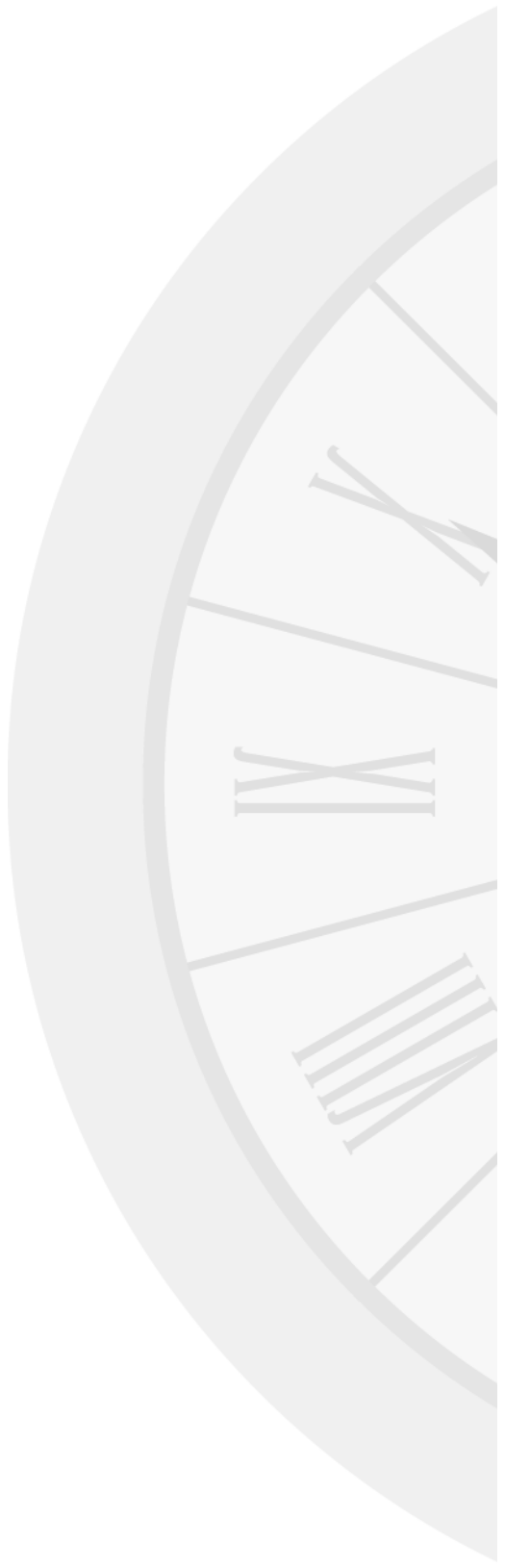


THE
MUSEUM
OF THINGS
LEFT BEHIND





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The Characters

THE CABINET

The President	Sergio Scorpioni
Minister for Defence	Alixandria Heliopolis Visparelli
Minister for the Exterior	Mario Lucaccia
Minister for the Interior	Rolando Posti
Minister of Finance	Roberto Feraguzzi
Minister for Health	Dottore Decio Rossini
Minister for Agricultural Development	Enzo Civicchioni
Minister for Education	Professore Giuseppe Scota
Minister for Recreation	Marcello Pompili
Minister for Leisure	Tersilio Cellini
Minister for Tourism	Settimio Mosconi
Minister for Employment	Vlad Lubicic
Chief of Staff to the President	Angelo Bianconi

THE PROLETARIAT

The Postman	Remi
The Stationmaster	Vinsent Gabboni
Patron of Il Gallo Giallo	Dario Mariani
Patron of Il Toro Rosso	Piper
The Clockmaker	Pavel
The Potter	Elio

THE VISITORS

British VIP	Lizzie Holmesworth
American Consultant 1	Chuck Whylie
American Consultant 2	Paul Fields



