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(see bio at the end of this story)

FLAVIO'S DILEMMA

by Albert Russo

He was a mamma's boy and nothing he did would be reprehensible in the eyes of Carlotta Bellini. The two shared a small apartment in via di Ripetta, midway between San Rocco and Piazza del Popolo. Although the place was rather somber, on account of the grime that had accumulated during decades, and gave onto a courtyard whose potted plants had seen better days, and which filled his nostrils with the unrelenting smell of garlic, mixed with, at the hottest hours of the day, the stench of cat urine, it was theirs, for they had inherited it from Mario Bellini who had also left them a pizzeria around the corner from where they lived.

Signora Carlotta, as she was familiarly known among her employees, carried on the business with grace and diligence, an oath she had made to her beloved husband who had succumbed to liver cancer, in atrocious pains, on the eve of little Flavio's fifth birthday. The funeral had taken place on a drizzly cold 20th of December, so near Christmas and just a little more than a week away from the coming New Year and Signora Carlotta had vowed to make it up to her son so that he would never have to replay such sad moments. In fact, she exerted herself to blur this memory from the boy's mind and whenever he tried to recall the event, she would gently counter him, pretending that he was imagining things. She invented a softer version of the tragedy, claiming that her husband had passed away peacefully in his sleep one early autumn night, his heart no longer willing to beat, and that if God had summoned him still in his prime, it meant that He needed him by His side to reform the souls of those who had erred during their lifetime and gone to Purgatory. Mario Bellini was thus watching over them from a corner of paradise which, she convinced Flavio, looked very much like the oleander scented alleys that laced the *laghetto* in the gardens of Villa Borghese, where she used to take the boy every Sunday afternoon during the warm season.

Little Flavio grew up, rather privileged for his condition. In daytime, he frequented a private Catholic school in the lovely wooded neighborhood of Parioli, not far from the Pincio which, with its grand Renaissance fountain and statues, overlooked Piazza del Popolo, then in the late afternoon he would go swimming and play tennis at the posh Belle Arti Club - Signora Carlotta had found three sponsors among her wealthier customers, for you couldn't become a member of such a club without the support and the recommendation of eminent patrons - after which, he would walk back home and do his homework. Once that was taken care of, for his mother who toiled from cockcrow till well after midnight, sacrificing herself so that her son would get the best that life could offer, was very strict regarding his education, then only would he be allowed to go down to the pizzeria. Surrounded by the whiff of warm dough and rusk, and the pungent odors of anchovies, green peppers and basilic, he would be greeted as Signorino Flavio by benevolent waiters, for whom he was considered none less than their mascot.

As the years went by and Flavio turned into a handsome, well-mannered, albeit, according to his mother, oversensitive adolescent, the young boy began to feel a sense of inadequacy. It was due, principally, to his social status among his schoolmates: they all belonged to the

Roman high society and with many of them, snobbery seemed to be inbred. Once classes were off, these youngsters would plan either to meet at each other's mansions - some of those sumptuous *palazzi* , hidden behind thick clusters of fir trees, had private swimming-pools - or at their parents' clubs, usually the Rotary or the Lyons, for drinks, where they would meet their *ragazze* who mainly frequented an all-girls religious institution. Very rarely was Flavio invited among this crowd and whenever he was, he felt out of place. He could not reciprocate such invitations, for when, in the beginning, he would tell some of the boys to come over to his mother's pizzeria, for an early evening snack, there would be a moment of hesitation, followed by an embarrassing silence, then someone would suggest an idea, which the band found more 'palatable'.

His schoolmates usually shunned the Belle Arti Club. To them, it wasn't a fashionable place to be seen at, they'd rather leave it to their elders or else to the kiddies. In fact, during the schoolyear, swimming classes were given there and so, it catered mainly to the elementary school pupils. After the boisterous children were through with their lessons, the middle-aged patrons would make their appearance and that was when Flavio would come for his daily dips. He knew a lot of these

people by sight and they would greet him with a distant politeness. The Club was also frequented by foreign diplomats and business people, often accompanied by their children. The latter constituted a breath of fresh air for young Flavio, since in their case the social barriers were replaced by more down-to-earth preoccupations, such as, learning the language of the host country or, if that became a lesser problem, adapting to its customs and striking up new acquaintances. As a matter of fact, once the first step was overcome, the youngster felt much more comfortable talking to these *stranieri*, for they were generally less inhibited than his own peers and, what pleased him above all, they never questioned his background or frowned upon him when they learned that his mother owned a pizzeria, on the contrary, it often whet their appetite and Flavio would then extend them an invitation. In the beginning, he would offer them a pizza on the house, but generally these people were urbane enough not to accept a free lunch and some of them even became regular patrons.

