

NO ORDINARY FUNERAL

&

OTHER SHORT STORIES



FRANCESCO RIZZUTO

NO ORDINARY FUNERAL

&

Other Short Stories

ISBN 9780995812659

Text Copyright © 2016 Francesco Rizzuto

All Rights Reserved

Sample Chapters

CONTENTS

NO ORDINARY FUNERAL	1
THE BATHERS	3
NEEDLES.....	8
OLD	11
LOUIE THE SKUNK.....	12
CHRONICLE OF A DEATH FORESTALLED	13
THE PRISONER OF O'BRIEN	18
WHAT TO DO WITH A DEAD KID'S HEADSTONE	23
BUT NOT A DROP OF HIS BLOOD	29
POISON PIE	38
IT'S ILLEGAL	41
BINGO WAS HIS NAME-O	45
PORCELLINI D'INDIA.....	50
TRUCK.....	54
HEY MACARENA	59
THE SYLVIA	64
THE DEAD LANGUAGE REPORT	71
TWENTY-FIVE	76
THAT'S AMORE.....	80
SEX AND THE SINGLE VIRUS	86
SULFUR	91
THE 5-YEAR PLAN	99
A MATTER OF TRUST	101

NO ORDINARY FUNERAL

The United States of America is the only nation on earth whose borders have nothing to do with its landmass. To go, say, from Montreal to New York, a traveler faces U.S. customs officers at Dorval Airport in Canada.

“Travel document?” The crew cut, pot-bellied storm trooper with the humongous gold-plated shield nailed to his chest and the stars and stripes splashed across his black uniform sleeve isn’t smiling. I hand over a dog-eared Canadian passport.

“What is the purpose of your visit to America, Mister Rizzuto?”

I’m tempted to tune up this minion with a terse lecture on what the world thinks of Americans versus what Americans think of themselves. This time, I decide to avoid provocation, the lockup, and the blue latex glove routine. My sphincter muscles are already contracting, for various other reasons, and I need to catch a plane out of here.

“Attending a business meeting.”

“What kinda business meeting?”

“Copper mines in Namibia. Investing.”

“Namibia, huh. Where’s that?”

“It’s in Africa, sir.”

“I knew that.”

“I’m sure you did.”

“Where do you live?”

“Toronto.”

“Not Montreal?”

“No.”

“Canadian citizen?”

“That is correct.” He holds my passport.

“Any other citizenships?”

“No, sir.”

“You sure about that?”

“No. I mean, yes. I’m quite sure.”

The man takes an overly long look at my face, as if comparing every wart, mole, liver spot and shaving cut with whatever the National Crime Computer Database is displaying on his hooded monitor this morning which, of course, I cannot see. He takes a momentous decision; puts himself out there for me.

“Then have a nice day.” Smiley Face.

“Sure.”

An attractive, blond Air Canada Jazz flight attendant in her blue and white two-piece ensemble with red neckerchief strolls down the aircraft’s strip-lighted center aisle – the one that leads to the escape hatches over the wings – distributing newspapers. Today’s surprise isn’t the faceful of cleavage I get when she stoops to hand me the Montreal Gazette.

“NO ORDINARY FUNERAL FOR MOBSTER NICOLO RIZZUTO”

MONTREAL—A gold-plated casket and a mysterious black box, grieving family members and curious onlookers, burly security staff and watchful police.

Those were the sights Monday outside a funeral at a church in Montreal’s Little Italy.

86-Year-old Rizzuto, dubbed by many as the Last Godfather, arrived in Canada as an illiterate immigrant from Sicily and went on to build one of the world’s most powerful criminal enterprises with influence on several continents. He was assassinated by a sharpshooter while relaxing inside his suburban Montreal home in front of his wife of 55 years.

But the biggest, most powerful member of the Rizzuto family remains alive.

THE BATHERS

Like everything else in Silvio Berlusconi's Italy, a day at the beach offers all the inane charm and suspect grace of the Italian puppet theatre.

Six sweaty bodies shoehorned into Auntie Maria's vintage Fiat 500, each clutching his or her beach bag or backpack, a huge picnic lunch comprising three loaves of crusty Toscano bread, a length of hard salami, a generous wedge of salty pecorino Romano cheese, one kilo of *insalata* packed into round Tupperware bowls with snap-on lids, two dozen bottles of warm Peroni beer, four litres of chilled mineral water, a battery powered ghetto blaster, and a roll of toilet tissue, hurling down the toll way as if the waves were impatiently waiting. There was also a beach umbrella.

I'm here to introduce our sixteen-year-old son Vinnie to his roots, in a manner of speaking. Here is where the family originated back in the tender years of the early twentieth century before two world wars unleashed a whirlwind of murder and mayhem on the country; well, not exactly here in Tuscany but in Sicily. After a healthy dose of Fascism and Double-U-Double-U-Two, those of our Zio's and Zia's who hadn't already been killed or immigrated to America, drifted to more prosperous parts of Europe, specifically to Germany to work in factories then back south to spend their hard-earned Deutschmarks on land and houses and a fresh start in their own country. In those post-war days, the beach sand here at Viareggio still concealed unexploded munitions; less risky, however, than today's discarded but still deadly hypodermic needles.

A typical day at any Italian beach comprises an exercise in virtuous struggle and patient suffering, like the tasks set for Hercules although his were limited to twelve. The first is to find a parking space that is always non-existent, eventually relinquishing custody of one's motorcar to any one of the thousand Moroccan hucksters who stake out the roadsides flanking the foreshore. The car is then caused to disappear into another dimension as one moves on to the next task, then the next, and the next, until returning to claim said motorcar after having enjoyed as much of the beach as anyone can stand, its enchantment having by now worn off and the vehicle magically reappearing.

Next task is to find one or two square meters of unclaimed real estate to occupy for a few purloined hours without having to once again pay for the privilege. The marvelous, blue waters of the Mediterranean are still free but access to the shoreline carries a price tag. The Italian beaches have been privatized although, the country being a nominal democracy and therefore its shoreline public property, the law reserves a very small percentage of the sand for public use, free of charge, something like walking a tightrope without falling or hopping from fencepost to fencepost without being shot for trespassing by the leaseholders to either side. All the rest has been assigned to commercial operators who charge steep admission fees for a path to the waterline through their territories, renting other amenities as well, such as umbrellas, chaise lounge chairs, change rooms

and toilets, and selling food and drink at outrageously inflated prices. But the one indispensable service these private beaches offer their clients is a lifeguard.

