



Stefania Zamagni

The Poppy Field



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A2/B1

The Poppy Field
By Stefania Zamagni, translated into English by Ruth Stephens
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Level A2/B1 (Intermediate) English audio-book
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1. Fabrizio's Dream

Listen to this story at: <http://soundcloud.com/imparareinglese-com/sets/the-poppy-field>

It's daybreak. The sun is just coming up; it's still early but Fabrizio is awake. This is his favourite time of day, when the world is still asleep and all is quiet.

The light is special at this hour. Fabrizio has often tried to capture it on canvas but has never managed it.

Fabrizio is an artist... On the floor beside the wardrobe is his latest work: a field of poppies bathed in sunlight. It's probably dry by now and he will be able to take it with the others to the city's art galleries, as he does every day in the hope of being able to exhibit them.

The walls of his flat are covered with his pictures; soon he'll have to find somewhere else to keep them. His studio flat is tiny: one room with a small kitchen and a bed. The bathroom is at the end of the corridor.

But the rent is not high and it's big enough for Fabrizio to paint in. Even so, it's been difficult lately for him to pay the rent each month and he needs to find a solution to his problems as soon as possible.

He stretches and decides to get up. Perhaps today he'll be lucky enough to find a gallery interested in his paintings.

After breakfast he gets dressed and begins to prepare his material. He decides to try a gallery in the centre – the best known in the city. It's not far, so he can walk – the exercise will be good for him.

As he walks, Fabrizio tries to think of what he will say, by way of introduction. But when he reaches the gallery and sees the display in its window of paintings by the celebrated artist Mantovani, his only thought is to turn around and go home. "Maybe I'll come back some other time."

He is about to turn and retrace his steps when he sees a young woman smiling at him from inside the gallery. She beckons him to come in.

"Good morning!"

"Good morning....I'm Fabrizio and .. erm.."

The girl smiles. "You've brought some paintings? Are they yours? Can I see them?"

Without waiting for a reply, she takes the paintings and studies them carefully, one at a time.

"Interesting" she says.

Fabrizio doesn't know what to say. He usually tries to make a good impression with a little speech he prepared, but today words fail him.

"I wonder what her name is?" is all that comes to him.

"Are you busy next Saturday?" she asks him.

Fabrizio is seized with panic.

"Is she asking me out?" he thinks.

"No, I'm free." he says, wondering what will come next.

There is a pause. Finally the girl gives him back the paintings and without any further questions

says "Good. On Saturday at 6 o'clock there will be an aperitivo here, and an exhibition of paintings by emerging artists. Bring your work here tomorrow and we'll put them on display."

She hands him a card with a name and telephone number.

"I'm Marianna. See you tomorrow." "OK. I'm Fabrizio..."

"I know. Tomorrow, then." Fabrizio walks out of the gallery almost without realising it.

He can't believe his luck. His paintings are going to be in an exhibition!

But who is this Marianna?

Glossary

daybreak - alba

canvas - tela

poppies - papaveri

art galleries - gallerie d'arte

exhibit - esporre

studio flat - monolocale

rent - affitto

stretch - distendere i muscoli

beckon - fare cenno

speech - discorso

words fail him - non ha parole

Exercise

True or False? (Vero o falso?)

1. Fabrizio's flat is very small
2. He doesn't have money to pay the rent.
3. The girl in the art gallery is unfriendly.
4. She agrees to buy some of Fabrizio's paintings.
5. Fabrizio will return to the gallery the next day.

2. Never Say Never

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The day of the exhibition arrives. Fabrizio knows this is his big chance.

The gallery is about to open and his paintings are on the walls. It's a strange feeling to see them hanging there ready to be viewed by the public. To show one's own work is a bit like revealing a part of oneself to strangers.

Fabrizio is nervous and impatient. His eyes are burning and his hands itch. Marianna comes towards him.

"Don't worry. Everything will be fine."

She squeezes his arm, looking into his eyes. That look gives him the reassurance he needs.

The bell rings, the door opens and the clients start coming in. The gallery staff serve cocktails and canapés to them as they arrive. People greet each other, chat, drink and file around the room in a continuous stream to see who is arriving. Clearly, this evening the gallery is the place to see and be seen!

There are at least a hundred people, yet Fabrizio notices that no one is looking at the paintings. Four artists are exhibiting, all young and unknown. For the gallery this is a gamble; no other gallery would take a risk of this kind but this is the most successful gallery in the city, so it can afford to take a risk.

