

## **I WILL TAKE YOU TO ISCHIA**

*a Deborah D'Addetta short story*

I will take you to Ischia.

It was not an invitation or a declaration of love from Mr. Amato, but a threat.

In his family, which for generations and generations (climbing all the way up to the French branch of the Kings of Naples, or at least, so Mrs. Amato liked to say) was all about lounging, there was a legend, and the legend was this: any person born under the blue-and-white-striped banner of the lineage would not be allowed to set foot on the green island, unless they intended to end their love affair.

You may wonder how they came to support such a thesis.

Well, the first separation, like any other first separations, took place quietly, and Mr. Amato's great-great-grandfather blamed a bad batch of oysters. The wife died. The second episode saw the daughter meet the same fate: during a pleasure trip she lost her husband, this time not to death, however, but to a very prosperous housekeeper from the Hotel Regina Isabella, whom he fled with. The third separation, they say three clues make a proof, happened to a cousin, a fool with half a skull cap burnt off from a childhood accident involving a pot of boiling oil, whose wife suddenly left him, right after a holiday in Ischia.

The bottom line was that: everyone in the family was forbidden to land on those shores.

Clearly, the ban was blatantly ignored by the younger offspring, who, however, were punctually dumped by their partners or found themselves in need to dump them. It was a veritable curse that gave prestige and credibility, if nothing else, to the noble dynasty.

Mr. Amato did not believe it at all: he labelled those stories as stupid beliefs, clinically assessing them as silly superstitions of his great-grandfather, grandmother, father, cousin, who had not had the courage to leave or, worse, to be left. Mrs. Amato, on the other hand, born Capasso, whose family didn't dawdle in lounges preferring to build them (it paid better), was rather worried by the frequency of divorces, deaths and disasters caused by the island's influence and so had never agreed to visit.

A Neapolitan never been to Ischia. The craziest thing.

The Amatos, combining his wealth and her love for squandering, had travelled around the world, but never to Ischia. Mr. Amato would often call his wife "stupid goat" for that story, and she would reply "ignorant fool", again for that story. They bickered all the time, even though they had no children, no dogs, no birds, over any nonsense, but above all because Mr. Amato had a great desire

to visit the thermal baths and cafés and churches of Ischia, while his lady did not.

Ten years passed, then twenty, thirty, forty, sixty. Having reached he the age of eighty-one and she of eighty-two, they decided to summarize their existence. They sat in the all-wood and marble living room, decaying and withered just like its masters, and they talked while sipping Cointreau. I will take you to Ischia, he said. Don't be silly, she said. Yes, it is time, he replied. No, it is not the time, she answered.

They went on like this for the better part of an hour, until the housekeeper, as flat-chested as a wheat field, rang the bell because dinner was ready.

The discussion resumed at the dinner table.

We are old now, dear, if we wanted to break up, we would have done it by now, he insisted. Don't tease fate, you never know, she insisted. I really don't understand why you insist on letting me die without having seen Ischia at least once, he replied. I never forbade you to go there alone, she retorted. But it wouldn't be the same thing, he objected. Of course not, you can't even tie your own shoes if you're alone, she pointed out. And the talk came to a halt.

Mr. Amato hated it when his wife treated him like a child.

In fact, he hated many things about her: that she treated him like a child, that she insisted on always wearing the same dress on Sundays, he hated the gurgling noise she made when she ate, the shaking in her left hand when she combed out those four hairs she had left, he hated her crooked legs and those horrible breasts that had always been saggy, even in her twenties, and he hated her voice.

Ultimately, he hated everything about his wife.

He wanted her dead. Croaked. Six feet under.

She probably knew it, and took revenge for that by treating him even worse. When they argued then, the worst offence was just to tell her "I will take you to Ischia".

Well, I'm going there instead, he resumed. No, you're not going, she resumed. And how are you going to stop me? he asked. You're clueless, she answered. And you are a stupid goat, he insulted. And you an ignorant fool, she insulted. Then I'm going, goodbye! he shouted, jumping suddenly up from the table (well, *suddenly* for an eighty-year-old man with rheumatism); and he walked into the living room, to sit down and think about what to do.

His wife followed him and reiterated that he could not. However, a memory had awakened in Mr. Amato, a reverberation of the moment before their wedding, when by chance he heard his betrothed crying in her sister's arms and saying no, I will not marry that hideous toad with a pisspot-shaped nose. He remembered that episode just then, sitting in the living room, who knows why. He definitely did not have a pisspot-shaped nose. Sure, it had been an arranged marriage, but his nose was fine. Anger, however, at that offence, one of many, maybe one *too* many, took hold of him.

He would have taken her to Ischia and left her, or rather murdered her.

The next day he had his suitcases packed by the housekeeper. Mrs. Amato, unable to take half a step without him, was forced to follow him. They set foot on the island on a dazzling June day, all blue and gold. Threats seemed far away: one certainly could not die on a day like that.

Mr. Amato still did not believe in the family curse, but was determined to push on the pedal of fate so as not to disprove that theory. The wife, for her part, immediately won over by the beauty of the place, instantly forgot that story: she spent big quid in boutiques, jewelry shops, restaurants and lidos, also regaining a certain youthful beauty, a vigor she had never felt before. It seemed a magical place and she reproached herself for having succumbed to superstition all that time.

Meanwhile, Mr. Amato's rancor grew more and more, and he poisoned himself with rage while she rejuvenated at a steady pace.

