

Serenity

By Alba de Céspedes

In *L'anima degli altri*

Translated from the Italian by Tamara Lee

Not much remained of Lisetta's past, only a few mementos: a bed with a silk coverlet, a few feather pillows, a crystal perfume bottle, and a rose-trimmed hat. The rest of it—her memories—she held dear, but they were so distant they sometimes seemed to be from another lifetime. Yet it really was she, Lisetta, who once had carriages and horses, maidservants and a cook, and the silk dresses and plumed hats they wore in those days. But life, the ravages of time, had taken it all away. One might think it had happened because she was no longer a kept woman, but that wasn't it. Lisetta had never been a courtesan, she was unmarried, and in fact...but that's a long story. Perhaps it's easier to begin from when Lisetta found herself broke and earning two lire in Campo de' Fiori every Wednesday, playing new records on old Victrolas, over and over again.

For two lire, Lisetta would even put on her rose-trimmed hat, which harmonized nicely with the brightly colored horns of the old-fashioned gramophones. It didn't matter if it was winter, she wore the straw hat anyway—after all the stylish ladies, their noses red from the cold, wear summer hats with their fur coats. While the rich can get away with such things, they look out of place on the poor. So Lisetta, remembering that she'd been a lady once, wore her straw hat.

Lisetta, who had an easy-going nature that evolved with the times, liked modern music. But when she'd play a waltz in three-quarter time, that's when she was truly happy. One Wednesday, though, even the music wasn't enough to distract her: first thing the next morning, her landlady was going to throw her out, sofa bed and all. In fairness, Lisetta couldn't blame her; after all, she hadn't paid the rent in nearly a year, although she did the dishes and some of the shopping. Luckily, she could get used to anything. That day she wasn't paying attention to which records she played. The woman who ran the stall, who was not unkind, noticed and tried to help. She went to get advice from the antiques dealer across the way, or maybe the lacemaker. They recommended that she go to the Borgo district and ask around to see if there was a room available, maybe even just a cranny under the stairs that wouldn't cost more than a few lire per month. In Borgo.

She went there the next morning, without her rose-trimmed hat; she thought if they saw her dressed smartly they'd charge her double. She also needed to give some thought to how she might earn a bit of cash. Telling fortunes...if she had a room she could read people's cards.

Everyone told her to be sure to pay a visit to Domiziano: he was an agent of sorts, but without a storefront; instead he met customers in front of Santo Spirito hospital, where he spent the day selling oranges. He couldn't make a living on just that business alone, so in the summer he supplemented his income by selling roasted pumpkin seeds and lupini beans. But such treats, beloved by children in the old days, had by then gone out of fashion. He faced formidable, vicious competition from the ice-cream vendor. It was no longer worth the effort to work patiently and steadfastly for years to secure a little spot for yourself. The ice-cream man, on his bicycle, invaded every piazza.

He was a large man, Domiziano, strong and red in the face, as if he were constantly drunk. To mock him, fate had given an emperor's name to a beggar. But from the emperor he'd inherited pride. He seemed stern and arrogant to those who didn't know of his kind heart. But maybe he was actually proud of his poverty.

When Lisetta approached him, Domiziano, who was sitting on the steps, sized her up from toe to head.

"There are rooms," he said. "From Gigiona or Rosa, the one who sells rosaries at the entrance to Saint Peter's. The bad news is, since you haven't got any money, nobody's going to take you."

"I could help out with the chores, mind the shop..."

"Can you cook?"

"A little."

Domiziano mulled it over. He sold a couple of oranges to one of his regular customers, took the money, and gave back the change, still thinking. He was an old man—seventy-five—and could tell that this poor woman standing in front of him, who must have been about his age, was in dire straits. When he had a fight with his wife and fled the house where they lived with their married daughter, he'd spent many nights out in the cold. But he was a man. A generous one, in the way that poor people are generous, willing to share what little they have.

"I sleep in a room nearby that I share with my assistant."

"Your assistant?"

“Yeah, we have a thriving business. The other guy makes the rounds with his cart, since he’s young and can go to the market early. In the evening, it’d be nice if we could come home to a bowl of hot soup once in a while instead of going out. If you want to stay with us, we could curtain off a little room for you to one side.”

“I don’t know, how much?”

“How much? You’re poor like me, even worse off, and anyway you wouldn’t cost me a cent.”

Lisetta didn’t say no. What choice did she have? Besides, at seventy, you don’t worry about what other people might say.

“Thanks. I really appreciate it.”

She went over that same night.

Lisetta brought her divan, silk coverlet, feather pillows, perfume bottle, and a mirror to Domiziano’s spacious room. They divided it into three sections using some old fabric from Lisetta’s trunk. She was against the wall, Domiziano in the middle, and Threepenny under the window. Threepenny was the young assistant: he was only sixty-five. Between them they had more than two centuries of living in that vast room on the ground floor, which at night also housed the cart and the basket of oranges. They gave off a fresh scent, and the household’s only luxury—a nice brazier—glowed at the foot of Lisetta’s bed.

