**Caragh Medlicott**

**The Roman Thief**

He steals with swift, simple hands in the yellow Roman sun. The crowds are bulging, swollen, and he bobs amongst them as silent as a jellyfish. At night his soul is stirred by bad dreams, his slumbered eyes perturbed by the glare of police lights. But not so in the day; in the day he is calm, and he is precise.

     There are tools to this trade. Thin knives for slicing handbags and rucksacks, tricks of the fingers, and shuffling movements which allow the hands to fish inside zipped pockets and withdraw with a phone or wallet. The thief doesn't do jewellery, though there can be better money in it. When he sees a distant tourist patting empty pockets, he is, for a brief moment, pricked with regret. But then he remembers. He remembers his wife and his son. And so, he moves onto the next.

     The outfit is important, there's an art to it. The thief has it easier, his skin is a canvas – a balanced starting point. But for Hari, for Christopher, for Omer, the game is harder and likely to end badly. The thief paints himself into the swathes of people, blending with cheap sunglasses, plain t-shirts, eternal khaki shorts. Pointillism.

     The thief has other jobs, too. He works cover shifts at a tourist-heavy pizzeria near the Trevi fountain. Lena gets him odd jobs with the cleaning agency she works for, though they must work different days so that Jakub is not left alone.

     Oh Jakub. Just three-years-old and such a sun; warm and vitalising. The thief has watched Jakub's white moon face turn golden from days outside. In the mornings, when he wakes him – buongiorno orsacchiotto – he hears his accented Italian echoed back as pure as a bell – buongiorno papà. It will be Jakub's authentic tongue, but not his only language, not if he's to make a bigger life.

     The thief speaks four languages. He sees the tourists with their big, oblivious faces – the monolinguals. And yet...it's not worth thinking about. Letting resentment seep into the process is like lead in the water. He doesn't wish to be bitter or sadistic, not in any profession.

     It is a bone-dry Thursday. Jakub has been dropped at the crumbling daycare and Lena has been walked to work. The manic traffic beeps its annoyance at the crowds barging the roads in oblivious swarms. Wobbling above the heads of the always-moving visitors are the national flags of a world of walking tours. The eternal city clings to its time-trampled ruins, the Roman Forum desolated by neglect and weather and people, but now, glorified once again. How they flock to see it.

     A bunch of pink-faced Americans with baseball caps and slow strides make for easy morning pickings. The thief leans against a wall counting his winnings. €260 in crisp notes. He could go home for the day. He tucks the money away as a black-haired bluster of a woman blows towards him. She's short, about his age, tipping 30.

     "Excuse me, scusa, do you speak English?"

     He nods and she exhales as if this is a rarity.

     "Do you have any smokes? I'm dying here."

     He retrieves a pack pinched from a backpack for Lena and flips the lid for her. She takes it without a thank you.

     "Got a light?"

     He shrugs.

     "Never mind, I have one."

     She pulls out a neat pack of matches and strikes one on the wall. "Oooh, eeeh," she inhales deeply as she lights the cigarette, "those crowds are something, huh?"

     He smiles distantly at her.

     "And next I'll be needing lunch. Lord knows if there's a place near."

     "In Rome, you're never far from lunch."

     "By Jove! He talks! What's that from, a postcard? I want somewhere good."

     "Good?"

     "I want the house wine for peanuts and pasta that brings you to the pearly gates. You know any places, Mr. Sunglasses?"

     He shrugs. "A few. You speak any Italian?"

     "No."

     "Then for you, perhaps, not so good."

     She exhales smoke. "Why don't you take me then?"

     He raises his eyebrows, appraises the small plump figure, and scrunched up face. Her is skin scarred with old acne, her expression is open like spring leaves.

     "Chill out gorgeous, you're not so cute. I'll pay you. What's a translator fee? Shall we say $200 an hour."

     The thief feels his eyes bug but he looks down quickly. She gets her purse – it's carefully tucked away in a pocket sewn into the inside of her jacket – and hands him €100. "A deposit."

     "Prego." He gestures for her to follow and she flicks the half-smoked cigarette to the floor.

