

As one comes down the old road from Rimini, near Cesena, the forest oaks form a pleasant, secure umbrella against the scorching heat. After some ten meandering kilometers, at the top of a hill that the road cuts through, one catches a glimpse of the Castello Mardi. Its roofs shine in the afternoon sun, and it seems as though it has fused at a slant with the gentle surroundings.

Come nearer and it offers the chance to examine renowned frescoes and study all the beauty of early Renaissance architectural skill. One may also descend the two hundred thirteen steps that lead to the dungeon in which Enzo Strecti, that giant of Renaissance literature, spent days of hardship awaiting his death. He was the main reason I decided to visit Mardi Castle.

There were three of us, two girls and I, on a beautiful summer day, which was reflected in the red faces of the breathless friar-caretakers of the castle and its garden. They directed us — “*a destra, a destra*” — toward the tourist portion of the edifice. All the way to where the friar sold the tickets and offered select information about the history of the castle, we could feel a slight draft and smell the damp coming through the dungeon bars at the bottom of the wall. Here and there we could see a sword or mace or hear a voice from the cellar, as if Strecti himself were still protesting his innocence.

The first thing I noticed about the friar, with whom it turned out I was to stay until evening, was his unruly hair and luxuriant curls, hanging like bunches of grapes all about his round face. He waited for us, the tickets in his outstretched hands and a prepared smile of warm welcome on his face. There followed a lecture on the most interesting curiosities of the castle and then — because, as he put it, one has to make a living — he requested five thousand lire for the free tour. While he was putting the money into a box, probably in order to break the awkward silence that had followed his last words, he asked kindly, “*Da dove venite, ragazze?* (Where are you girls from?)”

Marianna said, “*La Francia,*” Irena said the same, and he turned to me and asked, “*E tu, bambino?* (And you, child?)”

“*Sono bosniaco* (I’m a Bosnian),” I said reservedly, which made the friar suddenly break into loud laughter and blurt out, looking me straight in the eye, “*Bang, bang. Eh? Eh? Bosniaco. Bang, bang.*”

I stood before him, utterly bewildered, unable to think of any words in Italian that might serve as a response. “*Capisci? Bang, bang,*” he said again, this time without gesturing in my face, waiting for a reaction to his all too obvious joke: it was the summer of 1995.

“We should get going,” said the girls, who were ready for the tour.

“Man this guy’s nuts,” I told them, looking at the stiff grimace on his face, upon which he answered with yet another surprise, uttered in Croatian: “Maybe nuts but safe at least, eh? What do you say to that, Bosnian?”

“I’d better listen to the girls,” I said. Suddenly he grabbed my hand and changed his tone. Once again he was the pleasant friar selling tickets, maybe even more pleasant because of the language only the two of us in the room and, it would seem, the general vicinity, shared.

“Just a joke, eh? *Capisci?* No harm intended. It’s been a long time since I saw

anybody from home. At least up close.”

That was the first time I wondered how old he might be. Only after he had mentioned time and suggested proof of his age, putting his hand on mine long enough for its surface to remind me of a layer of cream cut through with barely visible veins, only then did I look at him more carefully. Later I understood that he was over sixty-five.

There was a brief moment of silence, and you could hear the girls in the next room, admiring the accomplishments of Renaissance wall painting.

“I’m an exile, an *esulo*,’ like you a little,” he went on, without letting me interrupt.

I tried to explain that I was in a hurry. He let go of my hand and said, “I wouldn’t want you to be angry. It was just a joke. You’re not mad, are you? It must make you happy that I speak so well. Before you is living proof that the language of one’s early days is not easily forgotten. That feeling doesn’t grow old, you know. Yes, yes, no more *terra nostra*. Good-bye. Never again, *mai più*, back home. Bang, bang, like I said. See you when we free you, as they used to put it. Isn’t that right? Or am I making things up?”

He didn’t wait for my answer.

“I haven’t run into anyone from there for a long time, a really long time. Forgive me. Have a cigarette. I wouldn’t want to part with yet another Slav this way. You’re not angry? Are we okay?”

In the hope of getting rid of him for good, I said it hadn’t even crossed my mind, I was just a little unpleasantly surprised, I didn’t want to talk about it, I was on vacation, I was in the company of two angels who didn’t like to wait and, besides, I had paid for the ticket, so it wouldn’t be right for me not to see where the renowned Enzo Strecci had spent his last days.

At this the friar gave a knowing grin. “Enzo Strecci, yes. Yes. Enzo the Great. You won’t believe it if I tell you that he was like you and me. No, you won’t believe it. Just like you and me.”

He uttered every syllable of the last phrase as if it were part of a plot, opening his eyes wide to emphasize our newfound closeness.

“Really?” I said with some interest.

He immediately went on, “Yes, really. I sometimes think that that’s the only reason I’m still here. As if all my life I’ve been executing other people’s wills. Others know better than I that that is not an easy thing to do. ‘Let what has come upon me be remembered,’ as Enzo says somewhere in his book of poetry, if I remember correctly.”

I nodded. It was clear that we could share an interest in Strecci if the connection between us rested on a firmer foundation. As I write about it today, I think it was just then that I tried for the last time to remedy the tiny misstep on our intended journey into the Renaissance. But I didn’t get far. It’s a point of personal consolation to me that I stayed with the friar that whole afternoon. And, in the end, that is what made this story possible.

I had taken a few steps in the direction the girls had disappeared when he called me back and, his face to the window, began to speak. I looked at his bent round back, and that was how it began, when he stretched out his hand and said, “Come here. Look. That way there, up the hill, that’s the path on which Enzo Strecci, the handsome Lombardian, came to this place. Come. Take a look at that path.”

I couldn’t leave him after that.