



## THE ITALIAN BOYFRIEND

BY ANTONIO MELE

Gunilla Karlsson's long awaited day had finally arrived. Her daughter Matilda was to bring her Italian boyfriend home, so that she and Magnus could meet him. Gunilla had been preoccupied since the day Matilda told her she was dating a boy from southern Italy. From that very first moment she felt she was about to lose her daughter and feared that if she wanted to see her again she would have to go to an unknown village in Italy. Matilda was her only child and it was important to her that her daughter chose the right boyfriend.

Gunilla had been busy all day, making sure that everything was perfect and under control before Matilda and her boyfriend arrived. She had been cleaning, dusting, vacuuming, shopping, and preparing food without pause. She had been quite worried about the dinner, what to cook and how to please the Italian boy, but thankfully Magnus had been most helpful and had found a nice and suitable Italian recipe on the Internet.

Five minutes to seven. The Italian boy and Matilda were about to arrive. Once again, Gunilla checked to see if she had forgotten something, but everything seemed to be under control. She looked at the table and felt proud of how elegantly she had laid it: four plates with a silver knife on their right side and a silver fork on the other side. Two glasses each: one for the water and one for the wine. Italian wine of course! Under the knives, three paper napkins carefully placed on top of each other: the one at the bottom was red, the one in the middle was white, and the one on top was green, just like the Italian flag. Four little white and green bowls with romantica tomatoes from Spain (she hadn't been able to find any Italian ones) were laid at the corners of the table. In the middle, a little Italian and a Swedish flag, and four candles around them. She had done everything possible to make sure that Matilda's boyfriend would feel at home, with all those colors to remind him of his beautiful country. Of course he would appreciate it.

Gunilla switched off the lights in the living room, now only illuminated by the low light of two lamps on the windowsill, two candles on the coffee table and a candelabrum. On the other two windowsills in the living room, two adventsljusstake were nicely placed.

She looked out the window facing the sea, checking to see if Matilda and her boyfriend were visible. Outside, it was wet and foggy. The lights from the Öresund Bridge were opaque, muted by the fog that had come down in Bjärred, almost giving Gunilla a sense of suffocation. She thought about all the things that she could say to the Italian boy in



order to make him feel welcome, to show him her interest in his country and his culture. Together with Magnus, she had looked on the net for some information about Tratalias, the village in Sardinia where Matilda's boyfriend came from, but they hadn't found much. All the information was in Italian and the only thing they understood was that it was very small.

The doorbell finally rang and Gunilla quickly went to open the door. Magnus appeared from his study and followed his wife.

"Helloooo! Welcome, please come in," she said, hardly containing her enthusiasm.

"Mum, Dad, this is Mario," said Matilda while holding Mario's hand.

"Wow, you are so tall. Are you sure he is Italian, Matilda?" asked Gunilla, while they all laughed. They made their introductions and Gunilla rounded them off with a hearty

"Please, come on in."

Although she had always believed that beauty wasn't important, Gunilla had to admit that Mario was handsome. He had a nice athletic body and long legs. His hair was dark and short. His eyebrows were also dark, and he had large green eyes. Matilda had made a good choice. She showed the Italian guest in, and once he sat down on the sofa Magnus filled the glasses with white wine, a Santagostino Catarratto-Chardonnay from Sicily.

"*Skål* and welcome," said Gunilla.

"*Skål*," everybody intoned.

Gunilla put on an Italian CD, "*Ljuva Italienska Sångar*." She had bought it a couple of months before, when Matilda told her that she was dating an Italian boy. She looked at Mario while the first song of the album, "*Terra Promessa*" (Promised Land), by Eros Ramazzotti, played. But it seemed like he hadn't noticed the music. He kept on drinking his wine in little sips and held Matilda's hand. Didn't he know that song? Perhaps she had bought an album of unknown Italian songs.

"Please, Matilda, ask him if he feels at home with the Italian music," asked Gunilla.

"He speaks English, Mum," replied Matilda.

"It does feel like home, thank you. Ramazzotti is good," answered Mario and took another sip of wine.