     The thief moves fast and the woman keeps pace. The heat presses downwards from the sky, stacking itself on the cobbles. As they stray from the centre the roads fold, becoming twisted and thin. The noise of the crowds fades, the graffiti begins to crawl thicker along the walls. The thief turns to look at her and she smiles as a siren sounds nearby.

     "This better be some food."

     "S'. It is."

     The thief can feel sweat collecting around his nose, he puts his sunglasses on his head but is careful to keep looking forward. By the time they have reached the bistro his glasses are back in place.

     "This?" she asks, surprised but not disapproving. It's a small yellowed building sat between a barber's and a deli. Three small tables line the wall outside, the street is dirty and littered. Floating out the door is the heavenly smell of food, unidentifiable yet tangible, beckoning.

     "Come."

     They are seated with ease, the woman not saying anything, her Americanness is cloaked with just a few of his native words. An outside table, water, lunch.

     "Is there a menu?"

     He points to the board and she squints at it.

     "Okay. I know nothing. What are you having?"

     "Trippa."

     "Okay. I'll have the same."

     The dishes come steaming in a red sauce and the thief wastes no time in diving in. She watches apprehensively then does the same, muttering to herself; good thing I'm not vegetarian, huh?

     He finishes first. "It is good?"

     In response, she lifts her plate and licks it. "What was it?"

     He laughs. "Cow stomach."

     "Huh. And you promised me pasta."

     He smiles as she looks down the street. Silence settles between them.

     "So, what now?" All at once, she seems nervous, picking at her t-shirt and biting her nails.

     "Pay?"

     She shakes her head.

     "Caffe?"

     "No."

     He scratches the back of his neck. "Wine?"

     "Ah, yes. S', s'!"

     They drink it slow. The taste is dark, dry, nearly bitter. Outside the day passes in a clockwork of sunlight and shadows. Scooters zip down the street like flies. The thief regards the woman, her long hair a torrent of black framing dark, still eyes. A wide-cut mouth, thin and smirking.

     "I didn't ask your name," he says.

     "Jude. And you?"

     He laughs then looks away.

     "You know it's far less mysterious to make up a name than it is to ignore the question."

     "Who would like to be less mysterious?"

     She smiles slyly. "Good point."

     As the wine works its way into their cogs and coils, the conversation warms. Their limbs relax; shoulders fall forward, elbows find tables and legs stretch out to touch the curb. Jude has a sharp manner, quick-witted like she needs to get in first before someone says something terrible. She's not a babbler, they sit quietly as often as they talk, but with the wine running thicker in her veins, the thief's short questions begin to return longer answers.

     "And what is Brooklyn like?" he asks.

     "Shit, real shit, apart from where it's not, then it's cool," she stops to take another drag of her third cigarette, "I guess I mean, it's nice if you move there. Not so much if you're born there".

     He nods. "And you were born?"

     "Yeah, but I'm in the nice bit now."

     "Yet you stress?"

     "Huh?"

     He points to one of her bloody nails, bitten to the pulp.

     "Yes I'm always, a bit, jittery, I guess. I don't even notice I'm doing it." Her foot begins to tap under the table. "I've done some...challenging things. High-pressure job, high-pressure friends, high-pressure marriage, that kind of thing."

     He smiles. "You are married? That is nice."

     "Ha!" She drowns her wine. "Not anymore."

     "No?"

     "No."

     "What did he do?"

     "She didn't do anything, not really. My Dad died and I took it badly. As you would. My life kind of started falling apart."

     The thief refills her wine glass. "And now, you are in Rome, the most beautiful city in the world."

     She smiles. "I am."

     "Just a holiday?"

     "I'm not sure. I'm starting here, maybe more like a pilgrimage than a holiday."

     "Catholic?"

     "Not practising," she says sipping her wine.

     Jude keeps drinking and smoking, the thief moves onto water. His money-trained eyes can't help but watch the folded notes of cash flowing out from the tucked-away wallet in the secret pocket. She slips each note to him and sends him to order the wine. The money, at least, means something to him. He does not want it to file away or build towers; it's for cleaner clothes, clothes at all, food with colours, black and white letters.

     "You don't smoke," says Jude, her eyelids weighted with wine.

     The thief shakes his head.

     "Then why the–" she shakes the now half-empty cigarette carton at him and raises her eyebrows.