Marianna introduces Fabrizio to one client after another. He smiles and nods but after a while he loses all sense of time. He has a glass in his hand that is mysteriously always full while his mind becomes ever less clear. He seems to be in the middle of a circle of lights, colours, people and laughter and everything blurs into a dream. Marianna is beautiful. But to Fabrizio, who is watching her, she seems unreachable.

He wakes up the next morning on a sofa in the gallery. He looks around him. There are empty glasses and the remains of food everywhere. The paintings are still on the walls, silent witnesses. He goes to look at them and sees that many of them have "sold" signs affixed to them, but not his.

Glossary

hanging - appesi

oneself - se stesso

itch - prudere

a gamble - un rischio

nod - annuire

unreachable - irraggiungibile

witness - testimone

Exercise

Put the events in order (Metti gli eventi in ordine)

1. Fabrizio wakes up on the gallery sofa the next morning!
2. Marianna introduces Fabrizio to potential clients.
3. The gallery opens and lots of guests arrive.
4. Fabrizio is nervous about exhibiting his paintings.
5. Fabrizio drinks too much.

3. From Dream to Reality

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Well, how bad can it get? Fabrizio has finally got to exhibit his paintings in a gallery and has sold nothing.

He's disappointed and humiliated.

He had thought this was the big break he'd been waiting for, but it hasn't worked out. What's more, he has a terrible headache.

And now he must find a way to earn some money or he won't even be able to pay the rent.

Damn!

He remembers that today is the very day the landlord will be calling to collect the rent money. He had been sure he would have good news for him but now he doesn't know what to do.

"I could go out so that he doesn't find me at home. Or lock the doors and windows and not answer the door. Or pretend to be ill. Or ask him to wait a few days. What shall I do?"

At that very moment there is a knock at the door. Fabrizio opens it.

"Good morning Signor Finelli, how are you? I've been expecting you."

"Good morning. I've come to collect the rent and really I'm in a bit of a hurry."

"Umm....about the rent....I really need to speak to you. You see, I was hoping things would have worked out better but I'm afraid they haven't."

"So?"

"So today I can't pay the rent."

"I see. And what do you propose to do in order to be able to go on living here?"

"I suppose giving you one of my paintings in lieu of rent would be out of the question? No? OK, well, could I paint your house for you?"

The next day Fabrizio finds himself at the door of Signor Finelli's house, armed with paint and brushes, ready to start.

He's brought all the materials he's going to need, but his spirits are at rock bottom.

This kind of painting is work that he hates. He rings the bell, takes a deep breath and grits his teeth.

This is something he has to do if he is to pay the rent! The door opens. Standing there in front of him is Marianna.

Glossary

big break - grande svolta

hasn't worked out - non ha funzionato

landlord - padrone di casa

in lieu of - al posto di

spirits - stato d'animo

at rock bottom - toccare il fondo

grits his teeth - stringe i denti

Exercise

True or false?

1. Fabrizio is happy because he sold some paintings.
2. He doesn't have the money to pay his landlord.
3. Fabrizio offers to paint a picture of Sig. Finelli's family.
4. He goes to Finelli's house to paint it.
5. He is surprised to meet Marianna there.

4. The Lucky Painting

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The surprise leaves Fabrizio lost for words.

Marianna doesn't seem to know what to say either, but then, slowly, she lets him in.

Fortunately, Signor Finelli arrives at that moment and takes control of the situation.

He leads Fabrizio up to the attic and shows him the walls that he is to paint.

Fabrizio nods and begins work, his thoughts only on the young woman he now knows lives in this house.

He works all day, hardly noticing the time passing, thinking only of Marianna.

It is nearly 7 o'clock when he finishes and Signor Finelli comes to inspect his work.

"Well, I have to say you've done a good job. My daughter would like you to come back tomorrow and paint her room"

"Perfect" thinks Fabrizio "Then I'll get to see her again"

The next day, Marianna keeps him company while he works. The time flies as they chat and laugh together. The following day is the same.

But then the job is finished and the rent paid for a month.

Fabrizio finds the courage to ask Marianna out, so the next evening finds them dining at an Indian restaurant. They both love the spicy flavours of Indian food and agree it is their favourite. They are perfectly at ease in each other's company and wish the evening could go on forever.

Marianna confides to him that she liked him at their first meeting and that she thinks his paintings are fantastic. Fabrizio offers to take her home to show her others.

As she had done at the gallery, Marianna studies the paintings carefully and in silence.

Then she turns to him and hugs him.

"You're very good. I really like them all, but especially this one," she says, pointing to The Poppy Field .

"It's my lucky painting. I finished it the day we met. The day I decided to visit your gallery" explained Fabrizio.