Gunilla smiled, lit two more candles and finally joined the others on the sofa. Now the whole family was happy and together.

“So Mario, how do you like Sweden?” asked Magnus.

“Well, it’s nice although I haven’t had the time to see much.”

“How long have you been in Sweden?” asked Gunilla.

“Five months,” replied Mario.

“And why did you come to Sweden?” asked Magnus with an enquiring tone.

“Well, you know, there isn’t so much to do in Italy if you don’t know somebody important. A friend of mine is running a restaurant in Malmö and he helped me to move to Sweden. He still helps me, actually.”

While Mario talked to Magnus, Gunilla thought about how hard it must have been for Mario to leave his family. Poor thing. And his mum must have been so sad, too. Everybody knows that Italian mums are very protective and close to their children. She felt lucky to be born in Sweden, where everybody had an opportunity, where there was no need to emigrate in order to find a job, no need to know somebody important: if you deserved it, you got the job. What’s more, people like her had the opportunity to help other people, like Mario.

Mario was now telling Magnus about his job as a washing up boy in an Italian restaurant in Malmö, and that he had taken the night off to come to meet them. Magnus told him about his job as associate professor at the department of electromagnetic theory at Lund University. He told Mario about the conferences he had been to in Italy, the wonderful weather, and the lovely food. They seemed to get along. Mario then told Magnus that he wanted to study engineering in Lund, as soon as his Swedish was good enough. By studying in Lund he would be closer to Matilda, who also studied there.

Matilda asked if she could drive Mario back, from Bjärred to Malmö, in case the dinner finished late so that he wouldn’t have to wait for the bus in the cold.

“Of course you will drive him home,” said Gunilla.

“Oh, you don’t need . . . it’s ok, you don’t need to worry . . . thank you,” said Mario while nervously rubbing his hands against his thighs.



“Is it common for Sicilian women to drive?” asked Gunilla.

“He is from Sardinia, Mum,” said Matilda as she took Mario’s hand again.

“Oh, sorry, I meant Sardinia—. So, do women drive there?” asked Gunilla, embarrassed about her mistake.

“Well, in the Middle Ages perhaps, it wasn’t that common, but women do drive now, even in Sardinia,” replied Mario while putting his glass of wine down on the coffee table.

Magnus looked at Gunilla, shaking his head; he had noticed Mario’s impolite answer. Matilda met Mario’s eyes. Nobody said anything for a few interminable minutes. The Italian music filled the silence.

Gunilla was rescued by the beeping sound from the oven and she rose abruptly to check on the lamb. It was almost ready. Just five more minutes.

The smell of lamb filled the house and made a romantic union with the song “Gente di Mare.” She really hoped that Mario would like the lamb. Of course it wasn’t like his mum’s, but she wasn’t a housewife like Mario’s mother. Instead, she worked as a pediatrician and had very little time at home. Still, she had managed to raise Matilda in a happy environment and she had missed nothing; Gunilla had taken her to ballet classes, guitar lessons, and choir practice. Twice a year they went on a family holiday together. That’s how it should be. She felt compassion for Mario’s mum, forced to stay at home, cooking and feeding the family. Poor thing. Gunilla thought about the Italian women she saw on the television program “Solens Mat”: they always looked sad and weak from all the hard work, washing their husbands’ clothes and raising children. Again Gunilla felt blessed to be born in such a modern and equal place. But what if Mario convinced Matilda to move to Italy? Would he also force her to stay home and push out babies?

The rack of lamb with Italian red wine sauce was finally ready, and Gunilla switched off the Italian music and asked everyone to take a seat at the dining table.

“Skål and very welcome,” said Gunilla while raising her glass of Asili di Barbaresco red.

“Skål,” everybody answered.

Everybody congratulated Gunilla on the lamb. Magnus repeated several times how good it was while Gunilla pointed out that it was thanks to Magnus, who had suggested the recipe. Matilda also said she loved the lamb and asked her mum how she had prepared it.



