



Licia Canton
In the Stacks

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In the Stacks*

Licia Canton

Should I grab them all and have a seat at one of the tables, Rita wondered.

“Bagnell... Harney, Iacovetta... Ramirez... Scarpaci” she whispered.

The books were all on the same shelf at eye level. What luck. I won’t have to roam about, she thought. And she wouldn’t have to get the footstool. She hated getting up on that thing. She didn’t have very good balance. It would be good to sit on it, though. Rita looked up and down the aisle to see if the stool was within reach.

She just wanted to look through the books. She wasn’t sure she wanted to lug them all on the subway. She should have taken the car. It would have been easier on her back. But parking near the library was hard even at the end of the day. She didn’t think there would be so many books to look through. Who would have thought, in a French university library. This is probably the last time I’ll be here for a while, she thought.

She picked up Bagnell’s *A Portrait of the Italian Canadians* and leafed through it. Rita had begun reading the introduction when she heard someone coming towards her.

“Excuse-moi,” a man was trying to get past her.

“OK.” She didn’t look up. She moved over a bit but the man couldn’t get through. She realized now how tight the aisle was and how wide she had become. He wasn’t moving so she turned sideways.

“Sorry,” Rita said in French. “Go ahead.”

He moved over to the other side and then took a few steps back.

Rita continued reading Bagnell’s book. She had read it years ago. She remembered. She had taken notes, but she might check it out of the library, she thought. They could ask her some historical questions. Rita wanted to be as prepared as possible even though she did not have a date yet. She did not want to waste any time. She had already wasted too much.

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She picked up Ramirez's *The Italians of Montreal*. It was a dated book but still useful. And Ramirez taught in the history department at the university. She had never met him. He probably did not know about her research.

A light cough brought her back to the stacks. The man was still standing there. Not moving. She moved over slightly so he could reach the other shelves. He did not move.

Rita was uncomfortable with a man so close to her in the deserted library stacks. She remembered the man who had purposely stood behind her at the pharmacy while she pondered which brand to purchase. She had become increasingly nervous. She had walked out of the store without buying anything.

She turned around.

"Am I in your way?" she asked boldly.

He stood there tall, satchel in hand, leaning slightly against the stacks.

"J'attends," he grinned. "It's OK. Take your time. I'll wait."

"You are waiting for...?" She looked at him quizzically. "What?"

"I need those books." He indicated the shelf.

"Which ones?" she asked, hopeful that he wasn't referring to the ones she needed.

"All of them," he answered.

"Oh." She wasn't sure if he was serious or just toying with her. He wasn't making a pass at her, was he? That belly of hers was sure to keep men away for a while. But she was weary of French-speaking artsy types who smiled too easily.

"You're looking at the books on Italian immigration. Right?" he asked.

"Yes," she said firmly. "Do you need to take them out?"

"I'd like to. But first, I'd like to browse through them." He smiled again.

He will not get these books, she thought. He was too self-confident for her liking.

"You're Italian, aren't you?" He caught her off guard.

She didn't look Italian, she'd been told. Red hair and freckles. Maybe it was that maternal glow she had now which brought out her Italianness. Or maybe it was the protective way she held the books.

"You don't look Italian," he said, "but I can tell."

"Oh." Rita stared at his jean jacket.

"I can tell by your accent. You speak a polished, correct French with a very slight inflection. You're anglophone Italian. Am I right?" He was beaming. Waiting for confirmation.

Who is this québécois, she wondered, telling me I have an accent. She did have an accent, when she spoke French. And when she spoke English. And when she spoke Italian. She spoke properly, but in Québec, if you don't speak like a québécois, you have an accent.

"I'm a Montrealer. Born in Italy. Raised in an Italian family in the east end. Went to English school. Studied French at Marie Clarac. Spanish in college. German in Germany. I speak a Venetian dialect with my parents. Yes, I have an accent. Everyone does."

"I didn't ask for your CV," he chuckled. Then in a serious, kind voice: "I didn't want to offend you."

"No, of course not." It's the hormones, Rita said to herself.

"So where did the red hair come from? It's natural, right?"

"Now I could be offended by that," she smiled. "Do you know that there are twenty different regions in Italy? Do you know that not every Italian has dark hair and an olive complexion? Some are blond and have blue eyes or green eyes, and some have red hair like me."

"Of course I know that," he smiled.

"Oh?" Rita was intrigued.

"I know quite a bit about Italians. I'm from the east end, too."

"Oh."

"And my father is Italian," he grinned.

"Oh!"

"My name is Massimiliano." His pronunciation was perfect, mahs-see-mee-lee-ah-no but he put the accent on the o, as a francophone would. He looked québécois, he sounded québécois, but his name – a very long Italian name – was not a common one. This man was not a Tony, Frank or Joe.

She stared at him. He was not a Réal or Jean-Guy either.

Rita hadn't realized that she was hugging the books by Bagnell and Ramirez. He smiled. He could tell she was confused.

"Nice to meet you," Massimiliano said, putting out his hand.

"Nice to meet you, too," Rita shifted the books and shook his hand. It was a genuine, firm handshake.

"My mother is a québécoise so I was raised in both cultures. But my father was the dominant force, of course. You know what I'm talking about, right? Italian men. Always right," he said. "I'm not like that."

She was surprised by his candor.

Italian men are all the same, she thought, whether they are born in Italy or not. She had stopped trying to convince herself otherwise.

"So you speak Italian then?" Rita asked.

"No, not at all."

His Italian father was the dominant force but he does not speak Italian, she thought. In all of her years at this university, all the hours she'd spent at the library, she had never seen him before. Where had he been hiding? This very québécois-looking, non-Italian speaking man, who had a very long name.

