

Excerpt from **ZAPINETTE BAGUETTE & TAGLIATELLE** -
Part of the **GOSH ZAPINETTE !** humorous series by **Albert Russo**

To me, the Galleria Vittorio-Emmanuele in Milan is the most stupendous (that's not what you think, stoopid!) covered gallery I have ever seen from here to eternity with a return ticket. And as you walk out of this magnificent place, before reaching the Piazza del Duomo, you can stop at the Rinascente department store, which I advise you to visit.

The cathedral is mind-boggling. It looks like a gigantic sugar loaf, with its hundreds of little statues nestled in alcoves or perched on top of the innumerable spires - some of them faces are real spooky, and saints they ain't all. Crowning the Duomo is the golden *Madonnina* which weighs as much as an elephant. It's with the blood and the sweat of the poor dudes that the Catholic Church could build such a marvel, and it didn't matter whether they suffered from the plague or from mad cow disease.

As for the Scala, it's really no big deal. As a mat-o-fact, it stinks of cat piss. I've heard it's the world's most famous opera house. If you still want to believe this I'd advise you not to go near it.

In order to please my uncle, I went to visit Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper*, which is hidden in a church so dark that even the mice would get lost in it, cheese or no cheese. Try and recognize some of them apostles on that awful depressing painting, you'd first have to be on your knees and squint so much you'd end up getting slanted eyes like the Japanese. Now how them poor Asians don't get totally blind and their heads forever twisted staring at this minorpiece of artsy fartsy is a mystery. On the contrary, they seem to appreciate everything they watch and remain in awe in front of Jesus - he must appear to them as a scrawny Santa Claus, compared to their fat Buddha. And they don't stop ooh aahing as if they had suddenly met the Holy Ghost.

We ate ice cream at Biffi's inside the Galleria. It's one of the poshest tea-rooms in Milan, which I consider the second most beautiful city in the world, after Paris, of course. I had three scoops, vanilla, chocolate and mint, while Unky Berky had pistachio and raspberry. This is like being in the middle of a theater, or rather like watching a permanent fashion show. Some of the men bowled me over, they were so cute and elegantly attired. You'd think they were competing for the Mr. World cup. A lot of the women too were very pretty, with their silk dresses, their lovely chiffon ensembles and artsy fartsy prints. They do have a knack for colors, them Eytalians!

As we were feasting our eyes on these sophisticated dudes and dudesses, accompanied at times by their doggies, some of which had pearl-studded leashes and alligator collars - them lucky bitches or S.O.Bs. are treated like Hollywood starlets - a violinist suddenly materialized out of nowhere, wearing his great-grand-pa's tuxedo (you couldn't tell whether it was black, mole gray or dark blue, it looked so ironed out) and shining shoes that were all cracked. His long silver-colored hair swept his jacket to and fro as he was moving in our direction. He immediately began to play heart-wrenching tunes.

At first I felt very embarrassed and wished he would disappear as quickly as he came, especially since it looked like he was going to kneel at my feet. Maybe he thought I was Unky Berky's girlfriend, coz in this country you see a number of r.d.o.ms (rich, dirty old men) gallivanting with girls who could be their granddaughters - I'd be so disgusted I would throw my ice cream at their faces, and Goddess knows I hate to waste ice cream. But the violinist played so beautifully that I began clapping my hands. They shouldn't allow someone so professional to have to perform like a beggar, when there are so many schmucks who are paid the earth to appear on television, with their moronic TV shows that sprain your brain. Now I understand why my uncle snuffles whenever he listens to his old Italian records - he is stirred inside out with nostalgia.

Unky Berky told me a true story that took place at Biffi's in the sixties, concerning an uncle of his.

Bob, a cousin from Portland, Oregon, came to spend a vacation in Milan, invited by *zio* Bruno, *zia* Antonietta and their son Aldo (*zio* and *zia* mean uncle and aunt in Italian and have nothing to do with being

zany, but just wait a minute and see what comes next).

Bob was an artist, a bit wacko, especially since he trudged along half tipsy most of the time and wore garish leather clothes, Indian bangles and huge silver rings on every finger, essept on his thumbs... and a green cowboy hat. He looked like a walking Christmas tree.

Apparently the moment he woke up he would run to the bar and empty the bottoms of whiskey, rum or vodka bottles, to the point where *zia* Antonietta decided to take all the booze down to the cellar, at least those few bottles he hadn't yet opened.

Unlike his mother, who uddered strange bird noises that sounded like chuckles whenever Bob cracked a joke or did something outrageous - coz in front of her guests she always made an effort to keep *la bella figura* -, Aldo fancied his cousin a lot, on account of the fresh air (even though it reeked of alcohol) Bob brought into his strict bourgeois Milanese environment.

Unky Berky often repeats that in his time people around here took life very very seriously. Even nowadays, the Northern Italians claim that they have to doubly work

their asses off because the Southerners are 'such lazy bums'. They think of the Romans as pencil-pushers who take innumerable breaks during their working hours to chat at a *terrazza di caffè*, whereas the Neapolitans spend theirs playing dirty tricks or swindling their own neighbors, as for the Sicilians, they treat them as Italy's Arabs, with the extra onus that they have invented the mafia.