Imagine *la spiaggia*, endless kilometres of waterfront neatly divided into rectangular lots extending from the low tide mark to the access roadway lined up side-by-side like expensive properties on a Monopoly board, as far as the eye can see. The sand within these privatized beachfront fiefdoms is neatly raked clean and litter-free several times a day. There are no empty plastic drinks bottles or used condoms or discarded hypodermic needles to be encountered here. No unanticipated confrontations with dirty realism.

Some operators mark their boundaries with brightly coloured signal flags to orientate the client bather back to his home turf. There are surfboards and wake boards and paddleboats and water wings and pastel coloured foam noodles and floatation toys of every colour and shape for children and volleyball nets to rent. There are more nets in the water defining the safe depth and distance for swimming in the area under the lifeguards' vigilant gaze, their German-made binoculars sweeping back and forth inside the perimeter for any sign of emergency, that is, during the short intervals when they are not chatting up the scantily clad or topless female clientele. Everyone in this mini-Club Med environment is happy.

The few slivers of public beach, on the other hand, are the exact opposite. After sifting the sand in our sector with plastic forks and carrying the bits of broken glass, crumpled beer and soda cans, cigarette butts, foam cups, discarded plastic bags, and the sad remnants of other people's picnics to the nearest dumpster, we spread Auntie Maria's cheerfully printed tablecloth with the olive branch motifs over the sand and assemble the umbrella. Uncle Salvatore scans the space between our blanket and the waterline and spies a couple of topless middle-aged Blondies. He grabs three bottles of *doppio malto* and disappears in their direction, dusting off his German language pick-up lines and suddenly looking thirty years younger.

Auntie Elena strips off her wrapper to reveal an expensive two-piece Armani swimsuit complete with a pair of enormous, bejewelled Hollywood starlet sunglasses as if she were auditioning for a role in Beach Blanket Bingo. She punches a button on the boom box and immediately launches into one of her Zumba routines, daring Auntie Maria, who is nursing a badly herniated disk, to get up from the blanket and join her. While she gyrates, teenage Margherita screams at her mother to quit throwing sand into the picnic food. We swallow without chewing, washing down the lumpy fare with Peroni chased with mineral water. Then Margherita, Vinnie and I head for the roiling surf which after a half minute of splashing about seems marvellously warm and pleasant although the sea is choppy today and the water polluted with algae and what looks suspiciously like industrial sludge carried on the incoming tide.

Still, it's the Mediterranean.

Margherita says there's an old WWII gun emplacement somewhere up the beach so as soon as our fingers are sufficiently wrinkled we stroll off in that direction to investigate and dry our limbs and torsos in the stiff breeze. I wonder what's going through these kids' minds as we stroll along the gallery of topless women and girls of

every age, size, shape, and colouration, a veritable meat market. I ask myself whether my son has chanced to taste such fleshy delights yet. Today's kids are supposed to be a lot more promiscuous and street-smart than in our day. No matter. A teenager's thoughts are unfathomable and sacrosanct, as they should be. We live in a democracy after all and freedom of thought is a cornerstone of our system and the American Way of Life. In a most democratic manner, my own imagination wanders from one brace of mammaries to the next, dallying briefly here then there, hopping and popping like a suction cup from nipple to nipple, mentally snug and warm for a few seconds within each welcoming embrace in a vision of mermaid heaven.

And that's when we saw him, the drowned boy, I mean.

*"Che peccato! Aveva solo sei dici anni....*What a shame, only sixteen years old," someone whispers. The dead boy's former companions have lain his young and flawless corpse on its back, two glazed and sightless eyes staring blankly at the cloudless sky. Soon he will be laid out in a varnished mahogany coffin with polished brass fittings, probably the same day, his devastated parents quietly weeping alongside as relatives and friends assure them that it was *'Il Destino'* and not their fault for letting him go to the public beach with a group of school friends, you know, the portion of beach without a lifeguard. We stand there staring stupidly at this depressing spectacle alongside an attractive young woman with wavy black tresses cascading over her exposed bosom, large pink nipples jutting to left and right as if daring the dead boy to grab one last eyeful of what he'll be missing for the rest of eternity.

My mind fled to a summer's day some forty years earlier when I'd worked as a lifeguard for the Chicago Parks District. In the 1960's, the Whelan Pool was an enormous outdoor swimming hole constructed in the shape of a cross with the low diving boards at each extremity of the cross beam where Jesus' hands were said to have been nailed and the high diving boards located at the top where the inscription INRI was supposedly posted. I could never arrive at the pool for work without a religious vision of hundreds of happy bathers jack-knifing and cannonballing from the diving boards into the water-filled cross; water park heaven amidst the unbearably humid Chicago heat, even if it was sacrilegious. All day, I blew on my whistle to the frolicking children scurrying along the slippery deck and shouted from my highchair: "No Running!"

Being sixteen myself at the time and not yet having 'tasted the goods,' I was particularly entranced by a pair of bikini-clad girls of around my own age who visited the pool each afternoon, spreading their cheery beach towels over the rough concrete deck below my perch at the low diving boards but seldom venturing into the water. I studied these two nymphets while they slowly and languorously applied tanning cream to the bare portions of one another's anatomy then lay their luscious body parts out in the scorching sun like a brace of marinated Cornish hens on the barbecue, rolling over and re-basting several times as the afternoon wore on. My imagination did cartwheels. What *did* it taste like? Well, I didn't have long to wait to find out.

Early one scorching afternoon when these two sirens were sufficiently oiled and settled into their usual knockers-up posture on the grill below my highchair, a group of mentally challenged teens invaded the pool area with one or two caregivers in nervous

pursuit, laughing and screaming delightedly and splashing into the shallows. One of the boys, however, made a beeline for the low diving boards, scurried up the short ladder and cannonballed straight off the end of the board, causing an enormous eruption of water that wetted everyone on the surrounding deck and earned him a hearty round of applause. The boy, who was twice my own size and weight, disappeared below the surface. I began to count, one-two-three...thirty-three, then shed my white terrycloth robe, tossed away my sailor hat and sunglasses, and dove from my perch into the water.