Gunilla told her that it was just luck that it had come out so nicely. She said that it was an easy dish to make. All you needed to do was to sear the lamb and then put it in the oven for half an hour together with some dry red wine, onions and fresh herbs.

“They are right. It’s so nice,” Mario finally added.

Gunilla was curious to know more about Mario and his family, his life in Sardinia and in Sweden. She looked at him while he ate and wondered if he really liked the lamb or if he was just being polite. Matilda asked Mario if he wanted a refill and served him more potatoes. Gunilla suddenly felt anxious. Her daughter was just twenty-one but was already learning to behave like an Italian woman. Her gaze landed on the Italian and Swedish flags in the center of the table and she and noticed how different they were.

“Does your mum often cook lamb?” asked Gunilla.

“Actually, she doesn’t cook much. My father does most of the cooking.”

“And what does she do then?” asked Magnus holding his fork midair.

“She works as a kindergarten teacher.”

Gunilla could no longer picture Mario’s mother in her head. She had envisaged her wearing an apron and walking around the house on fat legs. But now that image disappeared and Gunilla became even more curious about this atypical Italian family. There were so many things that Gunilla wanted to know about Mario, but she didn’t know where to start. And he hadn’t been very nice when she had confused Sardinia with Sicily. She just wanted to know about him. She was just being polite and showing an interest in the guest. Maybe he had misunderstood her.

“Was your mum your teacher at the kindergarten?” asked Magnus.

“No, she only started ten years ago. I went to a Catholic kindergarten, with the nuns.”

Gunilla thought about the crucifixes they always showed on TV when they talked about the Italian schools. She had heard a lot about the way nuns educated kids. She’d heard that they were allowed to hit them and that they didn’t have a very structured pedagogical method. Poor Mario.

“Did they hit you? Did they shout a lot?” Gunilla asked.

“Who?” wondered Mario.



“The nuns. Their hard methods are well known,” Gunilla replied.

“Well not to me,” Mario said. “In any case, I don’t remember them hitting me,” he added and he adjusted his napkin on his lap.

Magnus kicked Gunilla under the table, and with his eyes he told her that it was better to end that conversation.

It was quiet now. Mario sneezed and it echoed in the piano. Gunilla chose to believe what Mario said, although she still had her doubts. Maybe he had traumas and didn’t want them to bother him again. How stupid. She shouldn’t have asked such a question. She had to change the subject as quickly as possible.

“Do your parents know that you have a Swedish girlfriend?” Gunilla asked.

“They do,” Mario answered and looked at Matilda. “I also sent them a picture of us together and they said she is very beautiful.”

Well of course they said that. In Italy, what is important about a woman is her beauty. That’s exactly what they showed in “Videocracy,” the film Gunilla had seen at the cinema with her friends a few weeks before. Women were only sexual objects, forced to parade their bodies on Berlusconi’s TV channels. But Mario didn’t seem to be that kind of person.. Maybe being in Sweden for a few months had changed some of his views.

Dessert time arrived at last and Gunilla, Matilda, and Mario cleared the table and laid out the coffee cups and the plates for the blueberry pie. How nice to see an Italian boy helping out in the kitchen.

Gunilla’s pie was delicious. Magnus had three portions, but that was to be expected since he had always liked cakes and sweets. Even Mario and Matilda complimented her on the dessert several times.

After the coffee it was time for Matilda to drive Mario home. The dinner had gone well and Gunilla felt really happy that she had succeeded in pleasing her Italian guest. It had been lovely to meet him, to know about him, but most of all to deal with a person from a different culture. Magnus went back to his study. In the living room it was quiet again.



# Shipwrights

*The Review of De-Centered English*

From the window facing the sea, Gunilla watched Matilda and Mario get into the car, start the engine, and drive away. She watched until the taillights disappeared into the mist. Then she gazed at the Swedish flag hanging on the wall, illuminated by the garden lights. Further away, over the sea, it was all still foggy.

***ANTONIO MELE** is a native Italian speaker, and English is his second language. Since he moved to Sweden a few years ago he has studied modern languages at Malmö University and Lund University. He says that he inherited his passion for writing and telling stories from his grandmother.*