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Michelino: a Gay Short Story

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(Author's Note: This is one of many chapters in an as yet unnamed mystery novel, but this character portrait can be read separately.)

MICHELINO

San Nicandro Garganico is a poor town in the Mezzogiorno of Italy. It is a few kilometers from the Adriatic Coast on the Gargano Peninsula. The original town was even closer to the Adriatic, but as each country bordering on the Mediterranean grew into its phase of dominance of the *Mare Nostrum*, San Nicandro was invaded, pillaged, its women abducted and/or raped, and its land and town destroyed or colonized as the invaders made them slaves/servants. In an attempt to protect themselves from the invaders who came by sea, the inhabitants moved to a high hill further inland at some time during the 12th century. It didn't help. It just made it more difficult for the invaders but they always eventually plundered the town.

It was here in this small town where his father was born that Michelino met Vincenzo, his lover for the past two years. It was from his cousin Sandro that he heard the story of Vincenzo. Sandro was a sexual opportunist. He loved men and he loved women. He knew that Michelino and Vincenzo were partners and he also knew from his own sexual experiences, that though Italians were becoming more tolerant of difference in sexuality, one never, ever, talked of making love to another man. One talked of conquering the "finocchio" who hung around the beach at night, and how one took them for sexual pleasure, but one would never reveal the creation of an enduring and mutual love relationship between two men.

Sandro was Michelino's second cousin. He was the son of Michelino's grandfather, the brother of Sandro's father. Because Sandro's father was nearly two decades younger than his brother, Sandro and Michelino were of the same age, if genealogically of different generations. Michelino liked Sandro immediately for his honesty and openness. As he relayed the story of

Vincenzo, Michelino also began to admire Sandro's sensitivity. Sandro began the story of Vincenzo.

"The first time I saw Vincenzo he was fishing near the Torre Mileto on the Adriatic, just a few kilometers from San Nicandro. I was walking toward the eastern rise of the sun and didn't know who it was at first, but what I did know was that this fellow had a great body with that body outlined against the sun. It was only as I passed him, looking down from high on the rocks that I could see it was Vincenzo Manduzo. We went to school together until his father said he needed Vincenzo for farming more than Vincenzo needed the state school to study literature. When his father came into the classroom to recruit Vincenzo to plow the land, Vincenzo had tears welling in his eyes as the entire class turned to watch Mr. Manduzo take his son by the ear and drag him from the class. Sadness even clouded the face of Signora Palmieri, our teacher who was usually expressionless and stern in her appearance, as the unwilling boy fell against the blackboard when his father first grabbed his ear. She looked sad, but she did nothing to stop the abduction. It was a common occurrence for overworked peasants in southern Italy to take their sons from education and put them to the task of putting food on the family table," Sandro said with sadness in his eyes.

"Vincenzo loved to read and even after his father dragged him from the classroom, on days when there was no work in the fields, Signora Palmieri allowed Vincenzo to sit in the back of the class and hear the lessons for that day. He was always reading. When others working hard in the fields took their "pranzo" and slept after eating, Vincenzo spent those three hours reading. He was better read than most of the students in our graduating class," Sandro related.

"Vincenzo took the exam for entrance to University and passed. He was 19 years old and was free of his father who had died the year before. Vincenzo had the blessing of his mother, who

also wanted Vincenzo to have an education, to travel to Ban to attend the University there. He studied law and eventually became the lawyer you met when you first came to San Nicandro. Everyone in the town seeks his advice and they all respect him. He has kept to himself these many years, but I have always suspected that like us, he, too, prefers the company of men to that of women. I am happy for him that he has found a lover in you, Michelino. I am also happy for you, for you could not find a better man in San Nicandro to love. He brings humor and humanity to everything that he does. He must be a wonderful lover,” Sandro said with curiosity in his eyes. Michelino couldn’t express in words what a wonderful lover Vincenzo was. Vincenzo was everything Michelino could want in a partner. Michelino had very little in the way of sexual experience. Other than a few encounters as an adolescent with friends who were curious about homosexuality but heterosexual, Michelino never experienced the touch of a man who loved him.