Contrary to what people think, the human body enjoys great natural buoyance and will float of its own accord without any help. The water will never let it down. This is why corpses float for hours or even days before sinking, unless they're wearing cement shoes, of course. If this phenomenon were known and understood and people didn't thrash about in panic when falling overboard, there might be fewer drowning deaths in the world. Nonetheless, the impulse is quite the opposite, panic serving no useful purpose. Relaxing and keeping a cool head is what usually saves the day. I learned this from lifeguarding.

When I reached the thrashing boy at the bottom of the diving pit some nine meters below the surface, he managed to lock two meaty arms around my neck, squeezing and at the same time attempting to climb me like a ladder. I broke the death grip by inserting one of my hands between his cheek and mine and pushing his face in the opposite direction, then lifting one of his elbows while sliding my head down and out of the hold. With the other hand, I swivelled him around then threw my free arm across his chest, this odd and unnoticed water ballet taking place at the bottom of the pool. I could just make out the distorted shapes of onlookers crowding the edge of pool overhead. The drowning boy was now my captive, safe and out of danger.

Finally, I pushed hard with both feet against the concrete bottom, rocketing us to the surface and a barrage of welcoming cheers from the audience. I swam him over to the ladder where the boy's caregivers helped him out of the water. That was all, a simple and relatively uncomplicated rescue with just the right amount of drama. I retrieved my sunglasses, returned the sailor's cap to my wet crown, and rescaled the ladder to my highchair.

Within a minute, however, the two bikini clad girls were on tip-toes motioning to me from the deck below.

"Come down, come down," they chanted in unison.

"Why?" I responded.

"We want to kiss you," one of the girls shouted while the other nodded, both smiling seductively. From the perspective of the highchair, I gazed straight down into the bras of their bikinis. Their kisses were full on the mouth and one of the girls inserted her tongue and began to explore the space inside my teeth that was cluttered with braces. She tasted like Wrigley's Juicy Fruit gum.

But what of this dead boy now, lying here on the sand at Viareggio, the incoming tide threatening to reclaim its prize from the public beach with no lifeguard? Could the

Italian politicians not see fit to provide even minimum funding for the barest of public safety measures along the meagre strips of shoreline they'd not already awarded to their friends? What was the life of an innocent child worth in the Berlusconi New World Order?

It seems impossible for me to convey now just how easy it is to save a human life and how much easier it is to lose one. That dead boy lying on the sand could have been my own son. And what about the hired lifeguards on the adjacent private strips of beachfront, staring out from their crow's nest high above the sand? Were they prohibited from patrolling the tiny public sectors, from glancing to left or right? Did they stand idly by or look the other way whenever emergencies occurred, so as not to attract liabilities to their employers?

And what about the hundreds of naked and semi-naked people crowding the sand that afternoon, all that excess cream cheese and beefcake, parading their pumped-up biceps and abs and pecs and stuffing their magnificent mammary glands into one another's snouts?

Nobody had made any move to save him.

NEEDLES

Some weeks ago, a small piece of news appeared on page sixteen of the Spuzzum District Sentinel alongside a full-color advertisement that boldly announced, “Eat Your Way to A Fantastic Figure”.

The article described the fate of a two year-old Brazilian boy discovered by doctors to contain forty-two sewing needles inside his small body. Two of the needles had pierced his heart and another entered his liver, so that surgeons were cautious about attempting extraction, fearing their intervention might further endanger the boy’s life. He was the human equivalent of a hedgehog turned inside out. The child’s most recent stepfather had inflicted this horror at the urging of a new lover who sought revenge on the boy’s mother for opposing their affair. Their tiny victim was the youngest of the woman’s six children, each by a different father.

Police used more stainless steel needles to extract a confession and trial evidence included a bottle of “Cachaca” which is a type of rum used in rites of the African-Brazilian religion known as Candomblé. Add a little lime and some crushed ice and Cachaca makes passably good coolers. The needles in question were inserted in the child’s flesh by the stepfather and his lover on the instigation of a sorceress during a month-long ritual at her home. The three accused had to be transported by armored car to jail in another jurisdiction in order to protect them from the angry mob, many of whom were already drunk on Cachaca.

Closer to home, in the Entertainment Section of the Sentinel there was the case of Country and Western singer Wilbert Nickelbrine who threw his drunken carcass down onto the matrimonial bed during the wee hours of a morning and later awakened sewn up inside the sheets, sacked so to speak, battered and bleeding from a severe thrashing with a two-by-four administered by his irate wife. It took only one sewing needle, instead of forty-two, to reduce prickly old Wilbert to sobriety.

One sober, unstitched night between the sheets, my wife whispered to me that a sewing needle left carelessly in the bed can enter a human body undetected during sleep then travel silently and painlessly throughout the arterial network like a heat-seeking missile, searching out a vital organ. So what? I blandly informed her that should I happen to stop by the nearest garden center and purchase too much ammonium nitrate fertilizer, the store clerk would be compelled by patriotic duty to ring up the Department of Homeland Security, especially if I reeked of diesel fuel, though there is no legislated formula for determining just how much ammonium nitrate or diesel fuel constitutes a suspicious amount. But needles? Why, hell, Honey. Fabric Land will sell you needles by the ton, all a mass murderer could ever need or want, with no reporting.

Yes, she replied. But it only takes one.

Her second cousin twice removed, one Gelsomina La Sarta, a seamstress by trade, suddenly came to mind. Hers was a crude and faithless excuse for a husband who, immersed one day in an alcoholic haze, slammed poor Gelsomina's skull hard against the stone floor of their dwelling, damning her for the curse of his own drinking and whoring because after birthing six children she'd lost her beauty, notwithstanding that every piece of his clothing, even the pretty, flower-printed cotton briefs that hugged his ankles whenever the local *puta* sucked him off had been cut, fitted, and hand sewn by his devoted wife.