One hot June afternoon - school had just recessed for the long summer vacation - a strikingly beautiful redhaired signora, wearing a one-piece swimming-suit with zebra stripes, accompanied by a young man, settled in the deck chairs next to Flavio's. The youth was a bit

fairer than she, but there was no doubt as to their kinship. He had the same aquiline nose, high cheekbones and piercing eyes whose color was a lustrous honey shade mottled with splinters of green, and a shock of hair with which the light played mischievously, sending out copper glints that gave it a life of its own.

At first, Flavio believed he was her junior brother, or else a first cousin. Upon learning that he was her son, Flavio issued a whistle of admiration and said:

"You must have married very very young, Signora,
congratulazioni !"

"Yes, indeed," answered the lady, with an illuminating smile, then, in her accented yet fluent Italian, she added, in a tone of self derision, "in fact, I barely knew my first husband, he ran away three weeks after we moved into our new apartment and we never heard from him since."

"Oh, I'm sorry!", said Flavio.

"You shouldn't be," she exclaimed, flamboyantly, "I made up for this short-lived affair and I've known some wonderful men after him. One hard lesson I did learn: never be submissive with the opposite sex, and, applying this philosophy, I only surround myself with respectful gents; the others get the picture pretty fast and don't dare overstay their

welcome. By the way, I'm Samantha Gibbons and this is Jerry," she said, extending her hand to the young man.

Flavio always wondered at the ease with which some foreigners, especially Americans, opened up to total strangers. Here in Italy, such an attitude would be deemed indecent, if not outright vulgar. Yet, listening to this still youngish looking woman, the adolescent felt elated, her frankness induced in him a sense of liberty and she made him think of a singing brook, for her voice had this flowing quality.

Her son, in contrast, appeared subdued, almost bashful. He had the same bland personality as that of the young protagonist in that old Visconti movie 'Death in Venice', he'd seen on television, several years ago. There was that same halo of mystery around him and Flavio couldn't figure out whether he was happy or not, whether he liked living in Italy or whether he missed his friends in the States. Did he have friends? One thing was beyond any doubt, he indulged in the love of his doting mother. He looked up to her as if she were a goddess and, whereas another boy in his situation would have felt somewhat spare in her presence, even irritated by her often extravagant reactions, he seemed to drink her words, nodding approval whenever she ranted

against American or local politicians or against the UN for mishandling human induced catastrophies.

"Why don't you come home on Saturday evening?" offered Samantha Gibbons, "Jerry and I will prepare a barbecue on our terrace. *Molto intimo* , there'll be just the three of us, it'll be fun, and also it will give me the opportunity to show you some of my current work, in particular a sculpture of the archangel Gabriel for which Jerry is modelling.

From the moment Flavio entered the Gibbons household, the young man felt something stirring in him to the core, as if a page were being turned. It occurred almost surreptitiously, like one of those ephemeral flowers opening up for the first time and probing with exhilaration its new environment.

His hosts resided on the top floor of a Renaissance palazzo, which had been divided into spacious apartments, along the via Aldrovandi, at a stone's throw from the baroque gates of the zoological gardens. The interior was magnificent, not because of its furniture which was rather banal and of no great value - they had probably been bought at the flea market -, but in its architecture, in the details of its floor tiles, with its

carved motifs, many of which were weatherworn but could still be divined, with the head of a dragon here, the claws of another fabled beast there, the joined feet of Mercury in one corner of a room. The high ceilings were adorned with their original beams and some of the paintings covering them had been remarkably preserved, so were the frescoes surrounding the walls on its upper part. Half of the terrace - it covered as much as a third of the apartment surface - was protected by a bay window and had been converted into a sculptor's atelier; actually, in good weather, Samantha used the whole space for her work which, with the potted plants, the gardenia and a couple of rosebushes, had an air of art moderne garden, overlooking, beyond the green hills, Trastevere, with afar, Saint Peter's dome.

Flavio thought that the statues, never full-bodied - they reminded him of those Roman masterpieces missing either the head, a leg or an arm, only here, the artist intended her work to appear so - had a lot of character and he found a fluidity in their movement which made up for what was left out. She would focus, here on a torso, there on an elbow and elsewhere on an ankle, creating thus close-ups within the stone or the piece of wood she had selected as her material. In another case, the

centerpiece was a young man's hip, showing his well-developed genitals, with the penis half erected.

Jerry was grilling sausages and chicken breasts on the barbecue, when Samantha came in from the kitchen, laden with a huge wooden bowl of tossed salad, mixed with cherry tomatoes, pecorino cheese, tuna and radishes, all of it sprinkled with sesame seed. It looked fresh and scrumptious and the whiff of the slightly burnt meat blowing his way made Flavio want to sink his teeth into food.

Soon the three were seated around an oval table, toasting with a glass of sparkling Chianti rosé. The moment Flavio would finish his glass, Jerry would refill it, and by the time the young Italian had eaten his second serving of meat, he was surfing on a cloud of happiness, feeling slightly tipsy, for contrary to many of his peers, Flavio was not a wine drinker - he preferred beer, especially during the heat, and this was an exception.

They were discussing recipes then, without transition, Samantha asked her young host: "Would you mind posing for me? I think that with your kind of body I could do wonders. Here, watching you at this moment, I would cast you as Mercury or even Tut."

It took Flavio a moment before he registered the woman's words and he started suddenly to blush as though he had received an indecent proposal. That is when, in spite of the haze that surrounded him, he realized how stuck up he still was and the abyss that separated him from these strangers. Was it merely cultural or must he account this to the fact that Samantha was an artist? He had never frequented artists in the past and harbored the vaguely misguided idea that not only did they belong to the fringes of society but that they were sexual perverts. He'd read about Michelangelo and his minions and more recently about Pasolini and his orgies with ragazzi he'd just pick up. When these so-called geniuses weren't homosexuals, they sought out prostitutes, like Toulouse Lautrec or even Van Gogh. A whirlwind began to spin within him and he felt terribly ashamed. How much more evolved than him his classmates appeared all at once, when until now, he lived with this chip on his shoulders, attributing their free ways to their money and to their social status, seeing them just as snobs. He indirectly blamed his mother for putting him in such a situation, for making him feel out of place among these people. Couldn't she have sent him to an ordinary public school where he would have met his equals and where the question of class would not have been an issue? He would have

developped normally, enjoying the normal pleasures of life, which would have made him withstand its drawbacks in a less acute manner than under the present circumstances. His background was *piccolo borghese* and he should never have tried to pretend otherwise, or being forced to do so *per la bella figura* . He also realized that what his mother loved in him was the image he was projecting to her environment. She would boast about the people he frequented and how he was so ‘well integrated’ in the circles of *la gente per bene* . Oh yes, she adored that son of hers and he could do no wrong, provided he continued to climb the social ladder.

With the Gibbons things had appeared so natural, so pleasant and easy-going, until ... until Samantha spoke about using him as a model. And it triggered all these considerations he had left till now in hibernation. They had bothered him like one of those black flies that occasionally breach your privacy and of which you rid yourself, inflicting your wrath upon it or better still killing it, if possible. And the incident would be forgotten. When Samantha insisted, Flavio meekly accepted. Soon thereafter, he asked to be excused, for the wine had gone to his head. He came back from the bathroom, relieved, and seeing how livid he had become, Samantha suggested that he take a rest in her own

bedroom. Before he could answer, he saw himself flung across the queen-sized bed of his host and being soon undressed. He half made a gesture of protestation but was devoid of any volition and minutes later he fell into a long slumber peopled with wild sensual images where succulent carnivorous flowers opened up to lure oversized red bananas then clutched them between their treacherous pincer-like hairs until, bit by bit, inexorably, their substance would be ingested.

When Flavio woke up, he saw Samantha lying by his side with a radiant smile on her lips. He then realized that they were both naked and tried to pull a corner of the bedsheet over his genitals. She softly dissuaded him and whispered: "Let me admire you as nature made you. I need to immerse myself in what is most intimate in your soul to be able, later, to produce a work of art." And she began to stroke the young man. Her touch was so smooth and her skin so enticing that Flavio gave up all resistance. He, in turn, now fully aroused, contemplated her body; it had a milky quality and her breasts were handsome in a frail way, he could almost hear her pores beckoning him. Lightning coursed his spine and he literally jumped out of his skin. He turned over, pressed the full weight of his body against hers while their mouths became

sealed, he then penetrated her and began making love to her wildly until they both exploded in each other's arms.

It had been so intense, so swift and at once so passionate, that the young man's thoughts had completely dissolved. And if at the outset he had felt some guilt, this had given way to a sensation of fulfilment and bliss, such as he'd never experienced before. His very first sexual encounter had been with a prostitute and the result had been disastrous.

It had produced in him a sense of shame and of lovelessness. He had had a couple of girlfriends but he couldn't make it with them, lest he would soil or, worse, violate their body, and they both left him, persuaded he was impotent and did not love them strongly enough.

Thereafter he contented himself with platonic relationships. He never told anybody of his deep frustrations and gave the impression, to his mother, at least, that he led a satisfactory life all round. Now that he had discovered passion - or was it more than that? - he looked upon his recent past as a total fraud, a lie that had spread in and around him like a cancer - he couldn't remember when it all started, or didn't want to.

He was overwhelmed by this sudden realization: how could a stranger, in such a short time, reverse one's destiny? The thought was at once awesome and exhilarating. This, however, would mean a break with

everything he had been led to believe in. He still didn't know how he would handle it, but it was bound to take place, sooner or later and he foresaw a confrontation with his mother, the person who counted most in his life -sofar, at least -, and whom he had never 'betrayed'.

The following afternoon, which was a Sunday, Flavio went to the Gibbons' for his first posing session, and if at first, he would blush, fearing that in the middle of the session he would have an erection, Samantha dispelled all such digressions with a straightforward remark. When she concentrated on her work, nothing counted but the fusion of her hands with matter and the slow, painstaking fashioning of the clay. Her model was an indispensable element of the process, but he remained an object and should be subservient to her art. There was no question of mixing or confusing their love-making with these spells of creativity. Nevertheless, when Jerry appeared to come and fetch a video disc he had left in the atelier, excusing himself - Samantha did not allow to be disturbed during those moments of gestation, by anyone -, something stirred in the young man, for his host's son sized him up with a strange flicker in his eyes, he looked on silently, expressing no feeling,

except that the sight of the young model seemed to make him feverish. He left the terrace, staring at Flavio.

The following weekend, as convened, Flavio stood at the Gibbons' apartment gate, his heart racing at a hundred beats per minute. He so looked forward to his meetings with Samantha, both as her model and her lover. She had added a new dimension in his life. He became all flustered when Jerry opened the door, announcing that his mother would be absent for two days and that she would be spending that time at a friend's house on the Amalfi coast. He reassured the young Italian that it didn't imply anything personal and that she hadn't forgotten him, but that every once in a while, she would take such decisions on the spur of the moment. Jerry invited him in, saying how pleased he was to have a private conversation with him. This surprised Flavio, since he didn't think that Jerry had an interest in him, apart from the fact that the young Italian was now attached to his mother. He always stood on the side, like a distant and benevolent observer, never speaking his mind. Flavio had rarely met a youth, barely older than him, with such a placid and philosophical attitude, for even though he knew so little of this boy, he had an inkling that nothing could really disturb him. Was it lack of

feeling, was it a sign of crass superficiality? How different he was from his exuberant, trail-blazing mother! And yet, they seemed to live in perfect symbiosis.

Jerry invited the young man to have a slice of panettone with grana cheese on the terrace, accompanied by Lambrusco wine. All the while he was showing him photo albums of their home in Vermont, and the people he grew up with, the host kept pouring wine into Flavio's glass until the latter got butterflies behind his lids. Jerry was not much more loquacious than his wont, but he looked pleased to share his childhood mementos with the young Italian. Flavio would enthuse about the autumn landscapes and the lavish wooden mansions, then there were the winter scenes which reminded him of the Christmas tales his mother would read to him when he was a little boy. Upon closing the last album, Jerry suggested that they go to his room, for he wanted Flavio to listen to the latest disco CDs he'd received from the States. Bleary-eyed and feeling very hot and sticky, the young Italian obliged.

"I think that before anything else, we should take a shower, we'll feel more comfortable" said Jerry, matter-of-factly, which astonished the young guest .

“Why not?” murmured Flavio, dazed, “I’ll have one after you, *prego* .”

“You needn’t wait for me, the shower is large enough for the two of us.” said Jerry without the shadow of a smile.

Though he found this proposition somewhat strange, Flavio did not have the strength to argue and he followed his guest to the bathroom. The frosted glass cubicle was indeed very capacious and contained two showers, one of which was fixed to the ceiling, the other hung against the wall and could be hand-held.

The two young men had slipped out of their clothes and Jerry opened the two taps, setting the pressure powerfully enough so that the water would flow in a pleasant luke-warm temperature. He then gently shoved Flavio under the ceiling shower. As the young Italian was beginning to relish the soothing effect of the water, he felt a hand stroke his shoulders and he opened his eyes. “What are you doing?” he asked meekly.

“Please relax,” said Jerry, as a light steam filled the cubicle, “I’ll massage your back with this fiber glove, you’ll feel great, believe me, I often do it to my mother.”

Flavio's head was spinning, but he let his host wash him, which he did with the expertise of a physiotherapist and it gave him goose pimples. Actually he was enjoying it, all the while he kept staring in front of him, for he didn't dare look at his guest, inasmuch as Jerry was now massaging his buttocks. The young Italian suddenly became aroused.

"Why am I letting him do this to me?" Flavio mutely lamented, yet he didn't budge to stop his host. "I could never have suspected he was gay. This is not for me, I'm not a homo. It's Samantha I want, not him. I ought to run away from here at once."

Then all of a sudden, he felt Jerry clutching his shoulders and forcing his entry inside of him and while he invested the most intimate region of Flavio's body, he began to nibble at the small of his back. Now his movements grew relentless and furious.

"I love you." Jerry whispered in the young Italian's ear and the latter could feel his hot breath tickling his neck.

That night, in spite of being totally spent by what had occurred in the Gibbons apartment, Flavio was very agitated. He fought against sleep, lest he might reveal things to his mother in his dreams which would give him away and create a scandal. His mind was battered.

He'd been so happy with the prospect of starting a new life with Samantha. She had opened his horizon. But now her son had undid everything to the point of destroying his newly won equilibrium. Worse even than that, there was a lingering pleasure in the violation of his body, like some kind of drug that he would be seeking after, again and again.

Nobody is aware of it, neither his schoolmates, nor, least of all, his beloved mother: after classes, Flavio now spends several evenings a week, selling his charms to rich men in the splendid woods of Villa Borghese. He intends emigrating to the United States as soon as he finishes college and he is paying his way to this aim, for San Francisco is the city where he wishes to settle; hasn't he read somewhere that it was the gay capital of the world?

A humanist with roots in Central, Southern Africa, and the Mediterranean, **Albert Russo** has been acclaimed by important authors, such as James Baldwin, Edmund White, Martin Tucker, Douglas Parmee of Oxford University, Adam Donaldson Powell, David Alexander, Richard Mathews, Joseph Kessel, Pierre Emmanuel, and Jean d'Ormesson, all three of the Académie Française, as well as by his African peers, Chinua Achebe and Maurice AMURI Mpala-Lutebele (University of Lubumbashi, DR Congo).

His seminal work, the **AFRICAN QUATUOR**, set in DR Congo, Rwanda and Burundi, has appeared in his own English and French versions, as well as in translations (Italian and Dutch), in over 20 editions worldwide. All in all, his work has been translated into about 15 languages. **SPEAK TO ME, MOTHER BELOVED** (2019) is dedicated to his adored mother and to POETRY, with about 140 poems and as many photos in both black and white and in color, that he took during his years on the four continents in which he has resided, and during his travels around the world. His last novel co-written with Jeanette Skirvin, **TEL AVIV'S ETHIOPIAN QUEEN**, was published in 2021 by l'Aleph in Sweden. His most recent French novel is **MÉMOIRES D'UN FILS DE NAZIS**.

Albert Russo's 50-odd books of photography have garnered awards in the USA, UK, Russia, France, including **Photography Vibes certificate of excellence 2009**, and **Artavita certificate of excellence 2020**. Some of his work has been exhibited in the **Louvre Museum**, at the **Espace Pierre Cardin**, both in Paris, in **Times Square, New York**, at the **Museum of Photography in Lausanne**, Switzerland, in **Art Berlin**, in Tokyo, in Moscow, etc. The former **Mayor of the Big Apple**, Mr. Bloomberg, has lauded his two **photobooks on Paris and New York**. Some of his novels and memoirs have also been filmed in English, with videos (90 and 100 minutes long).

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