For the two years before his mother’s sudden death, Michelino was in San Nicandro building a relationship with Vincenzo. He went to his father’s hometown to escape the hectic life his father wanted to create for him.

Michelino was introduced to Vincenzo by Sandro one night in the town square in front of La Chiesa di Santa Maria del Carmine. An important way of socializing in San Nicandro, as it is in most Italian towns, is the evening walk. Between the hours of nine and midnight or even later in the summer, everyone in the town gets dressed in their finest and walks slowly the distance on Via Umberto from the square in front of the Franciscan monastery at one end of the town to the square in front of the Church of Santa Maria del Carmine (Our Lady of Mount Carmel) at the other end. In each square there are benches for people to sit on, and along the way as well. Each night people stop and talk of politics, families, or whatever else is on their mind. Slowly, every

night, they walk up and down the street. If you don't get a chance to talk to someone during the first pass at the length of the street, you certainly will during the evening at some point. After that first introduction, Michelino and Vincenzo became inseparable during the evening walks in the small town. The electricity of immediate and mutual attraction had powered them both into a quick friendship that had the potential to develop into more.

After a few nights of "passé are" together, however, the two realized, with the help of Sandro, that they were becoming a topic of conversation for the local gossips who began to note that they were spending so much time alone together, oblivious to everyone else walking between the two squares. They decided to move their meetings from the public eye to a pub in San Severo operated by an American ex-patriot called *O'Malley's*. God only knows why a bar in southern Italy is called *O'Malley's*, but they made a date to meet there at ten p.m. the following evening.

They drove in separate cars through the farmland, forests and olive groves that surrounded San Nicandro in darkness once the sun went down. There is only one road from San Nicandro to San Severo. The winding, mysterious two-lane road was what they both needed to travel to reach the rendezvous. When Michelino realized that the auto behind him was Vincenzo's little Fiat, the compact car he need to negotiate the narrow lanes of San Nicandro's 12th century streets, he pulled over onto a wide shoulder to let the car pass. If the car were not Vincenzo's it would just pass him as he sat there waiting for the Fiat to make the last curve.

Sure enough, Vincenzo pulled in behind Michelino and parked the car. He walked up to Michelino's window and was laughing at the fact that he forgot they would be driving at the same time along this road and should have made plans just to park one of the cars outside the Village. Michelino giggled at the first foil in their master plan to escape discovery as lovers. The two decided to leave Vincenzo's car at an abandoned farmhouse his law office is overseeing for

the long dead owner's son who is working in France as a carpenter. As Vincenzo opened the *cancello* of the driveway, Michelino noticed the sign that read, "Vende" with Vincenzo's office phone number attached.

Michelino fell in love for sure with Vincenzo that night, but he also fell in love with the farmhouse just on the outskirts of San Nicandro. Vincenzo ran up the driveway in a slow trot to where Michelino had parked his Alfa, as he opened the door to get in, Michelino implored him for look at the farmhouse. Vincenzo immediately said, "Sure," and they walked up to the thick, wide, weatherworn door. Vincenzo reached into the folds of the awning drawn shut over the door and pulled out a set of large keys that he had hidden there in case a prospective client might want to see the property.

The door opened to a room darker than the night that was lighted by an almost full moon. When Vincenzo threw the switch and Michelino saw the room for the first time, his heart jumped and he knew he wanted the place for himself and, if things turned out as he desired, also for Vincenzo. An isolated place like this would be a perfect hideaway for the budding romance between the two.

The walls of the house were made of stone from Apricena, a nearby town famous for its quarries. When the door was first opened, one walked into a huge room with 15- foot ceilings. Off this room was a kitchen with a large storage room to the left and two bedrooms to the right. All the rooms were large except the kitchen and that small space would be called a "galley kitchen" in the U.S., but even this undersized area had the 15- foot ceiling. The house was fully furnished but everything was covered in large drop cloths to keep things clean and protected while the owner was away.