Her room was but a crude imitation of the one she’d had in the old days. Lisetta had brought those few objects with her as a reminder that her past life had not, in fact, been a dream. But by then she’d grown accustomed to her current life and was gradually coming to terms with her situation. She picked up the local dialect and kept her nose out of matters that didn’t concern her. In the morning everyone had a job to do. After Lisetta tidied up the room and said goodbye to Domiziano and Threepenny, they’d head out with their pushcarts and she’d open up the local affiliate in the doorway—a basket, an enormous basket filled with oranges and a few packets of roasted pumpkin seeds. Right next to the brazier.

The life of the working-class neighborhood swirled around her—some small talk with the olive man, a chat with the housemaid as she returned from her shopping. Of course she would have loved to have a little stove for roasting chestnuts, but she would have had to buy it, and the business was still strapped for cash.

From the vantage point of her current existence, Lisetta looked back on her earlier life as if she were watching it play out on stage. Back then she was a different Lisetta, one who moved and lived in artificial surroundings. How she'd suffered to avoid falling into a life of mediocrity! Now that she was—to be frank—poor, she relished her poverty; she found it deeply gratifying. She savored the life she was living, surrounded by honest people. Domiziano—deep down, yes, maybe she loved Domiziano as much as her first love. For the first time, she felt as if she were someone's wife, she had her man to wait for, and her heart would skip a beat when he'd suddenly emerge in the distance, in the alley, the basket slung over his arm.

Such poverty. Such hardship. In the evening, a meager bowl of soup on the table. One by one the feather pillows disappeared, and the crystal perfume bottle too. The rose-trimmed hat hung from a nail on the wall—no one wanted that. Lisetta didn't wear it any more. Such poverty. At the end of the day children would walk right past her basket; they couldn't care less—they wouldn't take her oranges if she were giving them away. Then came March. The first swallows screeched overhead. Carriages full of foreigners with their noses in the air drove through Borgo. Sometimes a few women from the neighborhood would stop by to have their fortunes told. When she was young and had money to burn, Lisetta often visited the fortune teller, so she had no trouble mimicking the techniques, the mysterious incantations, the way of shuffling the cards while casting a spell—the works. Her advice was solid, drawn as it was from the experiences of her long life. On her tongue, the local gossip was transformed into the power to divine the future. Tricks of the trade; an understanding of human gullibility; and, above all, hunger.

On Monday afternoons Domiziano would relax, sitting next to Lisetta on the doorstep. He no longer went out to the tavern and enjoyed being home, with his companion by his side. She may have come to him in the twilight of his life, but she brought him so much sunshine. Before he finally mustered up the nerve to leave the woman who had poisoned his existence, he'd go out drinking. He drank so he wouldn't hear her voice, wouldn't even see her when he got home, in a haze, his head spinning. He thought if he'd have met her—Lisetta—sooner, he would never have started drinking and wouldn't have ended up among the ranks of the beggars.

It was a Monday, in fact, when his wife turned up. Lisetta and Domiziano were in the doorway next to the fire, watching children play ball in the alley. She didn't deign to look at them.

“Where is that woman?” she asked.

Domiziano turned to face her.

“That woman? Anyone who harms so much as a hair on her head is going to be in trouble!”

“The trollop! Keeping house with a couple of tramps no less. Where is she? Where is that slut?”

Her words tumbled one by one onto Lisetta’s heart and seemed to animate her. Domiziano didn’t dare look her in the eye. It must be so humiliating at that age to be viewed with such suspicion. He toyed with his shirt button without answering his wife. Lisetta rose from her chair, walked up to her, and said simply, “I’m the slut.” Framed by her white hair, those words sounded strange; they clashed with her cotton apron, the wrinkles etched into her face, the crushing poverty of her old age. Even the other woman was taken aback.

“You’re Lisetta, the fortune teller?”

“That’s me.”

The woman spun around to face her husband.

“Your daughter,” she shouted bitterly, “says you can come back home if you want, you old fool. You coming or not?”

Lisetta’s heart quaked. She pictured herself back on the street in Campo de’ Fiori wearing her rose-trimmed hat, she picked out the sounds of the tinny gramophones. No longer sitting in her doorway, selling oranges to children in the morning, no longer waiting for Domiziano to come home. Domiziano.

“I’m staying right here,” he snapped.

His wife cursed under her breath. Lisetta went back to her seat by the fire.

“You got any dough?”

“I haven’t got anything.”

“How about oranges?”

“Sick people don’t like ‘em any more.” He laughed.

“Idiot!”

The woman walked around the room opening all the drawers, then returned to the doorway. Lisetta warmed her hands in front of the fire.

“Witch!” the woman yelled at her. Right before her eyes, she angrily grabbed the little brazier and stalked off with it.

Domiziano and Lisetta didn't speak. They needed silence. The brazier left before them a cold and painful vacuum.

"I'm sorry..." Lisetta began.

"Please, let's not talk about it," Domiziano said. He took a cigar butt out of his pocket, lit it, and calmly crossed his hands over his stomach.

The old woman's lips were quivering with emotion, her hands trembling slightly—she was so happy. The fragrance from the pile of oranges in the basket wafted around them.

Threepenny appeared in the alley, pushing his cart and singing.