Her revenge then, was to unstitch each garment, a few threads at a time, until her once dapper husband was reduced to rags. At the same time and after pricking her finger, she inscribed magical words and symbols in her own blood on the backside of his wardrobe, in this way placing a curse on every garment inside. The man eventually sickened and died. Neighbors exclaimed what a good wife she'd been, having stuck with her worthless husband to the end.

We were reclining on an overstuffed sofa facing an oversized TV, enveloped in cigarette smoke and working our way through an overly large bottle of Cachaca, when the doorbell rang.

It's for you, Dearie, my wife said.

How do you know it's for me? I said.

She extracted her ponderous bulk from the sofa and waddled over to the door.

Because it's the sheriff, she said.

What's he want? I said.

He's got a subpoena for you, she said.

I haven't been to the garden center, I said.

It's not about peonies, she said.

Then what kind of subpoena is it? I said.

Looks like divorce proceedings to me, she said. I'm divorcing you.

No way, I said.

One morning, shortly after reading the Spuzzum District Sentinel's account of a toddler pierced by forty-two needles, I awoke with an ache in my right thigh near the femoral artery and what looked to the naked eye like a tiny boil formed of an ingrown hair. Squeezing the worrisome lump between two blackened fingernails, a dot of yellow pus emerged followed by a bright red drop of arterial blood and a hard, metallic stub that oddly resembled the almond eye of a sewing needle.

(Published in FreeFall Magazine, 2014)

LOUIE THE SKUNK

Louie snared a skunk in his hardened-steel-jawed trap in the back of his vegetable garden and lowered it, ever so slowly and with great care and attention, headfirst into a five gallon, white plastic vino bucket filled with water. He hates skunks. They dig the dirt around his tomato seedlings and spray the ugly ferret he keeps in a screened wooden crate, the one he uses for hunting rabbits on Saturdays. The drowning animal gives birth to six hairless kittens as if this manufactured agony were not cruel enough, the life force seeking one last, desperate chance. She curses Louie to eternal Animal Hell.

Meanwhile, Louie's wife lies inside the darkened house undergoing a slow, agonizing death of cancer. Their sour-smelling bedchamber reeks of decay and human fermentation, worse than a skunk's den, or a tomb, post-burial. She moans in unison with the desperate cries of the frightened mama skunk issuing from the garden just outside her window. Her spleen is so enlarged now that it appears she too might spontaneously birth a monster, the one that's eating her insides. Her husband won't need a white plastic vino bucket this time. She's drowning in her own fluids.

In a sudden fit of remorse, Louie rescues the tiny newborns and raises them on an eyedropper and bottled milk until his house stinks like a skunk's den. It's too late for their mama with her flattened black and white-striped fur who, like his wife, stares accusingly at him through filmy dead-beast eyes. He will bury them together, he thinks, side by side in the garden.

CHRONICLE OF A DEATH FORESTALLED

“Hey, Dom!Dominic!” My uncle is shouting from his hospital bed. “Will ya take this hunka pork an’ put it in the freezer?”

“Okay, Uncle Tony” I reply, then grab an imaginary handful from atop my uncle’s blankets and pretend to carry it over to the upright freezer he sees in the corner of the room.

“No. No. I said take this hunka meat an’ put it in the freezer!”

“It’s in the freezer, Uncle Tony. Trust me.”

My uncle is referring to the huge hard-on that bulges like a mini-Vesuvius under the crisp white sheet. A vinyl catheter emerges from its crater to connect with a clear vinyl sack perched just below the mattress. The sack is half filled with piss, a cloudy, wheat straw colored piss. My uncle is pissing away his insides.

You might think this is the psychiatric ward – the loony bin – but it isn’t. The man is eighty-nine years old and he’s dying of pneumonia and a few less threatening ailments. An oxygen cannula in his nostrils terminates at a cylinder of compressed gas that rests in a dolly next to the bed, the bottle a bright green like fresh mowed grass. His circulatory system and his brain are pumped full of drugs and he was already a bit addle-minded when they carried him in here a few nights ago. Neglected to use his cane. Slipped and fell. Fractured his right leg. He’s lying here with the damaged limb inside a blue fiberglass tube and another tube up his wee-wee which he thinks is a shoulder of pork. Insists I stick it in the freezer.

Uncle Tony is my favorite uncle but I’m not his favorite nephew. Life can be strange that way. His favorite nephew and the one to whom he will someday leave his modest estate is my brother Danny, the drug trafficker. Still, I love Uncle Tony. I’d do anything for him, even put his dick in a deep freeze if that’s what he wanted. Not so, my darling brother. Some years ago, Danny took our uncle for more than a hundred thousand in a confidence game that resulted in Uncle Tony needing to decide whether to press criminal charges against his nephew or simply take the punch and roll with it. He rolled. Blood is thicker than water, Uncle Tony insisted. He could never testify in a court of law against his own sister’s son. This was family, after all.

As a teen, I worked Saturdays and after school in Uncle Tony’s Italian delicatessen over on East Hastings Street near the Pacific National Exhibition. It was before Vancouver’s East End went over to low-income housing blocks, street whores, drug dealing, and yuppie redevelopment all at the same time. Descendants of the old Italian immigrants started moving away, further into Burnaby and across to the North Shore, to Richmond which is below sea level, and out to Surrey and Langley, the so-called ‘burbs’.

There are still a few of the old cronies around the neighborhood but they don't hang out among the *fashionistas* at the trendy, upscale coffee bars along Commercial Drive. They are guys like Uncle Tony and his friend, Jimmy Di Corpo, who calls himself 'The Corpse' because he was supposed to have died three times and didn't.

First time was on Juno Beach in 1944 when Uncle Tony dragged his badly wounded buddy from the waterline up to a Canadian Army aid station under heavy German machine gun fire. It was the end of the war for Jimmy but only the beginning for my uncle. Second time was when Jimmy's wife threatened him with a pistol but the gun misfired. We found her next day curled into a fetal position inside the deep freeze in the delicatessen, the same freezer where Uncle Tony now expects me to put his hard on. Did she get trapped inside at closing time? A suicide? Who knows? She was already as solid and white as the alabaster statue of Maria Purissima in the side chapel at Saint Agatha's. Third time was when the doctors took out Jimmy's stomach. No, it wasn't the war wound that had sent him home in 1944 acting up again. It was forty years of heavy drinking that did him in this time.