Once they had removed the defensive cloths, Michelino began to draw in the beauty of the

place. The main room served as a dining room and a living room. On one side, there was a large heavy table with chairs to match. The table was deeply stressed from years of use, but if sold at auction, would bring enormous sums of money. It was hand made from local wood and left in its natural state. The same was true of the chairs. On the table was a hand-crocheted tablecloth as intricate in its design as any Michelino had seen. The floors were newly placed and made of a green, olive-colored ceramic tile and covered the terrain of each room including the kitchen. The *soggiorno* or living area of the large room was outfitted with a heavy brown leather sofa and two matching armchairs that faced a small fireplace constructed of the same Apricenan stone as the walls. Small tables were placed in front of the sofa and next to each chair. The room was sparsely furnished but what was there spoke of the good taste of the owner.

One bedroom had a floor to ceiling armoire and a large double bed. At the foot of the bed was an enormous wooden chest, worn with age and like the dining room table, unfinished. Other than these few pieces, the room was bare as were the walls except for one large print that was held under glass in a frame made of cherry wood. It was a print of Carlo Crivelli's *Pieta* that Michelino had seen in the original at the Museum of Art in New York.

Michelino had always found the 15th century masterpiece intriguing. One day while resting at the Museum, he found himself facing the Crivelli piece, and the face of St. John jumped out at him. Created with tempura on wood, the piece is of Mary, the Mother of Jesus, Mary, the Magdalene, and St. John, with all of them at the foot of the cross holding the dead Jesus. All of the characters in the painting are crying at the sight of a dead Jesus but the face of John as portrayed seemed to express a real horror. Mary was painted in brighter colors, or so they seemed and this gave her the foreground. At least, she seemed brighter than John and the Magdalene. Jesus' hand is outside the coffin in which he has been placed. His hand is in a grasp

as if still alive. He is black in color with a tint of yellow as if jaundiced. Jesus' veins are protruding especially those in his left arm.

Mary, the Mother, is looking up into the face of Jesus. Magdalene is holding the left arm, looking down at its lifelessness. She is crying. There is an enormous contrast between her living skin, beautiful and pink, and the black skin of the dead Lord. Her hair is uncovered like that of St. John. Mother Mary's hair is covered.

John is looking up in a pleading, horrified expression at his dead "beloved". His eyes are tearing, teeth are showing, and his mouth is open as if in a wail. Michelino didn't see John's tears until he got up from the bench on which he was resting to look more closely at the painting. In this farmhouse in San Nicandro, he looked again at the painting reproduced in this fine print and noticed the delicate hairs around the nipples, and the dark hairs below the navel that grew in thickness as they approached Jesus' groin. As he noticed this, Vincenzo startled Michelino as he hugged him from behind. Michelino was in such concentration he didn't hear Vincenzo enter the room, the room that must have been the master bedroom of the owner.

Michelino was willingly drawn from the intriguing print by a number of kisses Vincenzo was planting on the back and sides of his neck. Vincenzo put his arms under the thighs of his lighter friend and gently lifted him in the direction of the room's bed.

Michelino forgot the Crivelli and his own reflective attempts at understanding the relationship between John and Jesus to enjoy the physical pleasures of what became his profound and first love. But they both agreed that they would keep the Crivelli print and bought it from the owner when they purchased the farmhouse.

Life passed simply and elegantly at the same time for the happy friends and lovers. In bed, the earth moved, and usually because of their growing and deepening affection for one another. One

night after lovemaking, Michelino actually laughed as he said that the earth moved for him that night. Vincenzo responded that it probably really did move.

“San Nicandro, the Gargano peninsula, and indeed, all of the province of Puglia in Southern Italy is an area of continuing seismic activity. Several years ago, in San Giuliano di Puglia, school children were killed during an earthquake and San Giuliano is only 100 Km from San Nicandro Garganico. Lido del Sole, a popular beach community in Rodi Garganico some 20 Km from this farmhouse experienced a small quake last summer and this past February, San Nicandro itself felt slight tremors,” he said.

