone back to London, of course. But ultimately she decided it was better not to.

The third movement was building rapidly to a powerful climax. An explosion of sound, like crystal breaking, followed by an echoing silence.

Everything quiet now. Only the light net curtains floating gently on the midnight breeze.