That's why I'm not Uncle Tony's favorite nephew and my brother Danny is. While I labored in the grocery shop helping Serafina – that is, before she turned into a statue of the Madonna – to slice prosciutto into tissue-thin strips or ladle out ricotta cheese and spicy Sicilian olives for plump matrons in flower-print house dresses who kept their money folded inside a handkerchief, my brother was out stealing automobiles. He stole so many that he had to flee the country. Then he was caught stealing cars on the USA side of the border.

A Seattle judge offered Danny two choices: a few years of jail time in the Washington State Penitentiary or a stint in the Marine Corps during a time when young Americans were shouting "Hell No, We Won't Go!" It was a no-brainer, even for a guy with little brain. He was in his element. After two tours of duty in Vietnam where he was introduced to every illicit drug known to mankind and, even worse, to selling drugs among the ranks, Danny overnight became Uncle Tony's favorite nephew. Of course, he didn't tell Uncle Tony exactly what it was he did overseas. The fact that Danny was 'infantry' was sufficient to earn that special bond. It was more than just family. Uncle Tony could never testify against a fellow soldier, a hero like himself.

Auntie Lilla and Uncle Tony hadn't made any babies of their own. They never explained why but when a speeding silver Canadian Pacific passenger train swept our parents' car away during one of their usual angry spats on a snowy day at the Rupert Street railway crossing, Auntie Lilla and Uncle Tony became our mom and dad since they were our parents' *comare* and *compare* and our godparents.

Auntie Lilla suffered a stroke some five years back. That's when Uncle Tony decided to call it quits and sold the store to a Chinese couple who continue to operate it with most of the same Italian goods on the shelves although they converted the deli section to an oriental meat counter selling crispy roast pork, dark brown soy sauce chickens, and greasy barbecued ducks dripping fat, all hanging by the same metal hooks that used to suspend legs of salty prosciutto and wheels of pecorino cheese. I have to

admit that these new smells are rather enticing and the new operators are friendly in the way my uncle and auntie used to be.

Uncle Tony used the money he got for the shop to pay for his wife's care and stayed home to personally supervise her every need. That was a big mistake. He gave up meeting his old cronies on their favorite park bench each day or perusing the coffee bars to savor the aroma of the five-dollar espressos and cappuccinos they couldn't afford anymore. He stopped talking about the war. But what else could he do? Auntie Lilla was paralyzed all the way down her right side. She lived in a wheel chair now and refused to leave the house, which was probably a wise decision for a defenseless woman with an eighty-four year-old husband. The streets of Vancouver's East End aren't so safe anymore, not even in the daytime. They became shut-ins, the two of them.

When he quit working to look after his wife, Uncle Tony started downhill himself. Sleep deprivation took its toll. He was used to rising at four each morning to pick up supplies from the grocery wholesalers. Now he was kept up all night bringing glasses of water, bags of Oreo cookies, and slices of pepperoni pizza to his invalid wife who then slept like a baby between feedings. Whenever he would nod off, she grabbed him with her good arm and shook him back to wakefulness once again. No sleeping on the job, Uncle Tony. Being tired all the time and without an Italian wife to cook for him, he lost his appetite. He couldn't get used to the Asian dishes the hired caregivers prepared and he hated the canned spaghetti they heated in the microwave for him.

Uncle Tony began looking thin, emaciated, like he did when they let him out of the prisoner of war camp back in 1945, only worse: he was old now. His toad-like eyes bulged menacingly from their sockets. His skin turned a putrid yellow and as transparent as the tissue-thin prosciutto he used to sell. Ugly brown age spots and scaly reddish sores began to sprout like cemetery flowers atop his baldhead.

When Auntie Lilla died quietly in her sleep one night, Uncle Tony was patiently watching over her, holding her frail, withered hand as she slipped peacefully from one world into the next. He was pretty far along the same road himself by then, little left but skin and bones. One night, while shuffling to the bathroom without his cane, he slipped and fell.

"Dominic! Will ya put that hunka pork back in the freezer like I told ya?"

"Sure, Uncle Tony, I'll do it right away."

My brother never came to visit his uncle in the hospital but when we took him back to the house to die, Danny was already there waiting.

"I'll stay here with Uncle Tony while he's convalescing," he informed me, rather too authoritatively I thought, "Got myself set up over in the den." Cellular phone rings. "Later, man. Later. I'm busy for the next coupl'a days."

The hospital rings us with the message that a hospice nurse will be calling tomorrow. A white paper bag of prescription medications is delivered in the afternoon. There's a

drug to manage the dementia and another to help my uncle to sleep. There's a syrupy red liquid for pain. I scan the label for ingredients: liquid morphine, cherry flavored.

I telephone a home health care agency and they send over a cute young Filipina with Lolita sunglasses and a nice figure. My uncle looks better already.

"What's your name honey?" he asks, "You look nice."

He's dying all right, but not quite yet. Danny's in the kitchen, on the telephone again.

The caregiver helps Uncle Tony change from the hospital gown into clean P.J.s. She has to roll him from side to side to do this, blue latex gloves on her hands; very professional, I think. She spoon-feeds him from a plastic yogurt container. I've never seen him eat yogurt before. Used to say he hated the stuff. Wouldn't even carry it in the dairy case. Now she's spoon-feeding it to him by the carton. He wants to get up and try to walk again. Only this morning he was in Vancouver General on his deathbed.

I ring up the hospital and ask for physiotherapy.

"We're so sorry," a lady informs me, "but when a patient is enrolled in our hospice program, he can't also be on rehabilitation. He's expected to die. If you want physio, then you'll need to pay for it yourselves. Medical Services Plan won't cover both. Your uncle is in hospice. He gets drugs to manage his pain and visits from a nurse until he passes away. He doesn't recover. If you want him to recover, then there are private agencies listed in the Yellow Pages."

