



## Dark Face of Beauty

by Joseph M. Ditta

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“Like I said, it was a long time ago. My parents had immigrated from southern Italy some ten years before. I was born here, or, rather, in Brooklyn, in this country, I mean. My parents never learned English very well. They spoke to each other in their Sicilian dialect and to me and the rest of the world in a halting, nearly incomprehensible gibberish made up of English words and Sicilian grammar, with not a few words they invented themselves out of fortunate—or unfortunate—blends of the old and the new languages.”

The young priest was listening to his elderly parishioner not as a confessor but as a friend. There was, however, something on the mind of the oddly formal older man, and the priest suspected that it had to do with some burden of guilt the man was carrying about his mother, who had passed away long before the two had met and become friendly. They were at a local tavern, sitting comfortably in a booth with a pitcher of beer on the table. The priest had taken only one glass and was nursing it skillfully. More than a year ago, the older man, whose name was Tom, had proposed a hypothetical case to the priest, and he, young and ardent in the faith, had given a response which he suspected had deeply troubled his friend.

“Thinking back on those days,” the older man continued, leaning stiffly on his elbows, “I wonder I was able to understand my parents at all, especially as I got old enough to leave the house and play in the streets. Once in school, I became another person, almost entirely. But I did, you know, I did still understand them. I guess you could say it was love that made it possible, I don’t see how it was possible any other way. They did love me—I was an only child—and I them.

“Anyway, my mother would call me, ‘TomMIE, TomMIE, veni ca!’ Always with the emphasis on the last syllable, ‘TomMIE’—like that. She dressed in black, always. I can’t remember ever seeing her wearing anything but black. She was dark, also—black hair, olive skin, very fine and smooth; she had dark brown, almost black eyes, flashing eyes, which I can’t remember as being anything other than intense. Her hair never grayed. She died at sixty-six without a gray hair in her head. In those years she was slender, and from photos I can tell she was a beautiful woman.

“My father, on the other hand, was her opposite in almost every way. He tended to softness where she was hard, I mean physically as well as in terms of character. He was round, jolly, and pink complexioned. I can hardly remember him as being anything other than pink cheeked and gray haired, or rather, white haired—most of his life. But I suppose in these still early years, when they were so young, his hair was probably still brown. But I have only undated photos to remember these times by. I can’t be sure about a lot of things. I have only the stories others have told me, the stories my mother told me, and those parts of the happenings I witnessed myself and read about in old newspapers—but of course, at the time, I had no understanding.

“My father managed to open a hardware store on Linden Boulevard in Brooklyn, next to a little Italian Ice shop—where I used to play when I was old enough to get out of the house, which was both in back of and on top of the hardware store. The store was on a corner with its main entrance on the street it faced, and on the side street there was a door to the house. At street level in back of the shop that door opened onto the kitchen, and next to the kitchen there was a tiny sitting room. Upstairs were the parlor and bedrooms. We lived there until I was well into my teens. By that time, the war was over and the economy was changing. Suburbia was growing fast, and the hardware store lost most of its customers. My father had to close it, eventually. We moved like so many others to eastern Long

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Island, and it wasn't long after that that my father died.

"One day—I was about five years old at the time—a man came into the shop asking for my father. I can still remember him. He spoke Sicilian, rapidly, his hands waving and punctuating his words with a certain premeditated violence. I remember him so clearly because I remember my mother. She had pulled both hands to her chest and her face had whitened. I started to cry because of the fear she had in her eyes. The man looked down at me in the aisle where I had been playing, and I can still remember his face. He pointed to me and said something to my mother which struck me as unpleasant and stirred me to cry harder. He left, and my mother bundled me off to my bedroom upstairs and put me to sleep. My father wasn't home at the time, having gone to Staten Island to visit a cousin, which I remember my mother saying was the great blessing that proved God was watching over us.

