

## TAKEN

The day was unremarkable except for a call from a seller on Craig's list, a woman interested in divesting of her Honda Ex. The voice amplified a strong-willed, thirty something Italian, confident of her non-nonsense business savvy and her way with people. The sounds alone captivated me; her foreign inflection trailing rhythms in my brain that somehow repeated themselves long after the point in which she spoke, as if she were privy to the miracle of suspension itself, the ability to float anything in the air, regardless of weight.

She began. "This car could only have leather. I had it put in originally, so it's easy to clean, and it's all top quality. Low mileage too, only \$24,000. Yes, it has a few nicks here and there but if you had a look at this special matching gloss paint I use, given to me especially by the dealers, you'd see how it works over the blemishes, so you don't really see them. I didn't tell you yet about the auto mechanic who put in a keyless trunk release for me as well; it's a specially-made Honda feature for older cars that you're not going to find elsewhere."

She let the details drop, mentioning the increasingly remarkable, unremarkably. Already I was leaning forward, sensing this car that could be mine.

"You know I bought it over in your parts. I was such a hit with those East Bay dealers; they hired me on the spot but I didn't last the week. Oh, I sold plenty of cars but it's a seedy auto joint, no ethics in any of them. Had 'em

all amazed though that I could coral buyers by actually being honest. So, hey! You want to meet?”

We agreed to do so the following day. She picked me up at the Sheraton fifteen minutes late, with a few trailing apologies.

“That’s okay, “ I assured her. “You’re here.” But she went on as if I hadn’t answered. “Before I could never have said that, acknowledge just that. Now, it can be okay with you because I gave you a simple apology.”

“Sure, good” I said. If she heard me answer, it certainly wasn’t the point.

“And, I can’t tell you how my mother tried to screw me up.” She drove with determination, through the snarly traffic and recollection both. “Such a wicked person, you know, pushed me to do things; then criticized me to no end behind closed doors if I didn’t represent her well. I had to leave Italy.”

It was easy for me to hear her out, like placing the carved details of her life on a board already cut for those pieces. The main piece--a girl/woman, competent, attractive but utterly discarded by a selfish mother, someone so unfeeling her own daughter had to put an ocean between them--made me unequivocally sympathetic. Indeed, I had moved away from home to begin the process of reclaiming myself and toward the effervescent hope a fresh start could give.

“I guess that’s why it’s so important for me to do the right thing, you know, and because I gather by the way you’re looking at my car, you’re interested.

That's right, huh?"

I conceded as much, letting her know I appreciated the features, and leaving out that I'd been looking for months.

"So, here's the thing, I showed it to another guy last night who said he wanted it but he couldn't give me the money then. I told him, of course, that it wouldn't be right to have you come all the way into the city if he wasn't interested in buying and would lose the deal if he didn't respond quickly enough. But he said he'd risk it and have you come in. He said he'd let me know later today or tomorrow. So, as it turns out, you're both interested and I do want to be fair. You spoke to me first about it; he saw it first. I owe it to both of you, but just between you and me, I think he really blew it."

The unexpected revelation was like an invitation, like conversation warming, like my turn to finally and fully enter in. "And his price?"

"\$10,500 but he's willing to go up \$500.00. Still, he's pushing, of course, for \$10,500."

"Well, I could do the same plus a hundred," I offered. And I'll pay you on the spot."

"Can't do that," she said. "I am completing the final transactions of a loan. I can't technically give you the car right now. Besides, James IS interested and we've got to work out something where we can all be happy."

“But you only have one car,” wondering whether I really needed to waste air pointing that out.

“Yes, well, what I mean is, both of you should negotiate for it. Want to drive?” she asked.

The fast pop, pop, pop rhythm of our exchange signaled the start of a real negotiation but there was more here than I wanted to know. I took the keys, and sitting still asked out loud, “And what’s the point? She’s selling it, she has to decide!” So I turned defiantly and threw it back, threw it all back, forcefully, clearly and...to absolutely no effect. It seemed we’d all be waiting ’til next Monday, to figure out a means of resolution.