By this time Uncle Tony is sitting upright on the side of the bed with the girl's arm around his waist. Her name is Janie. She calls him Grampa.

* * *

The following day I pop in to see how Uncle Tony is doing. Danny's there, on the telephone in the kitchen. Curiously, I notice Janie's overnight bag parked next to his in the den.

"Hey, Dom. You know where he keeps his will?" My brother covers the receiver with his hand.

"No, Danny. I don't. And why would you need that information anyway?"

"Oh, well you know, just in case, eh?"

Uncle Tony is sitting up in his bed now, surfing the TV channels with the remote in his right paw and the caregiver's manicured fingers in his left, ungloved this time. Judge Judy is tearing a strip off a recalcitrant husband for cheating on his wife with a hooker, exposing her to AIDS or worse, if there is worse. The wronged wife wants a divorce. But there's a twist: she has a lover and she's pregnant. Whose child will it be this time?

Janie has given her Grampa a sponge bath this morning and shaved him. He doesn't look like a dying man anymore. The nurses removed the fiberglass cast from his leg and the plastic catheter from his wee-wee before sending him home, perhaps thinking it kinder now than later in the morgue. Now he has his good leg draped over the edge of the bed. He's ready to get up and walk again.

"How you doing today, Uncle Tony?" It was a stupid question but I had to ask.

"I'm doin' great, just great. I'm gonna get up an' walk today. This little lady is takin' me out dancing, aren't you Sweetie?" The tired, raspy voice had disappeared overnight.

* * *

Next morning the telephone rings. It's Danny.

"Dom, I gotta tell ya somethin'"

"Tell me."

"Uncle Tony's dead."

"You want to repeat that, please?" I say. "I saw him less than twelve hours ago and he was all set to go dancing."

"Ya. Well, ya see he did get up but then he started complaining about a pain in his chest. So we gave him the red syrup for pain like it said to do. Then he wanted to get back into bed. He didn't say anything more after that. Just lay there. Janie got up to check on him this morning and he was stone cold dead."

"How much of that stuff did you give him, Danny? The dosage is written right there on the label." I knew it was only a teaspoonful every six hours and there was a full half liter bottle.

"Don't know. Bottle's empty. Maybe he O.D.'d himself. We weren't watching him much last night. Busy doin' other stuff. By the way, did I ask you about the will?"

THE SYLVIA

She is glad to leave the elevator where the early morning stench is unbearable. Shielding her lips with her palm on the flight up to Floor 13, she fakes a cough but is really sampling her own breath. To her sleepy colleagues in the elevator, however, Marie Clair may as well be invisible.

She reaches her windowless cubicle in the investigations department of Revenue Canada where she will spend all her daylight hours ploughing through stale tax returns. Each morning, a supervisor places a stack of folders on Marie's desk. Her task is to scrutinize these already processed documents for opportunities to penalize the taxpayer for undetected errors or omissions, then bill him for back taxes due plus accrued interest and a stiff penalty, despite the forms having already been approved and taxes paid or refunds processed. Some are ten years old. Ten years is the statute of limitations on tax reassessment.

Her employee performance review will take into account the total dollar value realized by her investigations. For this reason, Marie has been quietly advised by her more experienced coworkers to simply reassess each file for a modest amount accompanied by a complicated letter of explanation citing various sections and verses of the Tax Act, regardless of whether or not there really are any irregularities in the file. Most people won't question the bill but will simply pay up, especially if the amount is relatively small and they feel that a challenge is not really worth their trouble. Would anyone in their right mind choose to lose an entire day's wages in order to challenge a tax reassessment worth only twenty-five dollars? No. People simply pay up and move on. They think the government is always right.

The exercise reminds her of an article she'd once encountered on the Internet about gangs of cybercriminals headquartered in Brazil who were hacking into people's personal bank accounts then transferring small sums of money, never more than twenty-five dollars, to their own accounts. Like the bite of a malarial mosquito, the victim feels nothing at first while some never discover the theft at all. But the total proceeds of crime run into the hundreds of millions, even billions. Those who do find out, later discover that police don't pursue thefts this small but instead laugh at them, so they become sick inside themselves. Marie Clair knows that in spite of a Government of Canada badge with her photo and her name in capitals pinned to her blouse, she's really nothing better than a hungry bitch sniffing at old weathered carcasses for a few shreds of flesh the jackals may have missed, or a tiny tropical mosquito carrying a deadly microbe.

During this entry-level phase of her career, she endeavours to keep her head down and do as the others do. Marie Clair considers the demographics of her department and expects to quickly rise through the managerial ranks. This low-level grunt work – something she considers on the ragged edge of ethics and morality – is not for her, not long term that is. She has ambition.

For now though, it's a job to kill for, she tells herself. She tells this to herself over and over again, pushing other discomforting thoughts from her mind as she reprocesses other people's tax returns, using her small measure of authority to grab a privileged peek into their personal lives. Some of these guys, Marie Clair knows, don't tell their wives how much they earn; yet here she is examining their finances in all its embarrassing, vulnerable nakedness. She could so easily blackmail these horrible men, the philandering liars and cheats. Their wives' social insurance numbers are listed right here in the forms and she only needs to key in that number to access a woman's home telephone.

"Hello, this is Revenue Canada calling. May I speak with Sylvia Ablovitz, please?"

"Yes? This is Sylvia," comes a slightly agitated female voice at the other end of the line. Just the two words "Revenue Canada" are sufficient to strike terror into the average Canadian heart, like a call from the police at three in the morning when your teenage daughter still hasn't arrived home from her date with that boy you didn't like.

"Sylvia, we'd like to know if you're aware how much money your husband earned last year? We need to determine if he's getting the proper deductions."

A long silence.

"Hello-o? Are you still there?"

By the time the stranger at the other end of the telephone line replies, anger has overtaken the fear in her voice.

"Well, actually I don't know how much he makes. Like George won't tell me. He gives me a little cash on Monday but I can't stretch it even to Thursday and there's like never anything left over? If I wanna buy something for myself, like maybe some new clothes or tampons or diapers for the baby, I need to like ask him to go shopping with us so he can pay for the stuff? Most of the day's groceries he brings home himself then I have to like, you know, cook it for him? Like the house and the truck are his? He says money is too complicated, like I couldn't handle it, eh? I don't know. Like maybe I can't. I don't really have anything for myself."