Mariana smiles: "Don't feel bad about not selling anything at the exhibition. We'll try again. I'm sure you'll do better next time!"

The days pass. Fabrizio feels he ought to start painting some new canvasses, but he finds it difficult to concentrate on his work. He can only think about Marianna, and when he will see her next.

They meet most days, sometimes only for a few minutes, but he lives for those times.

With Marianna he feels good. He's happy, they laugh a lot together and talk about everything and anything. He's always impatient to see her again.

In the months since they first met, they've been on picnics, visited a museum of modern art, eaten out, and even driven to the coast for a day's swimming and sunbathing. Everything they do seems special, because they are together.

But one day Marianna stops answering her phone. Fabrizio finds her at the gallery, and as soon as he sees her he realises that something has happened.

"I can't talk now, but my father has found out that we're going out together."

"And that's a problem?" asks Fabrizio.

"I'm afraid it is.... we'll talk about it later."

Marianna's voice is cold, and Fabrizio notices that her eyes are red. He can see from her expression that she is struggling to control herself.

He's worried. If the fact that they are going out together is a problem, what will this mean?

Glossary

inspect - controllare

keeps him company - gli fa compagnia

time flies - il tempo vola

spicy - piccante

at ease - a proprio agio

hug - abbracciare

Exercise

Put the events in order

1. Fabrizio and Marianna go out together.
2. Sig. Finelli is happy with Fabrizio's work.
3. Sig. Finelli finds out that Fabrizio and Marianna are going out.
4. Fabrizio takes Marianna home to show her his paintings.
5. Fabrizio paints Marianna's room too.

5. How Long Does Happiness Last?

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Days pass with no word from Marianna.

Then, finally, a letter arrives.

"Dear Fabrizio You can't know how many times these past days I've dialled your number or started to write to you. I wanted to explain what has happened and how I feel. When my parents found out that we were seeing each other, they were not happy. In fact, there was a big row. They don't approve of our relationship and have forced me to choose! Fabrizio, the days I've spent with you have been wonderful. But I can't go against my family with all that it would mean. I would lose everything – home, job, support. I'm sorry but I'm not as strong as you think I am. I wouldn't be able to survive. Can you understand me? Marianna"

Fabrizio is stunned.

He reads the letter again, twice over, to make sure he has understood it, but he still can't believe it. He has to see her!

He has to speak to her and hear these words from her own mouth, in order to really be sure that they are true!

He rushes out of the house and doesn't stop running until he reaches the Finellis' villa.

This time, the door is opened by the maid, who won't let him in.

Alerted to the situation, Signor Finelli appears and tells him to go away!

"I must see Marianna. I won't go away until I've spoken with her."

"Marianna doesn't want to see you any more. Go home!"

"It's not true! I don't believe it!" shouts Fabrizio.

Pushing Signor Finelli out of the way, Fabrizio rushes to Marianna's room. He finds her lying on the bed, crying.

He takes her in his arms and turns her face to his, but she won't look at him.

"Go away, Fabrizio, we can't see each other any more."

Between sobs, she adds,

"It's over, finished."

"No! It can't be!" At that moment, Signor Finelli, having followed Fabrizio up the stairs, enters the room and grabs him by the arm.

"I don't want to see you in this house ever again!

And for that matter, in your flat either.

Be out of it by next week.

Find somewhere else to live!"

Glossary

row - lite

stunned - sbalordito

grab - afferrare

flat - appartamento

Exercise

True or false?

1. Marianna phones Fabrizio.
2. Marianna's father insists that Marianna stop going out with Fabrizio.
3. Marianna comes to Fabrizio's flat to explain.
4. Marianna tells Fabrizio to go away.
5. Sig. Finelli tells Fabrizio to leave his flat.

6. An Artist's Life

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Montmartre, Paris.

The sun is shining in the little square, which is crowded with tourists. Fabrizio is walking among the artists who are selling their work to the tourists.

It's springtime, and a light breeze is blowing.

Fabrizio decides to sit at a table outside a little café to enjoy the spring day.

He has been living in Paris for 5 years now, and his life has changed a great deal.

He often thinks of Italy and, of course, of Marianna.

After that afternoon when Signor Finelli threw him out of the house, he never managed to see her again.

He remembers going back to his flat in a kind of trance. He just couldn't believe it was all over between them.

He had hoped that Marianna would have called him to try and put things right, but the phone didn't ring.

He hadn't heard from her again.

After a week he had left his flat and his old life.

As a farewell gesture. He had sent Marianna the painting of the poppy field. On its own, without a letter.

But there was still no response from her.

Beginning a new life in Paris had been hard at first.

He hadn't known anyone, and hadn't been able to speak or understand French.