"You have to know certain things about the circumstances of those years to follow this story as it unfolds. My father opened that store and bought and paid for its inventory just before the stock market crash. Afterwards, that inventory kept us alive. However little he earned from it, it was always just enough to keep us going during the worst years of the depression. Many people in that neighborhood of immigrants starved or scratched and clawed for pennies. I tell you, we made a good day out of a nickel's worth of sales. And there was almost always that, and sometimes much more. I guess we were regarded as prosperous. And we were, by comparison. The year the stranger came was 1935, and that was one of the hardest years of them all.

"What he came to ask, or to demand, meant my father's ruin and our being put out on the street, and worse. You see, both my mother and my father believed this man was dead."

The priest had raised his eyebrows at that, and the old man smiled. Sipping from his beer during the pause, the priest said, "And you remember?"

"Oh, yes, I remember. It's because I remember—I mean, had all of this faded as most things do, there would be no concern, would there?"

"And the concern is for your mother?"

"For her. Yes. Not for my father. He died blissfully ignorant of what happened that day. There's no telling how life would have changed for us had he seen. You see, my father had, in fact, witnessed this man's murder, and that was the reason he left Sicily and came to America. There was a debt owed to this man—a moral as well as a financial one. And that debt was now being called in.

"Years before, in the ancient city of Medina on the northern coast of Sicily, my father's family owned a hotel—an old, run-down place that the family was always too poor to fix up into anything more than a third-rate establishment. But like the hardware store in Brooklyn, it provided the family with resources enough to keep body and soul together. This changed with the outbreak of the first war. People traveled less, even though Sicily was far from the conflict. And those who did travel were not the kind who frequented third-rate hotels.

"My father was young and vigorous and somewhat enterprising. To supplement the family's income, he had gone down into a seldom used section of the old catacombs beneath the city—this would have been far out on the city's extreme inland edge—and there set up a kiln to bake bricks and tiles, which he sold in the underground markets for half their value, dealing when he could directly with the roofers and masons who would then make an extra profit on them. It was an arrangement that worked well enough for a young man who only put his sweat

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into it. But the war intervened and called him away, and the whole enterprise was shut down. Unknown to him, others, searching out the darkest corners of life in the city for illicit dealings connected with the war, came upon the kiln, and thus its existence had become known among certain elements of the city.

“At the war’s end, my father returned to a family destitute and starving, with no hope for the old hotel, which had, out of disuse, fallen into ruin. Immediately, he returned to the catacombs to see about the kiln. It was still there, of course, though it had been pilfered, and there were signs that the little room he had excavated in the side of the corridor to store the bricks and tiles had been used by others—there were burned out torches still on the walls, an arrangement of sitting stones along one side, and two empty wine bottles lying in the dirt. He decided he could waste no time moving what was left of the kiln and excavating a new store room. The family was in bad shape. He needed to borrow money to start up again and get to work immediately. There was a man he borrowed from the first time, a young man his own age whose family had a history of influence and successful competition, often violent, for local dominance in all the arenas of power—fishing, politics, agriculture, banking. This young man was named Emilio, and he, too, had gone off to war, though not as an infantry soldier like my father. Emilio liked and respected my father, and, most importantly, had had every lire repaid from the first loan.

“‘I won’t lend you the money,’ Emilio said to my father, ‘I’ll give it to you, but you will have to give me something, in return.’

“‘And what can I give you, Emilio? I, who have nothing but a future, which I need your money to make happen.’

“‘You can give me of yourself, Angelo (that was my father’s name; I should have said so earlier). I will need your help from time to time when you are down there baking your bricks. That’s all, but I need to count on you.’

“‘I’ll do what you ask, so far as I can, Emilio. I can promise you that.’

“‘Your promise is good enough for me. I know I can trust you, that’s why I ask it of you.’

“And so the money was given, and my father began to prosper. After the war, life began to pick up in Italy, slowly at first, but steadily. The hotel was put back in order, and the family was beginning to look forward to better days. But it was not to last. My mother and father were engaged to be married—having been betrothed since before the war, since, in fact, they were thirteen years old. What happened came upon them so suddenly that everything fell into ruin again and the young couple had just time to flee the country.

“My father was hard at work in that dismal dark underground. When the kiln was fired, it sucked the air out of the room, and my father had to open a vent he cut into the ground above. This vent was concealed, of course, and so firing always had to take place late at night. This practice kept my father down there until after midnight most nights of the week, which exactly served Emilio’s purposes. It was there, in the secret darkness of the place of the dead, that Emilio did his dirty business with those who were called the Black Hand. My father, whose presence was supposed to be unknown, was to stand ready with a shotgun in case any of Emilio’s business partners became unruly and threatening. At that point, my father was supposed to step in.

“This arrangement worked well. My father got his money essentially for free, and that money turned his whole family’s life around; while in return, he never really had to do anything but listen to Emilio’s conversations. Nothing ever came of

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them. Except one time. It was well after midnight, and the firing was done. The kiln was let to cool and my father had closed the vent above when he heard the voices.

“He did as he always did—put out his own torches and grabbed the shotgun and stood guard up the corridor just before the turn in the darkness where Emilio was holding court. On this night, things went bad. Angry words were exchanged, Emilio called for my father, and just as he stepped around the corner into the men’s torchlight, he saw a man blast Emilio directly in the chest with a shotgun.

“At that very moment, the killer saw my father and raised his shotgun at him and pulled the trigger. But it was an old double-barrel twelve-gauge, and he had emptied both chambers into Emilio, who was crumpled in the dirt and bleeding badly. The killer and my father looked at each other, my father’s gun leveled at the other man. But the man was cool and competent and said calmly, ‘If you kill me, neither you nor your family will ever rest, be assured. You are known.’ My father knew what he said was true. He looked at Emilio, and thinking him already dead, realized there was no longer any point. He lowered the gun; the other man laughed, and when he turned his back on my father he said, ‘Now, all you have to worry about is HIS family,’ meaning Emilio’s, and meaning, also, that my father was a coward.

“In that moment, in the inflection of that man’s voice, my father knew life had become impossible for him in Medina. He looked at Emilio in the dirt and felt responsible for his death and responsible also for not avenging it. He made the sign of the cross and followed Emilio’s killer out, though well behind. He wasted no time. That night he packed his things, wrote a note to Emilio’s sister, telling her where to find him, and left Sicily.

“He went to Naples and then to Rome, and from there he finally left for America, almost six months later. My mother followed about six months after that. They arrived in this country in the year 1921. Nine years later, my father had his hardware store, his inventory, and a son. His life looked rosy. But then, the market had crashed and the depression took the wind out of everything, and then, suddenly, Emilio shows up, demanding—what? No, not the money back, not revenge for my father’s failure, but something much worse; he wanted my father’s loyalty once again—as a henchman, a gunman, in Brooklyn, the new world! Something, of course, my father could just not do. Emilio had his leverage, however, in the form of what my father owed him. Those were not the kind of debts one could refuse to pay. The moral obligation due to his failure in the underground and the money, which restored the family’s hotel: these were a nasty dilemma for my father.

“My mother’s face had whitened and her eyes filled with fear, and I cried. The stranger looked at me and shook his head and said something to my mother while gesturing at me, and her eyes widened and rounded, as people’s eyes do when they are shocked or stunned by what they see. I didn’t know what it meant. But it left a life-long impression on me. When the man went away, my mother gathered me up and hauled me upstairs, though I was big for five years old. And though it was only mid-afternoon, she pulled the shade on the one window and prepared me for bed. She said nothing as she undressed me. Her dark, intense face had become a mask. When I was covered with the sheet and the light blanket, my mother leaned down and kissed my forehead and said, ‘If you put your foot out of this bed, the roof will fall down on you, just when it touches the floor. See if it’s not true!’ Then she straightened and looked down at me. When she turned and walked out, I knew something terrible was going to happen.