The woman is using what Marie Clair jokingly calls "up-talk", ending all her sentences with a question mark while inserting the word "like" in every phrase. Marie Clair catches herself doing it too sometimes, a nasty habit that's worse than smoking or compulsive hand washing or eating chocolate cupcakes; once a person starts, she can't ever stop. She thinks it's a disease one catches from too much Facebooking or Twittering.

It may be a job to kill for but by the end of the day Marie Clair thinks this job could kill her. She can't forget her old supervisor, Albert, who passed away around this same time last year. She had gone on a training seminar with Albert to Montreal before they rolled out the new software package that links the department's computers with other government databases and some in the private sector as well. She can now discover in nanoseconds whether a person had cashed a rubber check in Halifax in 1944 or been

accused of child molesting in Rocanville, Saskatchewan just yesterday. It gives her an overwhelming feeling of empowerment.

And what about poor Albert? Where did the power get him? Fortunately for Marie Clair, Air Canada seated her several rows behind Albert on the outbound flight but they'd had to share a rental car on arrival. Although the temperature in Montreal had been well below zero and there was snow on the ground, she'd needed to keep the car window open sufficiently to breathe, that is, so long as she kept her cheek pasted against the glass that caused a slight patch of frostbite and some permanent discolouring that she still needs to cover with makeup. Albert's halitosis could have felled a moose at three hundred meters, further away than one might accomplish with a high-powered rifle. Would this have been considered hunting without a license, she wonders? She smiles at the thought of Albert wearing camouflage and crouching behind a tree, making moose sounds into the forest air, mating calls no less. Later it was discovered that he had liver cancer. He was rotting away inside. Then he died.

Marie Clair asks herself if harassing people and extorting money from them like this can really give a person cancer like it did to Albert. Like her Irish ma used to tell her: God punishes. If she had some special Hi-Tech instrument, she could take air samples from the elevator then rate each of her colleagues on a longevity curve. Wouldn't that be better criteria on which to base the annual personal development review? Along with the accumulated dollar value of all the tax returns he or she reassessed, it would provide a meaningful predictor of an employee's potential. That would surely get management's attention. When Albert passed away, Marie Clair didn't get his vacant position to her great disappointment. It went to a South Asian instead, a kind man who smells of curry and a long life.

Marie Clair asks Sylvia, who has broken down after delivering her unanticipated telephone monologue and is now sobbing quietly at the other end of the wire, if she would care to meet for lunch sometime. They could talk things out, mother to mother. Revenue Canada doesn't just take from people, she explains, they try to give something back too.

"We're real people here, not just cold, uncaring bureaucrats," Marie reassures her.

Sylvia wants to know why she gets an answering machine every time she dials the welfare department or the post office or, probably, even Revenue Canada, if there are human beings like Marie Clair waiting there to take her call. Unprepared for this question, Marie gives Sylvia her personal cellular number.

On Wednesday, she waits for her new friend in the bar grille of the Sylvia Hotel on Vancouver's English Bay. Marie Clair thinks this a nice touch, the old Virginia Creeper-covered hotel where young Queen Elizabeth once sojourned. She arrives in plenty of time so she can select a quiet, out of the way table before the power lunch crowd descends on the place. She thinks the association of Sylvia's own name with this venerable old hotel lends a poetic tone to their encounter. She feels like a teenager on a first date.

When Sylvia walks through the entrance and begins to scan the room, Marie Clair frantically waves her napkin in the air. Sylvia tells her that it's destiny. Her daily horoscope, which she pronounces "horror-scope" said she would meet somebody and her life would take an abrupt turn. To make extra sure, she spent the tiny grocery money George gave her on lottery tickets; forty-four million dollar jackpot this week and all of it tax-free. Her new friend Marie Clair from Revenue Canada could relate to that, Sylvia thinks.

Marie Clair has prepared for their encounter by placing George's Ablovitz's tax file in her briefcase. Her records show that he works as a deck hand on a tugboat, towing wood pulp laden barges up and down Indian Arm and ushering huge ocean-going freighters to their berths at the container terminal or the grain elevators that dot the north and south shores of Burrard Inlet. What sparked her interest in George's file in the first place was the question as to how a mere deckhand could earn so much money, over a hundred thousand dollars of taxable income plus benefits. It's the benefits that George didn't declare or pay any tax on, an error that escaped other clerks who reviewed and approved George's tax returns for the past five years. Nailing George Ablovitz would achieve her dollar quota for the entire week.

"Like he works extra shifts," Sylvia explains over a Bud Light that she chugs straight from the bottle, ignoring a properly chilled glass the waitress has placed on a beer coaster in front of her. Marie Clair is sipping a double Martini from a cocktail glass with a sleek, fashionably curved stem. An unnaturally green olive rests at the bottom.

"He gets like time and a half then double and triple time after that, depending on how many hours he works or if it's like night shift or weekends or something."

"But what does your husband do with all his money?" Marie Clair enquires. Along with the Martini, her mind is nursing a newborn suspicion that perhaps Sylvia deserves her fate, like so many other girls who go for stingy, control-freak guys. "I mean, he doesn't give you and the kids enough to live on, does he? He's not a very good father."

"Oh everyone thinks George is a terrific father and like I guess he is if people like say he is."

Marie Clair is comparing her mental image of George to her own husband. Not that Desmond is perfect either, of course. He works in a cube farm only a few blocks from her own office and, like herself, pushes papers from the left side of a desk to the right, in-basket to out-basket which are not really baskets at all but merely plastic trays. He shared that special insight with her one night over dinner and a glass of Cabernet Sauvignon, the one about the trays, that is. His workday begins and ends a half hour before hers so that he can get home in time to prepare the dinner for them, make the beds and get the day's laundry into the drier before she arrives. Over the years, she has shaped – some might even say "whipped" – Desmond into a good serviceable husband, the kind any wife might desire. It only goes to show that a woman really can change a man, training him like a puppy if she's determined enough. And like a puppy, she sometimes needs to rub his nose in a little doo-doo.