And, along the centuries, the mafia has grown into an enormous octopuke, sending its smartest octopussies to America, where they now proliferate and deal in hard drugs. Why do you think there are so many junkies in the US of A? You just have to look square into the eyes of an adult octopuke - better through the glass of a water tank, if you don't want it to strangle you from the neck down to the ankles - and you will notice that the lout is as stoned as the Grand Canyon.

Where were we? Oh, yes, with Bob the boozier! One evening he suggested that his host family accompany him to the opening at a hoity- toity gallery in downtown Milan where the artist's subject was a naked woman whose body he was busy painting before his public. On the sandbox next to her there even stood a pair of live goats, with their little ball crap and all.

The poor *zia* who had dressed up as if she was expected at the Scala almost fainted. I would have been furious, coz I can't stand it anymore that it's always the same people who get stripped naked. Had I been there, I would have demanded that the so-called artist, aka male chauvinist prick, also take off all his clothes and I would have personally daubed his private parts with green paint, making his carrot shrink to the size of a Brussels sprout.

After the happening, the *zio* and the *zia* drove back home with Aldo - Bob had stayed over at the artist's place to toast the event - and had a terrible argument. For the first time in her life, the *zia* blurted out that she was going to divorce her husband on account that he let that 'degenerate Yankee cousin' of his give their son an awful example of galactical immorality - I wonder what she meant by that, unless she was referring to the little silver stars the artist had tattooed on the woman's tits. She was also afraid the Jesuits who always seem to be in the know, sooner than later, of their parishioners' sleaziest deeds, would throw Aldo out of their school, exposing him in public first.

Until now, the *zio*, who, always according to my uncle, had been sitting on the fence - he was more on pins and needles, I would say - suddenly uddered an ear-spitting groan, the likes of which could only come from a wounded boar, for you should know that in those days divorce was *assolutamente taboo nella bella Italia*. Sophia Loren, for instance, could not return to her country since she had remarried 'illegally', for the minute she would set foot on Italian soil, the authorities would have driven her directly from the airport to jail, without letting her visit her family or friends.

Thank Goddess I did not have the privilege of meeting with the Pope of the time, already that the present one is lasting forever and ever, coz I would have made minced pie of his lowliness and thrown the goodies to the lions of the zoo.

The *zio* then accused her of being a petty prig of a *borghesuccia* (pronounce: bore - gay - zuccia, and we ain't talking about homeys or zucchinis here, boredom maybe; the Italians call their homeys *finocchi*, which means fennel) whose main hobby was to hang around in the via Montenapoleone, trying on designer dresses and jewels, the most expensive furs in the world, and artsy gadgets, then visiting too a couple of antique shops, from which she always picked out some silly or useless trinket if the latest Valentino ostrich shoes didn't fit her or she didn't fancy any of the mink coats of the latest collection.

And if her shopping let her feeling depressed, either because she didn't spend enough money or what she bought didn't quite satisfy her, she would go and meet some of her snobbish friends at the Alemagna tea-room, so that they could while away their time, kibbitzing and yikiti yaking around a tray of cream-filled chocolates and booze-drenched cakes.

The *zio* also added, in front of Aldo (all of this has been related to me by my uncle who, as you can see, is a great story-teller) that she was the queen of idleness and instead of going two or even three times a week to her queer hairdresser, she could do some charity work or help out the needy.

Talking of queers, one afternoon, when Bob was a little more sloshed than usual and he was alone with Aldo, he whispered to his young cousin that he was a bike. When he realized who he was talking to, he asked Aldo to forget what he'd just uddered and made him swear he wouldn't repeat it to his parents.

Frightened by her husband's burst of anger, *zia* Antonietta became sheepish and ahemmed an apology, like a little girl who begs her doll to forgive her after having spanked her silly, so that everything went back to normal between the two of them... until... hear this.

On the eve of Bob's departure for America, the *zio* decided they would all have dinner at Biffi's and celebrate one last time. It all started in good humor - whether half sober or completely looped, we don't know - Bob always acted high anyway.

During dessert, Bob struck up an acquaintance with the couple that had just settled at the table immediately next to theirs. He began to toast to their health and to Italian-American friendship. He then got up, yelling, "*Viva l'Italia, viva l'America, viva l'amore!*" and embraced the man who looked flabbyghosted yet didn't say anything.

But the instant he approached the woman to kiss her, the guy who was Sicilian and probably her husband jumped out of his skin, produced a very shiny and expensive dagger with an ivory pommel and leapt at the poor Bob, trying to stick the blade into

his back. If it hadn't been for the *Maître D's* swift intervention and that of a few brave waiters, Bob would have been reduced to a heap of pork chops.

Minutes later the *carabinieri* appeared. The *zia* was trembling like a leaf while she was having a fit of the hiccups. The *zio*, of course, didn't look particularly proud. As for Aldo, he ran to the toilet and brought up his entire meal.

The only one who seemed totally untouched by all the commotion was Bob. He even started singing. Maybe he thought he was standing in the middle of an opera or something. His mind must have been rrreal blurrred.