For a year, Michelino and Vincenzo lived together in that farmhouse in San Nicandro, enjoying the fruits of the trees chosen with care by centuries of previous owners. The vegetables were still volunteering their wares after years of neglect, and the local community served as a giant “mercato” as Michelino searched for just the right pieces to heighten the already rustic feeling of the home the couple shared.

As Vincenzo worked, and Michelino undertook the restoration of the farmhouse and its grounds, they became part of the life of the village and enjoyed its unifying rhythms marked by the bells of the churches sitting in clusters around the town like the old women of the town, who are all dressed in black during their breaks from their work in the home.

They even attended the local church together on occasion. San Giorgio sits in the historic center of the town and was built during the 12th century as was most of the “new” town. It was recently restored by the state as were all the churches in the Gargano. It has chandeliers hanging from the ceiling, it was small and probably could hold about 200 people when full. In the center of the ceiling was one huge chandelier. The ambiance created by the lights was captivating, inspiring a spirituality in Michelino that he thought he had lost long ago.

The main altar of the church was dedicated to Our Lady of Constantinople and housed a huge statue of the Madonna and her Son. They are both dressed in real clothing made of golden threads. They each have gold crowns and when lighted, it is a spectacular sight. But why did a small town in Southern Italy have a devotion to an apparition that supposedly occurred in Istanbul centuries ago?

Vincenzo responded to Michelino by asking if there were churches dedicated to Our Lady of Fatima in the United States. Michelino assured him that, of course, there were such churches. “Well, ask yourself why a city in the United States would be dedicated to an apparition that happened in a small, poor French village over a century ago and you’ll have your answer as to why Our Lady of Constantinople is famous in San Nicandro,” Vincenzo said as he clearly made his point.

Vincenzo laughed as he continued, “It was probably the only statue of Our Lady that the Sannicandrese of the 12th century could find and afford.” Michelino grabbed Vincenzo and slid his arm through that of his lover as they both laughed and walked up the driveway to their home. It was the middle of July and Michelino and Vincenzo had been together for over a year, the house was appointed exactly as they wanted and Michelino was putting finishing touches of ambiance in place for the August holidays when he knew they would have at least one guest, his youngest nephew, Michael Podesta. Michael had been consecrated a Jesuit priest last year and was in Rome for further study. He thought of his Uncle Michelino as a second father, and Michelino thought of him as a son. They shared a mutual love and respect, though they had differences about the Church’s position on pelvic issues.

Michael arrived as expected and before going to see his uncle he called on the local priest to give his credentials and ask for permission to say Mass in local churches, or even help out at

Masses during the local holidays. The local priest agreed immediately, he was after all a second cousin to Michael's grandfather and he knew Michelino and Vincenzo very well if not about the depth and meaning of their personal relationship.

It was August 15th and Michael had already left the farmhouse to prepare for the first Mass of the holyday known as the Feast of the Assumption. Michael had taken Michelino's car and Michelino and Vincenzo were to follow at an appropriate time to hear Michael say Mass in the Church of San Giorgio. As Michelino and Vincenzo walked across the soggiorno to toward the open front door and Vincenzo's car in the driveway, the earth began to move. An earthquake was underway and they both ran to stand under the archway of the front door for protection.

The old stone house withstood the rather small tremors, but the wooden arch piece of the front door was centuries old like the doors themselves, heavy if beautiful wood. It gave way and divided Michelino and Vincenzo as they stood holding each other under the arch. The tremors soon stopped and Michelino noticed that Vincenzo lay on the floor just on the other side of the fallen wooden arch. Fully dressed for church in his best, Michelino smiled as he looked at Vincenzo and how handsome he was. He didn't realize that the arch had nicked Vincenzo at the precise spot in his temple that would cause death and that Vincenzo was killed in an instant.

Michael made the arrangements for Vincenzo's funeral in San Nicandro for his distraught uncle and received permission from Rome to stay until the beginning of October when the semester at the Gregorian would begin. Vincenzo was buried in the local cemetery in a small chapel that Michelino purchased for his lover. Michelino took the death stoically, but spent hours each day at the cappella in meditation on the loss of his lover. Some days Michael had a hard time convincing his Uncle that he had to leave because the cemetery was about to be locked for the night.