In Which a Letter Stands Out

HIGH ABOVE THE CITY, in the dustiest, windiest, sparsest corner of the north-west quadrant, Remi was sorting the mail. He had arrived out of breath at the sorting office. He glanced at his stopwatch and noted, with a flicker of irritation, that he was at the upper end of the time he allowed himself for this short journey. The early-morning rain had added an element of risk to some of the sharper corners, and on several occasions he'd had to slow almost to a stop to avoid injury to himself or damage to his bicycle. Happily, though, he lived on the same level as his workplace, and his commute was generally a straightforward three-kilometre cycle ride on the slippery paths that snaked through the tea plantations from the small home he shared with his mother. In a month or two, with the onset of the harsh summer sun, these paths would quickly mould into dusty, deeply grooved channels. In turn the channels would soon evolve into narrow ruts, which would hug his bicycle tyres so snugly that he could

ride much of the way with his eyes closed – a feat he had often attempted with considerable, albeit unrecorded, success. Even in the wet spring months his journey to work was not strenuous; his bicycle could probably still find its own way through sheer habit, and this was certainly the easiest section of his day's circuit. That morning, however, his journey had been interrupted not once but twice, on the first occasion by a neighbour, who needed help with a stuck pig, then shortly afterwards by a second neighbour, who held the firm belief that a problem shared was a problem halved. Remi had wondered, as he pedalled furiously to make up for the lost seconds, whether the sharing of a problem exactly doubled it, providing it with two minds instead of one in which to fester, and he further worried that the problem, like the simplest of organisms, was simultaneously dividing and subdividing in his brain and that of his neighbour.

As always, however, Remi's most pressing concern had been his prompt arrival at the office for, despite the absence of a supervisor's watchful eye or any sort of mechanism to monitor his comings and goings, Remi's deep commitment to the state had engendered within him a work ethic unlikely to be rivalled within the whole of Vallerosa. In his decade of postal duties he had never been late for work, notching up instead some two hundred hours of unpaid overtime through his systematic early arrival. This uninterrupted record of excellence counted for little, however, and the banked hours bore no currency other than within his own conscience. Had he been pushed to verbalize the seriousness with which he

approached timekeeping, he would probably admit that if he were to stray from his self-governed schedule on more than one or two occasions, he would not hesitate to sack himself.

The sorting office – a basic construction with lofty eaves and a trill of natural light that flitted down from windows too high to provide a view in or out – served multitudinous roles and could, just by a change of the swinging sign outside, transform itself from postal hub to the country's only ticketing office to the bureau of the registrar and back again. With the ticket sign hoisted, citizens would come here from far and wide to receive their allocated quota for state-organized events, including the busy annual season of *fiesta*, dances and sporting competitions. Not long ago these duties would have been fulfilled far below in the official city buildings surrounding Piazza Rosa but the president (who had pledged his life to the rigorous execution of his responsibilities but occasionally had difficulty separating valid solutions from denial) had taken exception to opening his curtains in the morning and looking down upon slowly shuffling queues of people. Queues, the president was quite sure, were a symbol of need, the physical manifestation of demand outweighing supply and, most worryingly, a queue might suggest, to any rational man peering from his balcony above, a failure on the part of the president accurately to judge and cater for the requirements of his people. So the issue of tickets had been moved as far from the palace windows as possible. Now occasions such as the Annual Blindfolded Hog Chasing Finals or the Spousal Waltz would cause an

unobtrusive and unobserved queue to snake as far as the eye could see.

On the first Monday of each month the sorting-office sign would be lowered and replaced with the Owl and Viper insignia representing the city's official registrar. On those mornings the office was commandeered by Benito, the *notaio*, who issued, in painstaking brown-inked calligraphy, the hand-drafted certificates of birth, death and marriage. The queues for these services were inoffensively short, but the same president who had been insulted by queues forming in Piazza Rosa had been equally upset by the notion of grieving widows and widowers sharing a small reception room with eager soon-to-be-weds or, even worse, the smug and self-satisfied contentment of new parents. As it had been impossible to allocate a separate reception area to each distinct need, he had relocated the office in its entirety to the new postal sorting office at the top of the hill. While this did not negate the possibility of a newly bereft widow sitting beside a recently endowed mother, it successfully removed the possibility of the incumbent president being troubled by this notion. As it happened, there appeared to be less and less likelihood of such offence being caused as, in recent years, it had come to the attention of several officials, whose role did not specify a requirement to notice such things, that the registration of deaths was using considerably more ink than the issue of marriage certificates, and the issue of marriage certificates seemed to be using considerably more ink than the registration of births. But it would be a little while yet before anyone felt concerned enough to raise the matter

through the ranks of government and bring it to the notice of somebody with enough seniority to act upon it.

