

La Provenienza di Sully e Lina

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Published by Sweek.com

<https://web.sweek.com/profile/AgkDBQ8AZgYBBwAB>

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Excerpts contained within this work:

Blake, William. "Auguries of Innocence." Poetry Foundation,
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43650/auguries-of-innocence>. Accessed 18 October 2019.

Shelley, Percy Bysshe. "Ozymandias." Poetry Foundation,
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46565/ozymandias>. Accessed 18 October 2019.

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Rubyroconnor@gmail.com

Cover designed by Emma Clinton.

ISBN: 9789463677356

Part One

It was an unusually cool and windy night in April as she timidly walked the empty streets of Florence alone. A sudden downpour had surprised her, soaking her clothes and destroying the food she packed before running away. She would have ridiculed herself for not being more prepared, but nothing about this impulsive flight from her school trip had been thought through. When the chaperones retired to their own rooms after dinner, it was either go or give up. Now she was out, soaked to the skin, and freezing - but the thought of returning to her school trip a failure brought a lump to her throat. There simply had to be more than the monotony of boarding school and the sterile visits from her distant father. Without knowing where she was going or what she would do, she looked down the empty and dark street and somehow felt better there.

Lack of impulse control was quickly becoming her most distinguishable trait since transferring to this boarding school. Once her mother died, her father shuffled her along from country to country as his work called him away. One school after another, as though he couldn't bear to look at her. She shivered, continuing her walk as she tried to form a plan that didn't involve giving up and returning to explain her midnight walkabout to Mrs. Deever. That was a fate far too bleak to give any real consideration. *If I'm going to be in trouble anyway, she figured, I might as well really go for it.*

She giggled to herself as she thought of the entire trip stopping and searching for her. Mrs. Deever questioning all the girls only to discover that they didn't know anything. *You're gonna have to find me*, she thought with a laugh, *maybe I'll jump a ship. Then I'd leave that school a bonafide legend. Maybe the next one won't even take me!*

She turned the corner, stopping immediately as she saw two men at the far end of the alley. One appeared to be taller than the other in the distance, and they seemed to be in a fight of some sort. She watched quietly, unsure what she was feeling in her curiosity. Being born to a certain privilege left her relatively unafraid in situations, not really thinking in a negative way. Surely bad things happened, after all, but one shouldn't assume they **would** actually happen. She watched the two men tussle, wondering what might've started the fray when the taller man grasped the other. He turned the shorter man around, gripped his head and, in one quick motion, snapped his neck with an audible crack. Across the alley, she gasped aloud, shocked at what she just witnessed. This drew the attention of the tall man, who looked up at her as he dropped the limp body at his feet. Frightened, she stepped back into the shadows along the wall and held her breath.

The figure saw something move into the shadows after he heard the gasp, and he began marching toward the space to investigate the possible loose end. A harsh wind passed through the alley, and her still damp form shivered in response to the chill in the air but she found that she was strangely exhilarated at what she had just witnessed. She had never seen anyone so powerful before. As he approached, however, she realized he wasn't merely taller than the other man. His lanky,

somewhat gaunt frame seemed to grow with each step, looming over her as he approached. She looked up at him, her breath finally escaping her as her entire body shivered in the wind. He looked down, the aggression in his demeanor melting away as he realized she was just a frightened girl. Slowly, he reached out to touch her icy, trembling hands as her heart pounded in her chest. His hand was streaked in blood, inspiring a second startled gasp.

He looked at his hand, noticing the stain and pulling it back from her as he pulled his handkerchief and carefully wiped his hands clean before offering it a second time. His hand was very warm, and so large he was able to wrap it over both of her clutched, trembling ones. He said nothing, but there was a tenderness in his expression as he studied her. The warmth was calming, and as her heart seemed to slow to match his own she finally lifted her gaze to meet his. His large brown eyes lingered on her almost as though he'd never seen a girl before in his life. When the briefest smile passed over her upturned face, he gave her hands a gentle squeeze, tugging to coax her to accompany him. This again made her heart race, but she followed, unclasping her hands and tucking one into his crushing grip as they walked together in the night. She felt dizzy, anxious as she followed this man when all her classmates would have run away screaming.