“Escalating the price up and up, flipping a coin? I couldn’t quite restrain my feelings for being caught in the absurdity. Nor could I let the conversation drop, now half stuck in the place she had already taken me to promote her version of the honorable exchange. Not to mention where my own quirky imagination took me—two walk-fatigued people desperate for some wheels calmly accepting the modern day duel, a coin toss. It was a contest where the only sane resolution, under the circumstances, might well have been to walk away, to avoid the inevitable unhooking one of us was bound to feel.

But the seller tirelessly and calmly continued. “We’ll work it out. We’ll figure it out on Monday, when the loan papers are mine and it’s officially my car to give away. And let’s just say I’ll cap the price at \$11,000. I’m not greedy. Just hungry. Lunch?”

For a moment, I straddled the line of possibility. ‘Hungry for what?’ I pulled myself into the driver’s seat, and drove, finally, getting to feel the smoothness of the ride, the delightfully fluid finish, and my own motor still going, even after I removed the key. I hoped the bite to eat would give me clarity or maybe just time. An hour had passed but it seemed longer. The backdrop of San Francisco announced only a hazy promise, like a fog sometimes does, momentarily, making it questionable what we see.

We breezed up and down hills for a while to find that bite, and the more we did, the more so many other realities rolled in. We talked, shared a story and then another, and another still, and as we began to hear ourselves, it seemed in another time and place, we might have managed being friends, laughing, perhaps in spite of ourselves, mirroring post modern women, alternately lamenting and letting the light of some breezy topic descend. Though the picture was crazed—enjoyment and wariness in equal measure—the ride itself was deliciously free. As gradually as the sun broke through the haze, I also took the turn. Sure, I told myself, it was a roll of the dice here but then, it was a gamble my freedom-lovin’ self was rearin’ to take.

A local café offered up pastas, and after we took our seats, she revealed her feelings returning to Rome and a mother she despised.

“It will be different now, “ she told me, steeling herself against the memories and the moment ahead. “I’m in control. I’ve grown up emotionally here. I needed American and San Francisco for that.”

Yes, to the different time then,” I said, acknowledging. And somehow, quite naturally actually. we both reached across the intercultural chasm to pick up our cameras, and in the way life sometimes encourages, through an empathy that only later fills in what we can’t quite see, we snapped each other across the table. Female comraderie was having its day, and I was back to being warmed by it.

It was a bit of a surprise then, when the buzz from her cell phone interrupted and pulled us both out of a fine female reverie. “I’m sure it’s James. He probably just wants to reassure me of his offer. No worries.”

She took the cell phone and with calm and anticipation, moved decisively outside with the call. Through the window pane, I could see smiles emerge. A woman sidling up to her phone, her unseen body flirting, and a man seen too but only by way of her smiles. A man no doubt intent on doing his best to give what was wanted vigorously back. Timing in both cases flawless, for the woman I saw was ripe to be flattered by a man I presumed who would enter this engagement with his own craft, showing a perfect attention to complete the quest.

In that moment, things did change. No matter what was inferred, discussed or planned, it finally struck me that the car was not for sale. I had been playing the starring role of glue, a bit role, nothing more.

As I am wont to do, I did call her back that weekend to follow up the plan the Italian had so forcefully insisted was the path to “car-dom.” “Oh, it’s

you. What, are you STILL interested?” The voice was now accusing and bored, but she still let her words float. “I’ll call you Sunday night.”

I marveled at the day before, how easily fairness could be played with, and how practiced she was at manufacturing the facts to fit the ending she most preferred. And perhaps most of all, how much her line that she had ‘grown up here’ was now hulking like a wordless joke between us, like chilled air, and like a person whose hypocrisy inevitably feels heavy and hard. She wasn’t about to take a second look.

But before you feel sorry for my part in the transaction, I should tell you this. She finally did make her final call to me. “James and I will be taking it from here.” No kidding. And I? Only an afternoon later, I got an incredible offer, a lovely higher-end Honda at lower cost from a guy whose mirror dangled a god symbol emphasizing guidance for right character. Taken? Yes, life has its tricks and some, if you wait them out, are pretty fine indeed.