On ticketing days, and on the Mondays that fell to the service of the *notaio*, there was no mail service. Furthermore, much longer-lasting interruptions to the important job of postal delivery took place every five years. In the summer of years ending with 0 or 5, red and black bunting would be nailed to the front of the sorting office, and for a whole two-week period, the building would become the balloting headquarters from which the city's volunteers mounted and executed their political campaign. This period was fast approaching and Remi's underarms were already tingling with anxiety at the thought of the disruption his beloved postal service would suffer if – as had been rumoured recently – the campaign were to become one of above average complexity.

But on most mornings, such as this, the office was Remi's domain, a sanctuary in which correspondence could be allowed to negotiate the most delicate part of its journey, the transition from letter sent to letter received. The brass name plates were Remi's to polish; the visiting cats were his to spoil with saucers of milk and scratches behind the ears; the single teacup, saucer, plate, fork and knife were his to wash up; the kettle was his to – meticulously, according to a detailed list of tasks – descale every other month. Remi's routine had varied very little since he had perfected it nearly a decade ago but the diligence with which he approached every last detail suggested that the job was as exciting and agreeable as if he were performing it for the very first time.

The mail awaiting him was about average for the time of year, a smallish bundle at the bottom of a large grain sack. Having prepared his morning cup of tea, Remi set about the preliminary stage of his role. Removing his shoes, he set them neatly by the door. After clicking each of his knuckles, he took the sack and spilled the contents onto the polished linoleum floor, spreading the mail out as he went and occasionally separating small clusters with the aid of a socked toe. Then, with the deftness of a croupier, he began to shuffle each of the assorted envelopes into one of the eight quadrants.

Armed with the basic topography represented by the eight meagre piles of mail on the floor of the sorting office, any transient traveller would find himself very quickly able to navigate the dark and otherwise confusing labyrinth of alleys, moss-covered steps and steep gullies that interlinked each proud district. The four principal quadrants, north-west, south-west, north-east and south-east, further subdivided into a top and a bottom region, belonging either to the *altos* or to the *bassos*. Vallerosa's landmass, as any number of bleary-eyed and disoriented travellers can confirm, is made up in its entirety of a steep and craggy gorge, to which the medieval city has tenuously and surprisingly adhered since its founding fathers built their first hovels on a small plateau halfway up the side of the ravine; they had made their dangerous escape across Europe pursued by fervent Catholics who, luckily for the escapees, had had no fortitude when it came to mountain climbing, despite their very close relationship to God. Here, legend will tell you, on the far side of the

mountains – mountains considered insurmountable by the weaker-spirited – the nimble pioneers believed they had at last found sanctuary. Settling in this heaven on earth at the centre-most point of the world, they gave thanks for this safe haven. Finally harboured from the wrath of an all-powerful regime, they collapsed in exhaustion, hidden from view in all directions by the mountains that cut them off completely from the rest of the world for more than half of the year, yet blessed them with a plentiful supply of clean water from below and verdant pasture above.

Through the middle of this unlikely outpost, half a mile below the shed in which Remi now toiled, the beautiful river Florin rages from west to east, thundering its pale blues, greys and greens through the centre of the country, carving an ever-deepening crease through the nation's belly. The river's source, the bright winter snows and cool spring rains from the slopes of Italy's high mountains to the west, contribute generously to both velocity and volume; within the last hundred years, three generations of formidable engineers have built a trio of impressive dams to harness the energy of this plentiful resource. First Hydras, then Gorgons and, most recently, Chimeras have been built, each more ingenious than the dam before; between them these masterful behemoths turn the great turbines that feed the country's modest electrical needs. With its excess energy stripped and redirected to boil kettles, to flicker and hum in light bulbs and refrigerators, the Florin continues its journey more sedately, though always with the capacity to surprise, towards a series of inhospitable bends between sheer granite cliffs, that mark

the end of its journey through Vallerosa, where it passes quietly into Austria.