“In the heated garishness of Sicily’s floral hues (the outward sign of the fertility of the people), moral obligation afflicted the human soul like drought. The ancient and complex history of relations between families, the religiosity of the people,

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and face or honor—all these things in those days made the one to whom obligation was owed a powerful man. He was able to play tyrant, if he were such a type. Perhaps I make too much of this, but perhaps not, for it explains my father's dilemma in ways I could not otherwise. To live your life under the thumb of one to whom you are indebted is to lose your life, because your independence has ceased to exist. Indebtedness invites corruption. Only the good will and character of the benefactor can avoid it. However, temptation is hard to resist when its object is power. And as we all know, power is meaningless if it isn't exercised.

"I can imagine my mother, now, reasoning this way as she left my bedroom. I did not sleep, of course. I listened for her downstairs, for the bell announcing people coming into the store, for voices. I listened for my father's voice, especially, feeling that when I heard it, I would be comforted, and things would be all right. I listened, but all I heard was the dreadful silence of a closed up shop and my own breathing. Many hours passed before I heard my mother again.

"For the rest of this story I have to depend on hints dropped by my mother over the years, and fit these in with what I myself saw and learned from other sources. She never told me anything outright, but once, after my father died, she alluded directly to the events that followed my being put to bed. In her characteristic way, she touched her forehead and chest and two shoulders, kissed her fingers, and said, 'Your father is resting where I will never go. At least he knows now what a sacrifice I made.'

"She said this as though I understood her meaning without saying, and I did, of course. I replied, 'He never knew?' And she, 'Only the Lord knows,' and then she blessed herself again. I asked her to tell me the whole story, then. But she only told me about their betrothal and about the hardships of the trip across the Atlantic, hinting darkly all the while at Emilio, the stranger who came into the shop. All of what I know about what happened in Medina came from relatives who stayed behind and whom I visited several times as a young man. My mother assumed I had learned the facts there and knew enough to piece together her story. But for the sake of her own soul, I believe, she refused to retell it. I have no doubt she confessed to a priest. Once, I asked you how you would have responded to a woman who confessed such a story as hers. Do you remember what you said?

"Yes, I remember. I told you I would have refused her absolution."

"You said a good deal more than that. I've been thinking about what you said. It troubled me. I tremble still, thinking about it."

"You asked me if damnation was the only possible outcome for this woman—hypothetically, you said, remember?"

"Of course. I was troubled; I was looking for a way I might think of my mother as redeemed, or as at least redeemable. I asked you if a woman who committed such acts, knowing she was damning herself and committing them in spite of that to protect her husband and child—wouldn't she find a sympathetic God to judge her soul? Shouldn't God reward self-sacrifice?"

"Self-sacrifice, yes. Like I told you then. By taking the life of one whom she put in mortal sin, without giving the person a chance to repent, she is responsible for that person's damnation."

"As you do, so shall be done unto you,' you said. I find that judgment very harsh. It chills me. I grieve for my mother. Only gradually, over the course of the year since we talked about it, have I come to believe you are wrong. You're

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young. I've lived a good deal longer than you and have thought about this for a long, long time."

"And what do you conclude? What wisdom has your longer life given you?"

"My wisdom is this: Life is never easy to judge."

"Of course it isn't."

"I mean more than that. I mean that one can't, the church can't, people can't formulate rules and fix judgments. All life's incidents defy attempts to categorize them."

"Your wisdom is wise. But it's not new, Tom. Anyway, go on with your story."

"My mother was a striking woman. She was slender and beautiful and passionate. And she was strong in ways my father never was. In those years, both she and my father clung to life through that hardware store as though it were a life raft. Now, suddenly, a shark was swimming around, threatening to pluck my father off.

"When my mother left with the threat that the roof would collapse if I stepped out of bed, she went downstairs and locked the store. My father had a display of very expensive cutlery locked up in a glass case in the aisle in front of the door. My mother took the key from a box beside the register, opened the case, and removed a small paring knife. She affixed its blade, still in its cardboard sheath, beneath the bottom wire of her bra so that it was pressed between her breasts. With the sheathed blade between and the handle downward pressed against her sternum, she left the store.