“But how can you say that George is a good husband and father?” Marie Clair shovels the doo-doo back in Sylvia’s yard by turning her previous assumption of fact into a question.

“Well, like every time we go to the supermarket and line up at the checkout stand, George like holds the baby while I place all the items on the belt. Then he like takes out his big fat wallet and pays. The cashier always smiles at George and comments what a good father he is, looking after the children and like helping his wife with the shopping.”

“But that doesn’t make him a good father. He’s stingy and he probably cheats on you too.” Marie Clair is thinking how easy it is for a man to be a good father, the prevailing standard being so low. Nobody ever tells her she’s a good mother. People only say things like that at a woman’s funeral and even then it isn’t necessarily true. She could have been a real Jezebel or beaten and starved her kids and they’d still comment what a good mom she’d been simply because she’s dead.

Marie reaches for her brief case before the Martini begins to cloud her thinking. Sylvia doesn’t seem particularly moved when Marie Clair informs her about how much money her husband earned this year versus how little she saw of it. Doesn’t this woman even care? George must be some special kind of guy or else Sylvia is one very stupid girl.

“What does your husband do with himself when he’s not working?” Marie Clair enquires, a little more diplomatically this time. Later, she’ll get around to pumping the girl for the information she needs to nail George to the wall.

“Well, he usually works like two weeks on and two off,” Sylvia tells her, “But like when he’s off work we don’t see him much. I have to like ask him if he’s coming home tonight so I can have his dinner ready for him, that is, if there’s anything in the house for me to cook. Like all we have in the kitchen are some jars of baby food and canned milk. I make sure there’s milk cause like I never know when George is going to be away or like for how long. Like the baby needs his milk, right?”

Marie Clair is thinking about her Uncle Malachy back in Cork, a fellow who kept two wives, each with two children, a boy and a girl, in separate apartments. Neither woman was aware of the other’s existence. Twice a month, he would travel to his other office located in Belfast, returning two weeks later. Or so everyone thought. One day, however, one of the wives forgot that her husband was supposed to be away, telephoned his office and was put through to his desk.

After the lawyers were through with him, Uncle Malachy decided he’d lick his wounds and take refuge with his sister’s family in Vancouver. When he enquired as to the weather here and what Marie Clair’s mother would like him to bring her from the *Old Country*, they informed Malachy that he needn’t bring any clothes at all with him. Men’s fashions were different here in Canada and they didn’t want him to look like he’d just stepped off the boat or, worse yet, arrive in his prison garb. They would buy him all new clothing he’d need after arrival. But there was something Marie Clair’s mother would like to have. Here in Canada, she couldn’t get the style of pretty Irish lace panties she

liked so much. Would her brother please bring over a dozen pairs and some bras with a triple D cup for her?

When Uncle Malachy arrived at Vancouver airport, the customs officers asked him to open his bags for inspection. A thick Irish brogue notwithstanding, he had some difficulty convincing them that arriving with only one suitcase stuffed full of women's underwear wasn't reasonable cause for deportation. Uncle Malachy was eventually permitted to leave the airport but only after Marie Clair's mother posted a five thousand dollar good-behaviour bond.

"But what does George actually do during his two weeks off? I mean, if he doesn't spend his time with you and the child?"

"I don't know," Sylvia answers. "Like I never ask him."

Marie Clair and Sylvia agree to keep in touch through a social networking website called Facebook. Back at the office, she checks her database to determine how much George Ablovitz's employer paid toward its portion of his group insurance, gym membership, parking pass, and all the other unclaimed benefits he'd neglected to declare on his tax return. She draws up the usual form letter with paragraphs of legalese citing various obscure sections of the Tax Act then invoices him for the amount due plus a healthy penalty; enough, she thinks, to keep Sylvia in canned milk and expensive undergarments for a very long time.

A week later, Marie Clair is discretely logging onto Facebook though it's during business hours and technically her time belongs to Revenue Canada. She's rewarding herself after nailing that stingy cheater George Ablovitz, and nobody will be the wiser, when her cellular phone suddenly rings. That's unusual, she thinks. Only her family and a few close friends have her number and they all know not to call her during business hours. Could it be an emergency?

"Marie Clair?" The voice is unfamiliar.

"Yes."

"George here."

"George who?" Marie Clair gets the feeling she's back in grade school playing the guess-who game.

"George Ablovitz. You know. Sylvia's husband? You *do* know Sylvia Ablovitz, right?"

"Yes."

"Well check out Sylvia's Facebook page, will ya? I've tagged a few photos of you that she took with her cell phone during your little *tete-a-tete* the other day. I think you'll find them, shall we say, 'stimulating'? Oh, geez. I almost forgot. I mailed the hard copies to your husband. Or was it your husband's employer? Shit. Can't remember. Anyway, you might want to recall that tax reassessment. Bye for now."

Though she's never met George Ablovitz, he certainly sounds different than she'd imagined. More like a Hells Angels gangster who wants to blackmail her. Is that what he means to do? She clicks on Sylvia's Facebook page.

Somebody has posted a new album of photos depicting a naked Marie Clair engaged in various sex acts with a tall, rough looking man with tattoos who looks like he might be a deckhand on a tugboat. The woman's lovely body would certainly do her credit, not Marie Clair's real body that is rapidly going to fat, but the digitally altered head and face certainly *are* her own. Sylvia has linked her own page to those of Marie Clair's relatives who all accepted Sylvia as a friend because she was a friend of Marie Clair, the hungry bitch from Revenue Canada. Many of them have already clicked on 'Like'.

Marie Clair holds her palm over her mouth and smells a sample of her own breath. Is she rotting away inside yet? Is this new feeling she has one of the first symptoms?

End of Sample Chapters

Kind Reader, Thank you for downloading these sample stories from NO ORDINARY FUNERAL. Please visit your local favourite bookseller or ebook retailer to purchase a full copy.

If you enjoyed these stories, then why not leave a review at Amazon or Goodreads?

Contact: Francesco.Rizzuto.Author@gmail.com

Website: www.francescorizzuto.com