The four lower quadrants, each nudging the river's craggy banks, combine to form the *bassos*. From here, where the lowest homes dip their toes into the spring floodwaters, the city, carved from a solid seam of red granite, rises chaotically upwards towards the magnificent Piazza Rosa to the north and the slighter, quieter, humbler Piazza Verde in the south. Despite their difference in grandeur, each has claimed the largest, flattest areas on either side of the river to house the country's municipal buildings. From these piazzas the city continues to clamber upwards, on either side of the river, meandering through the *altos*, the higher houses scabbling and clawing their way ever more precariously; the foundations of many appear to rest on the roofs of the tier beneath them. At the highest point of the gorge the anxiety of the buildings to take a foothold lessens and the dwellings dwindle in density, petering out as the steep gorge softens to join the plateau above. Despite the distance from the river beneath them, even the uppermost homes have chosen to turn their backs on the green expanse of the *mesa* and instead crane their necks to look down upon layer after layer of houses beneath them, and these houses scabble for a view of the river below. On a still day the rush of water as it crashes from Hydras, then again from Gorgons and Chimeras, can be heard from every corner of the country: the natural acoustics provided by the land's topography, the giant loudhailer that forms its mouth at the lowest point, will allow a man snoozing in his chair after lunch

high in the *altos* to set his watch to the bells chiming in Piazza Rosa way beneath him. That is, if the bells were allowed to chime.

These geographic distinctions – the *bassos*, the *altos*, from the north and west to the south and east – entirely satisfy the needs of all the country’s citizens, even though from time to time the government has attempted to issue new labels to describe the eight regions more accurately. Indeed, on one occasion a bill that introduced a complex postal code system that could pinpoint an address to its very street had been drafted but it had subsequently been mislaid and no replacement scheme had – so far – been adopted. Without the impetus and intervention of Remi it is doubtful that one ever will and so, for the time being, the eight quadrants remain.

And now, high above in the sorting office, with a neat pile of letters to represent each quadrant, it was Remi’s job to shuffle the post into the order of his delivery route. His fastidious nature and eye for detail insisted that he should hand-deliver each letter to the correct address. But he knew, too, that this must be balanced with the knowledge that it was his duty to be efficient with time, the currency by which he was paid and the yardstick by which he was measured; if a letter happened to appear in the pile after its designated drop-off point, he would simply post it through the first available door, trusting that the resident would pass it on to the correct recipient at his earliest convenience. In the summer, when homeowners leave their doors and windows open to encourage safe onward passage of any air current, Remi would take the letters

into the homes and stand them against a vase or milk jug so that they would not be missed. The people of Vallerosa were neighbourly by nature and were in and out of each other's houses all the time. The arrival of a letter to any citizen was always noteworthy, and any intermediary handler who redirected a missive to its correct address would probably be invited to share the news so all were happy to play their part in the safe forwarding of mail.

On a normal day (which this was not), with his mailbag adequately ordered, Remi would carefully attire himself in his uniform. To the Velcro strip above his left breast pocket he would stick the smart insignia of the post office and, to complete his transformation, don the navy blue peaked cap of the postman. Standing in front of the mirror, he would tweak and tug his uniform into its neatest possible configuration, polishing his teeth with his tongue and peering closely at his reflection for unruly nasal hair or other signs of personal weakness. It was undeniable: he was a good-looking, clean-smelling man with decent prospects. That he was still single was as mysterious to Remi as it was to his mother. There was nothing in the reflection that stared back at him that indicated why this should be so. Despite his bachelor status, he was comfortable with the man who eyed him squarely in the mirror. Proud to be an upstanding citizen with purpose, he saluted himself and received the returned salute with a grateful smile. At the threshold he would bend to attach his bicycle clips to his trouser hems and step into his shoes, which, with their rugged crêpe soles, were ideally suited to the long cycle ride ahead of him.