She didn't want to scream. She wanted to know him.

They crossed the Ponte Amerigo Vespucci, and continued to a brightly colored residential building near the canal. He released her hand, collecting his keys to

unlock the gated entrance and continued down to his basement apartment with her following cautiously in the dark. The apartment was a simple studio with a tile floor and modest furniture. Quickly grabbing a chair from the table in the center of the space, he placed it near the radiator and gestured to invite her to it. As she shed the wet coat from her shoulders, he lifted it from her arm and offered a dry pair of his pajamas to her. She watched him walk to the corner to give her privacy, his back to her as she changed and draped her school uniform over the radiator. "I must look like a drowned rat," she mused softly, "I was completely caught in that downpour."

"Top-p-polin-no," he responded, speaking slowly to aid his terrible stammer while keeping his back to her. His deep voice surprising her after the long silence.

"To-po-l-lin-aa," he corrected, a playful but self-conscious expression on his face. He glanced back at her, his smirk finding confidence in her elated expression. Now dressed and warming by the radiator, he went to the small counter top and began slicing a bit of bread. "So you can speak," she asked innocently, "you just don't like to?" Without looking up, he responded simply, "H-hard-d." This strained response immediately made her self-conscious, aware of her intrusive and rude interest. "I'm sorry," she admitted, "I shouldn't ask. I'm always talking though, every adult I know tells me so. I talk too much. Always have. So..." She crossed her ankles, tucking them under the chair as she rested her hands in her lap. He carried the bread to the table, setting it at the center with a bottle of olive oil and one of balsamic. He looked up at her, his expression inviting and kind.

“Thank you,” she replied, leaving the radiator to join him at the table.

Taking a piece of bread and breaking it with her fingers, he watched her as she chewed small pieces, her focus lingering on his large bookcase. Her eyes scanned the stacks of books filling the shelves and spilling onto the floor near the bed. “You killed that man tonight,” she said without emotion, still surveying the titles, “Did he do something to you?” Once asked, she looked directly at him, intrigued but not accusing. He swallowed, shaking his head to answer her query but only stoking it further. “Was he a bad person? Did he do something terrible?” She took another bite, staring at him as he looked down at the table and shrugged in response. He failed to return her gaze, which confused her. It was as though he had never considered her questions before, but that seemed impossible to her. “Why did you do it?” she asked finally, her tone softer than before. He took another piece of bread, sopping up a bit of oil before he answered, “Wor-r-k.”

Silence filled the apartment, which immediately made her uneasy. She hated silence, and was undisciplined and poor at handling it. Before she could break it with whatever ramblings came to mind, however, he scribbled something onto a small pocket memo notebook which he kept in his breast pocket. Once finished, he turned it for her to read:

Why were you out in the rain, alone?

She skimmed the notepad before looking deeply into his eyes. Looking childish and guilty, she answered, "I ran away. I ran away from a school trip because I didn't want to return to England with the rest of the girls." Taking a torn piece of her bread, she pressed it the the small plate of oil on the table as her hand brushed his gently. It was his turn to stare at her, taking in her youthful expressions, which were both intensely self-conscious and totally oblivious to consequences. If she did fear an outcome, it was one only she decided to value in the first place. He turned back to his memo pad, underlining, "Why," in the previous sentence and placing it on the table. Holding the pencil at the word to express himself as she read, he looked at her for explanation. She thought a long time before saying, "I hate it. I really hate it. I feel like nobody in the world wants me there, and each day I'm being taught to sit still, look pretty and be part of this thing and I don't want to." She added after a moment of silence, "It's all meaningless."

Saying it aloud robbed her of all confidence, and she looked at her feet quietly for several moments. "I'll leave in the morning, once my clothes are dry if that's okay," she asked, "but please don't tell on me. Please don't send me back there."

She looked back up at him, her pale grey eyes pleading with him though she said nothing further. He turned back to his memo pad, writing a response with only the sound of the pencil lead dragging across the paper in the space. Turning it back to her, she read: