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End Of A Great Life

“This has been a great life,” Franco mused, taking a slow sip from his now lukewarm cup of coffee.

Ordinarily, he would have opted for a sharp, concentrated espresso, but tonight he welcomed the indulgent passage of time. Sip by sip, the warmth gently dampened the edges of his moustache, a subtle, fleeting sensation he found strangely comforting. If only he could preserve this moment, stretch it into something infinite.

On most evenings, Franco would retreat to the attic, where the dormer window offered a quiet sanctuary. There, beneath the hush of twilight, he would lie back and lose himself in the constellations above. It was his refuge from the clamour of the world, a private escape from the relentless machinery of daily life.

Franco had built an extraordinary life. Once an ambitious young immigrant from Italy, he had arrived to America in pursuit of the elusive American Dream. Now, at thirty six, he stood tall and lean at six feet, the CEO of New York’s second largest architecture firm. He moved with the ease of someone who mastered his surroundings

successfully, affluent, and often seen among the city's elite. He possessed all the trappings of triumph: health, influence, wealth, and contentment. Life unfolded precisely as he envisioned it for as long as he could remember.

But now, everything was in question. One last conversation had unraveled it all.

To reach the attic, Franco climbed the staircase from the second floor, passing the narrow hallway that led to its entrance. Every time he made the ascent, he felt a quiet satisfaction, grateful he'd replaced the old pull down hatch that used to make access such a chore. Over the years, he transformed the once forgotten space into a personal retreat, a world entirely his own.

The room was rectangular, defined by clean lines and symmetry, with three windows, one on either side and a third positioned directly opposite the attic door. Each window was nestled beneath the peaks of the sloped roof, their triangular panes extending from the apex of the pitch down to the base of the dormer. Through this unique design, moonlight poured in unhindered, casting soft, silver beams that bathed the space in a gentle, ethereal glow.

Beneath the far window, Franco constructed a custom wooden frame, seamlessly integrated into the wall. It housed a series of drawers, carefully crafted to hold books, mementos, and personal relics. A lifelong traveler, Franco amassed a collection of artifacts from across the globe. Some were of modest significance, tokens of passing fascination, while others held profound sentimental value. Among them, one item stood above the rest: an ancient Bible inscribed in Hebrew, its delicate pages steeped in history. He paid a small fortune for it, not for its monetary worth, but for the weight it carried, a sacred piece of the past he could hold in his hands.

He sat on the edge of the dormer, quietly turning the pages, his thoughts adrift. On this particular night, the moonlight poured in with quiet intensity, casting silver across the worn text in his hands. Franco was a man of remarkable intellect, a true polymath, adept in many things and masterful in most. He set the Bible aside and lifted his now lukewarm coffee, taking a few contemplative sips before placing the cup on the small round table by the window. With a measured breath, he leaned back against the dormer, eyes drifting upward to the ceiling above.

He whispered to himself, almost inaudibly, “God, why must it be this way?”

This house had been a shared dream for Franco and his wife, Ciara. It possessed all the charm and beauty of the others they had considered, but it offered something rare, solitude, the kind Franco quietly longed for. Though he loved Ciara deeply, he often needed a refuge, a place to retreat into his thoughts. Ciara understood this about him, honouring his need for stillness. At the same time, she ensured the home echoed her own desires, most especially in the heart of it all: the kitchen.

The bright, sun drenched kitchen was among the first spaces Franco and Ciara renovated together, a shared vision brought to life. Designed to embrace natural light, the room was both functional and inviting, with generous counter space that encouraged Ciara’s culinary creativity. Cooking was more than a pastime for her; it was a joy, a ritual, an art form. And if she delighted in preparing meals, she took equal pleasure in savouring them.

Ciara stood just a few inches shorter than Franco, her figure soft and graceful, exuding a quiet confidence. Her olive green eyes held a kind of warmth that drew people in, and her radiant smile had a way of brightening

even the dullest corners of a room. Franco often remarked, half in jest, half in awe, that she reminded him of a Renaissance muse, a woman plucked from the pages of history. And to him, she was exactly that: timeless, luminous, and utterly captivating.

Every renovation within the house was the work of Franco's own hands, from the earliest architectural sketches to the careful selection of wood for the floors and cabinetry. He insisted on using only the most exquisite materials, personally carving each cabinet door and baseboard with meticulous precision. The house stood as his magnum opus, a testament to his craftsmanship and unwavering dedication. Every spare moment was devoted to its perfection. The hallways were lined with a plush, cushion like fabric, offering both elegance and warmth, while each room bore its own distinct theme, all conceived and realized by Franco himself. It was not merely a home, but a living embodiment of his vision.

Throughout his life, Franco maintained a red bound book of recollections, a private repository for memories that had once slipped away, only to reemerge in fleeting, lucid moments. Its contents remained a mystery to those

around him. Occasionally, he would sketch within its pages, most often capturing the grandeur of historic structures with a draftsman's precision and an artist's eye. Franco was, by nature, a problem solver, undaunted by complexity and invigorated by challenge. He often declared, with equal parts pride and certainty, that no puzzle was beyond his grasp. Gifted with both intellect and skill, he moved through the world with the quiet confidence of someone who truly believed there was nothing he could not do.

The red book was for Franco's eyes alone. He guarded it with unwavering vigilance, ensuring its contents remained a mystery, even to his wife. It was a sacred archive of memories, sketches, and secrets, sheltered from the world by both design and determination.

The dormer was one of Franco's most intricate projects, a labor of craftsmanship that demanded both patience and precision. He deliberated carefully over the choice of materials, weighing the qualities of mahogany against those of oak before ultimately selecting mahogany for its strength, elegance, and suitability to the task. Once the design had taken shape in his sketches and

the materials were in place, he began the meticulous assembly. The result was a trio of drawers, visually identical, yet only two were ordinary.

The third was exceptional by design. Shallower than its counterparts and incapable of fully opening, it concealed a hidden compartment, intentionally crafted to appear flawed. This secret cavity, just large enough to accommodate a hand, was lined with fireproof material, a safeguard for what Franco deemed irreplaceable. It was here that he concealed the red book: a private diary he had been keeping since the age of nine, filled with recollections, reflections, and confessions never meant for another soul.

To protect his sanctuary of thought, Franco destroyed every sketch, every note related to the dormer and its clandestine compartment. He left no trace of its existence. Even the mechanism to access the drawer had been rigged with deterrents, sharp nails embedded as a trap for the curious or the careless. Only Franco could open it without harm, guided by memory and instinct.

After a few sips of coffee, he unlocked the drawer and pressed the concealed trigger. With practiced care, he lifted the compartment and withdrew the red book. He

turned to a blank page, dated it, *September 13, 1981*, and began to write.

“This has been a great life,” he penned, his thoughts flowing for ten uninterrupted minutes, wandering through memories both warm and unsettling. One entry lingered in the air like smoke: a reference to meeting an old friend, and encountering someone who was no friend at all.

“Why has he come back after all this time? That life is long gone. None of this makes sense. What he spoke of... it changes everything.”

Ordinarily, he would have returned the red book to its hiding place, securing it against the world once more. But tonight was different. He left it on the table, conspicuously exposed, a rare break in habit, almost as if he were inviting discovery, or signalling a turning point.

Setting his coffee cup aside, Franco leaned back in his chair and let the starlight wash over him. Stargazing had become a nightly ritual since he and Ciara moved into the house seven years prior. Yet this evening, the stars offered no solace, only questions.

“Is this the right thing to do?”

The ritual, once comforting, now seemed infused with quiet dread. Something had shifted.

In the attic above, three massive wooden beams crisscrossed the ceiling. The central beam stretched from one window peak to the other, intersected by a heavy north south beam that bore the weight of the entire structure. Just above the junction, a narrow gap allowed room for a single inch thick rope to pass through. The rope, retrieved from the garage the night before, now hung in place, prepared with somber intent. Franco had been readying for this moment in silence.

He stood at the edge of the room, hesitation coiling inside him like a second heartbeat. He didn't want to follow through. And yet, what choice remained? It was this, or live with the unbearable weight of uncertainty. The noose was tied with exacting precision. A chair stood beneath it, tall enough to serve its grim purpose.

Franco lifted his coffee once more, stalling against the tide of inevitability.

“Self proclaimed greatest problem solver,” he muttered, bitterness lacing his voice.

“And now it’s come to this?”

He placed the cup down and rose. Approaching the chair, his thoughts turned to Ciara, sleeping peacefully downstairs. Pregnant. Vulnerable. Unaware. He longed to say goodbye, to whisper his love. But any deviation from routine might awaken her suspicion. Best to let her rest.

With trembling hands, he looped the noose around his neck. The coarse rope pressed against his skin as he exhaled slowly.

“Will my life flash before my eyes this time?”

A faint smile tugged at his lips, equal parts irony and sorrow.

He steadied himself, lifted his feet, and kicked the chair away. It fell in silence, cushioned by a pillow he placed earlier to soften the noise. Every detail had been considered. Nothing left to chance.

As the rope tightened, Franco’s body convulsed, the pain immediate and all consuming. Seconds stretched, each one a lifetime unto itself. And then, stillness. The only sound was the quiet groan of wood above, a final, haunting note in the symphony of a man who had once believed there was no puzzle he could not solve.

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