     "I found it on a wall."

     She shrugs, her eyebrows furrowed. The shadows are stretching out longer and the cafe is shutting until dinner, so the thief pays the bill and persuades Jude out her chair.

     "Where are you staying?" he asks.

     "Hotel."

     "You have the name? I'll walk you back."

     She gets up with uncertain legs. Fumbling with her phone she pulls up the hotel address and shows it to the thief. He nods and she puts the phone back in her pocket and links her arm through his. The thief feels a blossom of affection; tenderness like a prodded bruise.

     They begin the walk back to the centre and the streets feel different now. Lazy, idle, full of shuttered shops, and high open windows. Buttery afternoon sun melts onto the rooftops, then slopes down into the shadows of the narrow roads. Jude's head lolls as she walks, just touching his shoulder, she hiccups intermittently.

     The noise of the crowds hovers above their heads, an anxious presence, a hidden wasps' nest in the tree. The pavement is baking. Jude begins to wrestle with her jacket as they walk.

     "Please," he says and helps her take her arms out, one at a time, just as he does with Jakub after daycare.

     The patchwork inner pocket is a darker blue, contrasting just slightly with the lightness of the denim. The thief folds the jacket over his shoulder and relinks his arm with hers. He keeps Jude steady as the path begins to bustle and the cars crowd the road.

     "Here we are," he says, the hotel is white and faux Grecian – big pillars, stone ivy climbing the walls. Inside the thief can see bell boys pushing golden trolleys, huge white lilies stood in pale blue vases. The air con slips through a gap in the glass doors; delicious, fresh – it reminds him of a peach from the fridge.

     "Well," says Jude unlinking herself to stand opposite him.

The thief feels detached from himself like he's watching the scripted separation of two lovers in a movie. "Well," he says.

     Jude holds out her hand and he shakes it. "Pleasure to meet you."

     He nods in agreement.

     "And now," she says reclaiming her jacket, "your fee, sir".

     He shakes his head, "it is okay".

     She smiles "No?"

     "No."

     "You're alright, sunglasses, y'know that?"

     He puts his hand quickly to her face and kisses her on the other side of her scarred cheek. "Ciao," he says.

     "Ciao, indeed, ciao."

     And just like that Jude slips into the cool, white palace and the thief begins the long walk home.

     The tourists are still milling, loitering, cluttering the thief's path; there are bags hung loose on shoulders, backpacks partially unzipped, wallets peeking out of pockets – he touches none of them. Unbolting the locks and climbing the stairs to their apartment he finds Lena on the sofa singing to golden Jakub.

"Ciao," he kisses them both on the cheek and shuffles to the kitchen where the letters with the red words are stacked. He flicks through them, totalling the numbers. The living room window is open, the last sigh of sunlight settling on the clouds.

     Lena walks into the small kitchen and puts her arms around his waist. She exhales a small gasp at the large number shown on the calculator display. Before the thief can move Lena has already opened his bag and is flicking through the purses and wallets, turning out the notes with panic. The thief pulls out a thin leather wallet from his shorts pocket. He passes it to Lena who empties out the wad of notes, crisp and folded, a mix of euros and dollars. She pulls out the ID.

     "Jude," she reads then sighs, "dziękuję ci, Jude". Lena kisses the thief; a long, sweet kiss.

     Jakub squeals from the living room. The thief cranes his neck to see the small boy giggling and swatting at a large, white moth. It must have come in through the open window. Its dusty wings flutter, blowing like snow in the wind, dodging Jakub's prying, flying hands.

     "Eeee," squeals the boy. His hands encase the moth, it is trapped gently between his cupped palms.

     "Attento!" says the thief striding into the room. He scoops up the boy and lifts him to the window. "Mollare," he says, and the boy gently stretches his arms out the window. His hands come apart and the moth is carried away on a breeze, some of its powder still collected on Jakub's small fingers.

The thief places the boy back down. He stands for a moment, still and present. His tired eyes strain to watch the moth getting smaller and smaller, awayer and awayer, its white wings paling against the deepening sky, the trails of pink clouds and hazes of orange light conceding slowly, wearily, joyfully, to another summer evening in Roma.