Michelino hated to go home to a bedroom empty of the real Vincenzo but a room filled with his lingering scents on clothes in the armoire or on pillows still on the bed. Michelino refused to change anything in the room. The Crivelli print that they both had liked still hung on the wall. Michelino began to notice how much death as portrayed by the 15th century looked so real. Vincenzo was black in his coffin, with the same yellow pallor. Michelino began to understand the pain and sorrow that St. John had felt after the crucifixion of his “beloved”. He understands why John would cry, why John would wail, why John would risk imprisonment to be with his now dead friend.

It was a print by El Greco, *St. Francis and Brother Leo*, that Michael had given them when they moved into the farmhouse and that they hung in the soggiorno that really began to fascinate Michelino. St. Francis of Assisi was always an important figure for him. He liked the most popular saint of the Counter Reformation because of his spirituality and his emphasis on making his life more in imitation of Jesus, more Christ-like. It was this print where Francis and his follower, Leo, are meditating on death and its point noting the brevity and vanity of life that helped Michelino to eventually cope with Vincenzo’s death and to concentrate his thoughts on those many moments of joy his love for Vincenzo had brought.

It was the eventual call to come home because his mother was on her deathbed that actually brought Michelino home after nearly a year of mourning in San Nicandro. It was also the recounting of these events in San Nicandro, and their confirmation by independent sources that confirmed for Seth Isola that neither Michelino Podesta or his nephew Michael could be the killers of the beloved Rosanna Podesta. Rosanna Podesta died of ingesting poison over a number of months, and during that time, both Michelino and his youngest nephew were in Italy.

Seth listened to the story of Michelino and Vincenzo in quiet attention. It was as though Michelino were reading a novel to him, a good novel, one that held your attention and you hated to see end because you genuinely liked the characters and wanted to hear more. But, however, the story ended and Michelino walked across the room in quiet steps as if out of respect for the recalled Vincenzo. He poured himself liquor from a crystal bottle, turned to Seth, held up the bottle in an offer to Seth, but Seth just stared as he shook his head, “No.”

What was it about Michelino that Seth found so attractive? He was a handsome man. He stood about 5’ 10”. He had the body of a swimmer, he was slender and taut. When he smiled, and today, that was hardly at all, Seth was dazzled by its warmth. Atop this temple of beauty was a solid, short head of black hair with little, shimmering strands of gray. He had killer eyes that were deep pools of blue not uncommon even for Southern Italians. What was uncommon was their ability to express without words what Michelino was thinking. His eyes were the windows on his soul. Today, Seth looked into those windows and saw a soul steeled with a gentle stoicism against the pain of Vincenzo’s death developed over years of believing *che sera, sera*. Seth saw a strength in this “pretty boy” that unlike most of the many “pretty boys” Seth had known, made Michelino look real and natural and not like one of the many models one might find in an Abercrombie and Fitch booklet. Michelino, Seth also noticed, had a soft voice that seemed inclusive and had the power to make you want to listen. It was a voice Seth wanted to hear in the pleasures of love.

Seth found himself jolted from his appraisal of this beauty in his presence by a knock at the study door. As Michelino walked to answer it, Seth thought that Michelino was innocent for sure. Seth also knew from weeks of tracking financial and interpersonal information that neither Michelino nor the nephew, Michael, had hired someone else to kill their mother and

grandmother.

A friend of Michelino was at the door, Michelino greeted him warmly, they kissed each other on the cheek and when Michelino finished introducing him to Seth, Seth said, “Well, that’s all the information I need today, Mr. Podesta. Thank you for your time.”

He paused for a second, choosing his words carefully and said, “I may have other questions later, but if I don’t, I do hope we meet again.”

Michelino smiled and said, “Thank you, Detective.”

When Seth was out the door he realized he didn’t say “Hello” or “Good-bye” to Michelino’s friend, nor did he remember his name. He and Michelino were alone, always, that afternoon, at least in Seth’s mind.

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