One evening, right on the terrace of the Hotel Regina Isabella, he tried to get her drunk, so that he could push her, make her fall into a precipice and pass the whole thing off as an accident. The result: he got drunk and nearly broke his neck slipping down the stairs of the first floor. His wife laughed, laughed a lot, telling him well done.

The grudge turned into pure hatred.

Another evening he tried to poison her by dissolving rat poison in the bottle of Evian she kept on her bedside table. Then he forgot about it and, feeling a powerful thirst at night, asked his wife to hand him a glass of water, which she had not even touched. As soon as a drop touched his tongue, he remembered, and threw the glass against a wall. Mrs. Amato laughed, she laughed a lot, you are a crazy old man, she said, just crazy.

You decide whether hatred can deteriorate into some other similar feeling, the fact remains that Mrs. Amato tried the murderous route too, without realizing that she was doing the very thing she had always wanted to avoid. Did she love her husband? No, of course not, she had never been able to suffer that pisspot-shaped nose, but the island was good for her, she was rejuvenating, so Mr. Amato might as well get out of her way.

Another evening, after the one on the terrace of the Hotel Regina Isabella, she tried to repay him with the same coin: she tripped him, with false nonchalance, even with elegance, but he resisted, clinging to a curtain. They pretended nothing happened. The second attempt almost succeeded: with the same indifference, she dropped the switched-on hairdryer into the tub where her husband was bathing. When she saw the device make sparks she almost screamed of pure joy, but then it all ended with a cloud of grey smoke and the man staring at her, naked and dried up, on the other side of the soaking tub. Even then, they pretended nothing happened.

Sorry dear, it just slipped out, she said. Don't worry dear, I saw, he said.

After three weeks on the island, neither of them had croaked, and indeed, their failed murder attempts had become so hilarious that they now perceived them as a game. Mr. Amato, however, began to convince himself that the island was really haunted because the lady didn't want to die, while the lady began to convince herself that those stories told by her husband's family were all bullshit, because Mr. Amato didn't want to die.

So, if death was not the way, they simply tried to dump each other.

One day, they were both lying on a padded sunbed on the beach of Citara, all the way to the west of the island, the husband said I'm leaving you and the wife said whatever. They remained lying there, sunbathing. That same evening the wife said now *I* am leaving you and the husband replied finally. But they finished the excellent spaghetti with clams that the chef had prepared especially for them. And they went on like this, with this pathetic repartee, for another three weeks.

What they both failed to realize was that the island did not like to be stressed. It was Ischia that decided the fate of its inhabitants or visitors, and as long as Mr. Amato forced his hand by poisoning water or risotto, and as long as Mrs. Amato "accidentally" pushed an old man down the stairs, She stood by without giving a hint. She would observe and then make her decisions.

That was the way She had so far assessed the predecessors of the Amato family: the great-great-grandfather had been tyrannized all his life by his wife and the island had selected for her a bad death: food poisoning. She had arranged for a fisherman to find those very sick oysters and for those sick oysters to reach only, and I mean *only*, the woman's mouth. Similarly, her daughter had been left by her husband, who could find nothing better than cuckolding her with the housekeeper, because he would later meet a woman who loved flat-chested woman in bed. Lastly, and only for the purposes of this story and to summarize, the crazy cousin had been dumped precisely because he was crazy and his wife deserved a better existence with someone who still had an unmarred brain and didn't repeat *slut slut slut* every quarter of an hour.

Ultimately it was none other but the island's own will or choice, that determined whether you'd end up dead or croaked and abandoned.

To take revenge, therefore, for Mr. and Mrs. Amato's interference, She orchestrated things this way: in a moment, in the middle of a curious truce between the two, Mr. Amato collapsed. Heart attack! screamed Mrs. Amato, quickly! completely forgetting that her husband was actually croaking as he had wished.

The doctor arrived and pronounced him dead. The lady's heart could not stand the shock, the ultimate insult from her husband who had wanted to die through no fault of her own. It was her turn to have a heart attack. She died for real, however. A few minutes later, as the doctor tried to give her heart massage, Mr. Amato woke up. The doctor could not stand the shock. He had a heart attack

too (it was the island's way of punishing him too, for who knows what crimes we are not interested in now).

When he saw Mrs. Amato on the ground, her husband wept bitterly, for he had played no part in that beautiful death. The island then placed right in front of his eyes a moon such as had never been seen before, a sign of unimaginable beauty, for those bumps and wrinkles of Selene reminded him so much of the bumps and wrinkles of his bride's face.

So he (relatively speaking) ran and ran until he reached the edge of a cliff, intending to jump off.

But then he thought: the family curse had worked! He had taken her to Ischia and in Ischia she had died. But she was dead because she believed *he* was dead. She had worried so much that her heart had exploded. Mr. Amato felt the sting of remorse. In the end, he had killed her, of course not voluntarily, but out of a blaze of prideful, belated love.

He felt guilty just for two minutes. The island quickly assessed the hollowness of his soul, which not even in the face of that realization had tried to redeem itself.

Fuck the old woman, thought Mr. Amato, fuck her to hell.

One of his shoes had a loose lace. By a "pure trick of fate", that lace slipped under the other shoe, Mr. Amato lost his balance and ended up in the ravine, shouting Anna, Anna!, his wife's name.

Thus ended the lives of the Amatos, who had wanted revenge on each other and who had instead been mocked by the island of Ischia, which cuddled up under that splendid moon, gloating at the thought of reuniting on its shores all the other members of the Amato family, who would surely have had to land there to recover the bodies of the spouses, and for whom, while She went to sleep, would have concocted the best deaths and the worst revenges.