“So what do your friends call you?” she asked.

“Massimiliano,” he said again with the accent on the o.

“I mean your francophone friends.”

“I only have francophone friends... that’s the way it is since I work in a francophone milieu and I don’t speak Italian and I am uncomfortable with English. They call me Massimiliano. Everyone does.”

“Not Max or Maxime?” she insisted.

“No. Why?” he laughed. “Why would I change my name? My name is Massimiliano. I like it. It’s not Guy or Jean.”

“Interesting! How about your mom and your girlfriend? What do they call you?”

“Massimiliano, of course! I have a mom, but no girlfriend,” he said smiling. He’s a funny guy, she thought.

“We can speak English. That way you can tell me if I have an accent,” Rita suggested.

“But I said I don’t speak English.”

“You must speak a little,” she was surprised.

“I understand, but I don’t speak.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t like the language,” he said bluntly.

“You’re serious?”

“Yes. And I went to French school, raised in a French neighborhood, work in a French office. No need to speak English. We’re in Québec, remember?” He smiled again.

Oh no, so he is a *real* québécois, she thought. She did not want to get into a political debate.

“Yes. We’re also in Canada,” she smiled.

“Yes, but *I* live in Québec. Have you noticed that the signs are all in French?”

She sensed trouble looming in the next few minutes. She should just smile and leave it...

“What are you doing waiting for these English books then?” She couldn’t help herself.

“I said I don’t speak English, but I can certainly read it.” He wasn’t smiling now.

She wasn’t sure if he didn’t speak or if he refused to speak.

“Books on the history of Italians...” he said.

“Italians in *Canada*,” she stressed.

“... for my thesis,” he sighed. “My thesis is in anthropology. On Italians in Montreal... Écoute,” Massimiliano was not annoyed. “Listen. I don’t want to put pressure on you so why don’t we take all the books and sit at a table?”

Rita wasn't sure what to say.

"We can go through them and decide which we need," he said, looking at her belly. "Besides you must be getting tired, standing here."

"Yes, good idea. I *am* getting tired of standing," she said. "Thank you." She was glad the mood had changed.

He picked up all of the books on the shelf. "I'll carry these," he said.

She glared at him.

"Don't worry, I won't run off with them," he teased, as if he could hear her thoughts. "I'm a good québécois-Italian guy."

She followed him slowly down the aisle.

"When are you due?" he asked as they reached the tables. There were very few people around on a Thursday night.

"In about ten days."

"Wow, you must be quite the multi-tasker," he said amused. "One of those women who wants it all."

Rita wasn't sure what to say to that. Was he being complimentary or critical? Was he making fun of a pregnant graduate student?

"I want to get my thesis out of the way. Just polishing it up. Getting references, reading for the defence. I don't have a date yet but I want to read as much as possible before the baby comes."

"Is the father Italian too?"

"Yes. *He* is dark and olive-skinned. Born here of Italian parents and if anyone asks him where, he'll say he is from St. Leonard. Won't say he's Italian though. He's Montreal-born."

"Oh you are a St. Leo dame, too. Very, very Italian then."

"Well, I adopted St. Leonard. Don't get me confused with the stereotypes," she said. The words had slipped out too quickly.

"Stereotypes? My thesis is in anthropology, remember?"

They sat in front of each other for the next 45 minutes. He picked up one book at a time and wrote in his notebook. She read sections of Ramirez rapidly, worried that she might lose the book to the québécois anthropologist. She looked up at him every so often, and he smiled promptly every time. She was self-conscious, still unsure what to make of him.

He put the last book onto the pile on the table and put his notebook in his satchel. He waited for her to look up at him.

"I would ask you to join me for a coffee or a glass of wine, but you probably don't drink coffee or wine. And as a good Italian wife you will say "no" because hubby is waiting for you."

She smiled at the fact that this very unItalian man had asked and answered for her. She looked at her watch.

"It's 7:30. I'd like to get home in time to put my twins to bed."

"Twins?"

"Yes, I have two little girls."

"Oh. This is your third child then?"

"Yes..." she hesitated.

"An education and lots of children. Wow. A good little Italian girl." He wasn't teasing. His voice was serious, almost caring.

"Well..."

"I was married once," his voice was sad. "Now at my age... I look young, jean jacket and all, but I'm not. And I died many years ago when I lost her. I fell apart. I was so in love with her. I've only picked up my thesis again this year. I started it years ago. The therapy, the job..."

She was touched by his openness. She did not want to interrupt him.

"Now I want to finish. Coming here brings me back. Meeting you, like this, unexpectedly..." he sighed. "Sorry. I feel like I know you. I didn't mean to spill my whole story on you."

"Oh it's fine... I..." she paused.

"You have quite a bit of your own weight to carry," he chuckled. He was trying to get back into the happy-go-lucky guy she'd met in the stacks.

"You can take the books. I've waited fifteen years to come back, I can wait a couple more weeks or months."

"Are you sure?" she was sincere. "I probably won't have time to read them all."

"You take them home," he insisted.

"Massimiliano," Rita said softly. "We all have our stories. It's not always as it seems. I fell in love with the wrong man... And yes, now I am in a good place. But I know about therapy." Until then she had only ever said this to women.

"Give me your phone number and I will let you know when I bring the books back," she said warmly.

"Wow, a very pregnant, good Italian girl asking for my number!"

They laughed.

"I'm so happy to have met you," Massimiliano said, as he wrote his number on a scrap of paper. "I came over after work to look for books... And it looks like I found a friend."

Rita reached over to take his number and smiled.