But, little by little, he had learnt it.

Then, once he could speak, he had made new friends.

And he had worked, day and night!

He had taken a day job to pay the rent, while continuing to paint at night.

After a while, his fortunes had improved. People liked his paintings and they started to sell.

He found he no longer needed to worry about paying the rent, and was able to paint full time.

Is he happy?

He's not sure. He's stopped thinking about it.

For now he is satisfied with his life. He's able to dedicate himself entirely to what he has always enjoyed doing, and he has no money worries.

Sometimes he does feel homesick for his city back in Italy, but he has built a new life for himself in Paris and has no desire to change it.

In a week's time he is going home for a short visit. It'll be just a few days, to see his family and those friends that are still there.

This will be his first time in Bologna in 5 years and he is feeling a little nervous at the thought of it.

He is taking his girlfriend, Dominique, with him. They have been together for several months and it will be nice to show her where he was born and grew up.

He hasn't told her about Marianna, not yet.

After all, they may not even see her...

Glossary

crowded - affollato

springtime - primavera

breeze - brezza

farewell - addio

homesick - che ha nostalgia di casa

in a week's time - in una settimana

Exercise

Put the events in order

1. Life in Paris was difficult at first.
2. Fabrizio left his flat and Italy, and moved to Paris.
3. He became a successful painter.
4. In a week he will visit Bologna again.
5. It's a beautiful spring day!

7. The Poppy Field

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It's amazing how everything is the same, and yet different.

Fabrizio is back in his home town of Bologna. He recognises all the places – the shops and the buildings. But it all seems smaller than he had remembered.

All the friends and relatives he's visited have been delighted to see him. His girlfriend, Dominique, loves the scenery, and never tires of seeing new places. She has even learnt a bit of Italian, and enjoys practising it with everyone she meets.

It has been a good visit. It's almost time to leave for Paris again. But first, there is something Fabrizio feels he has to do.

He wants to see Marianna's gallery.

He doesn't know if he will have the courage to go in and see her, but he wants at least to see the place again.

As he leaves the house and walks in the direction of the gallery, he can feel his heart beginning to beat faster.

He turns the final street corner and there it is, the large window with several paintings on display. But the gallery seems to have changed. Maybe the business hasn't been going so well lately? It looks a bit run down. It's lost the air of luxury it once had.

Fabrizio stops to observe the gallery from the other side of the street. He can see Marianna inside, talking to a client.

An elderly couple are sitting on a bench just beside him. He can't help overhearing their conversation. They are talking about Marianna:

"When you think how well the gallery was doing before. And now, it's almost bankrupt!"

"It was inevitable when the daughter argued with her father. She lost his money, his contacts and her family's support. So she had to start all over again, and build a completely new network of clients and artists."

"Yes, it's not surprising that she's in debt. The art world is ruthless."

"But they say if she were to sell that lovely painting she has in the entrance, she could solve all her money problems!"

"She'd never do that. The painting has a sentimental value for her. It was the cause of the dispute with her father. She keeps it there, at the entrance, so that she will see it every day."

Fabrizio is curious.

He hadn't heard that Marianna had defied her father. It's news to him that she had, in the end, left home.

It can't have been easy for her, to make her own life, without help from her family.

From where he is standing, he can't see which painting the elderly couple were speaking of.

So, as an artist himself, he's naturally curious.

He crosses the street and approaches the gallery to get a better look.

He might even go in and say 'Hello' to Marianna, as an old friend.

When he reaches the door, he can see the painting.

As the old couple said, it's in the best position in the gallery, right near the door where everyone can see it.

It's a painting of a field, bathed in sunlight and covered with hundreds of poppies.

Glossary

scenery - paesaggio

heart - cuore

run down - malmesso

bankrupt - fallito

ruthless - senza pietà

defy - opporsi a

Exercise

True or false?

1. Fabrizio's friends and relatives were surprised to see him.
2. He arranges to meet Marianna again at the art gallery.
3. Marianna argued with her father.
4. The gallery is very successful.
5. Marianna still has Fabrizio's lucky painting!

Solutions

Chapter 1

1. T 2. T 3. F 4. F 5. T

Chapter 2

a. 4 b. 3 c. 2 d. 5 e. 1

Chapter 3

1. F 2. T 3. F 4. T 5. T

Chapter 4

a. 2 b. 5 c. 1 d. 4 e. 3

Chapter 5

1. F 2. T 3. F 4. T 5. T

Chapter 6

a. 5 b. 2 c. 1 d. 3 e. 4

Chapter 7

1. F 2. F 3. T 4. F 5. T