"Emilio told her where father should go to find him, and she made her way there. Although Emilio had not been very long in this country, he already had enemies. Up the street mother went in her black dress, past the playground, past the Reliable fuel oil outlet, past the butcher shop, to the row of townhouses beyond, the third of which was where Emilio told her he would be. Two men sat in a car at the curb. As mother approached, they could not take their eyes from her. She turned and went up the steps. Another man was guarding the vestibule and opened the door for her. Without acknowledging him, she glided past. At the inner door she stopped and knocked. Emilio opened it, gasped in surprise, then smiled, stepped back to welcome her in, and rubbed his hands together.

"Because he was arrogant and proud, he believed mother's declarations of desire and gave himself to her seductions. I'm not certain, however, that arrogance and pride are the weaknesses responsible for his fall. He knew mother from when they were children; here she was, familiar in all her beauty, in this strange, alien New World. Perhaps that explains it. I prefer, though, to imagine mother's powers as sufficient to explain it all. Many years later, after I had grown, I read the account of what the police thought had happened in that house. It appeared in the *Daily News* at the time. The things she got him to do! The account was graphic.

"Mother was never implicated. Because the circumstances were so bizarre, no one ever imagined her as the murderer, not even his bodyguards. According to the newspaper, he was found two hours after mother left bound to a chair with neck ties, his mouth gagged, another tie wrapped around his neck like a noose. His pants were pulled down around his ankles, his lap and the carpet in front of him puddled in blood. He was horribly mutilated. The police believed it was a

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revenge killing by the husband of a woman he had violated.

“I have a different picture. How did a slender, very feminine young woman manage to tie and gag such a man as Emilio? She seduced him, plain and simple. She beguiled him into believing she could give him that most mystical of orgasmic ecstasies: orgasm in the moment of extremity, when ‘to die’ crosses the boundary from physical experience to rapturous metaphor. I can imagine her piercing him with those dark eyes, dropping the top of her dress off her shoulders, revealing her olive-toned breasts cupped in the bra, but not the hot knife concealed between and beneath them. I can imagine the visions of ecstasy she evoked in him as she bound and gagged him. I can see her kneeling between his knees, then reaching swiftly to her breast for the sharp, glinting blade, the sudden look of horror in his eyes, the quick cut, the struggling, howl-smothered, twisting dying of the man as his blood spurted over his knees, mother stepping back to watch him empty out his life. She washed herself, no doubt, replaced the knife between her breasts, ordered her dress, and left.

“She had to kill him in a woman’s way, taking advantage of what powers she had, for they were all she had. I can’t conceive of any other way she could have managed to bind and gag him. She could not have assaulted him directly. If she were going to succeed in ridding him from her husband’s life, her husband, whose life was her life and her child’s, she would have to find some strategy to incapacitate him first.”

“Yet, you don’t know the truth of any of this, do you? It’s all speculation.”

“What myths of sex float around the human mind; what powers of seduction people are capable of—such a story, for all its improbabilities, grabs us and makes believers of us. And isn’t there, in the end,” the old man said to his younger friend, smiling, “a certain poetic justice in the tale?”

This was the point he was leading to, what the whole hour and pitcher of beer had been about.

“Mother was defenseless except for her looks. But what did her beauty mean to her? Was she even aware of it? Out of nature itself, I tell you, arises the occasion from which violators of nature are punished. When the natural order of obligation and indebtedness, gratitude and recognition are corrupted, that order sends up Nemesis in the guise of our own depravity to smite us.”

“Yet, you really don’t know, do you?”

“My mother was faithful up to the day she died. I don’t know, except for that hint I mentioned earlier, what she believed about the condition of her soul. From that hint, though, I construct this tale. And there is one other thing. At the time we left Brooklyn for eastern Long Island, my mother wanted to visit St. John’s. We took the bus together. Father was already out east. I was grown by then, being about sixteen or seventeen. I asked her who was there she wanted to visit, and she said only friends, people whose memory she wanted to be sure to take so far away as Lindenhurst. We visited many graves. I remember only the one—Emilio’s.”

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