Today, however, as already noted, was turning out to be far from routine. Having emptied out the post and spread it with his toe, as usual, one letter had immediately jumped out at him, his attention seized by its unusual colours. Remi could not have noticed its significance sooner had it been accompanied by a vision of blazing angels and a heavenly choir. Indeed, a well-aimed shaft of light from the window high above was now pointing it out to him. He dropped to his knees and crept forward on all fours. Fishing out his prize, he remained on his knees, barely able to contemplate this trembling fissure in a sea of the prosaic. He scrutinized the envelope with a curious, then greedy eye, scanning every detail. As the full significance of the letter began to sink in, the colour drained from Remi's face and re-formed as two pink spots high on his cheeks. He held the envelope in both hands, holding it up to the light and then to his nose, inhaling deeply and picking out the exotic scents absorbed on its long journey. Among the dirty whites, greys and browns of the everyday post, the pale blue of the aerogramme was distinct enough to mark it out as unique, but the almost weightless paper and those two neatly affixed stamps, one gold, the other blue, each bearing the foiled outline of the profile of Her Majesty the Queen of England, was enough to make Remi's hands shake. Never had he held such a precious delivery. The address revealed its intention. With 'Vallerosa' neatly printed as its closing directive and a double wavy line beneath it, drawing it to the attention of the postmen of many nationalities who had ensured its safe onward passage, the address insisted, politely but

firmly, that it be directed without delay to the country's Parliament Hall, the home of the government.

Breathless, he bundled the mail into his satchel, barely cognizant of the order as he stuffed it in. He dressed hurriedly, buttoning his shirt with one hand while smoothing his hair with the other. He slapped the Velcro badge to his chest, at an inappropriately jaunty angle. He jammed his feet into his shoes, and only slowed to stow the precious letter between his string vest and chest, then tucked his shirt tightly into his trousers.

Off he went into the fresh morning air, heart soaring and palms tingling with excitement and anticipation. Remi pedalled furiously for the last twenty yards of the steep hill, which allowed him to freewheel, at pace, along a dark alley, then diagonally across Piazza Rosa. He bumped over the cobbles, his bell ringing clearly in the quiet of the morning square, and leaped off, the bicycle continuing without him until it came to a clattering halt against the railings of Parliament Hall.

'I have a letter! A letter for our president! I must deliver it at once! Look, it has, it has ... a foreign stamp!' The two guards knew Remi well, drank with him frequently and would probably be joining him for their regular light lunch of cold boar and bread later that day, but nevertheless each reached for his gun holster as the postman ripped at his shirt, buttons flying. They took turns to scrutinize the letter, looking closely at the address, the stamps and back again at the trembling postman. Undeniably, the seal of international airfreight was a persuasive argument and one that, upon lengthy reflection, neither felt able to resist.

On the understanding that both men would accompany him until responsibility had been passed to a senior minister, Remi was allowed to enter Parliament Hall. As they pushed the double doors to enter, all three experienced a prickle of excitement as the building swallowed them.



In Which Treason Is Narrowly Avoided

THE OFFICE OF THE MINISTER FOR THE EXTERIOR was an efficient one, run by the extremely busy Mario Lucaccia, whose intense industriousness manifested itself in an empty desk with just a notepad and a careful alignment of recently sharpened pencils, ordered by size and poised for action. The interruption to his morning was regrettable as he was on the verge of implementing a groundbreaking directive, the nature of which had eluded him for some years. He tutted audibly. With barely a pause and a brusque wave of the hand, the young minister swiftly passed Remi on, through an internal door that was partly shrouded by a heavy brocade curtain. It led to the larger and more cluttered office of Signor Rolando Posti, the minister for the interior.

‘What have we here, Remi-Post?’ the world-weary minister enquired, peering up at the visitor from beneath his once-impressive eyebrows.

‘I am here, with your kind permission, to deliver a letter from the United Kingdom of England, sir.’ Remi shuffled a little but took comfort from the presence of two palace guards and one minister for the exterior.

‘A letter you say. And how can you be so sure?’ The minister reached for the aerogramme and studied it carefully.

‘Oh, I know a letter when I see one, sir. It is my job to know these things.’ On safe ground now, Remi shuffled a little less.

‘It is, is it? And at what point, Remi-Post, does your job end and my job commence? For is it not within the remit of my job to recognize the difference between a letter and a formal application from a foreign entity?’ The minister for the interior let the possibility hang in the air.

‘A formal what, sir?’ Remi knew immediately that this was outside the realm of his training and fell silent, his mouth agape.

The minister continued, ‘And as such, if it is determined to be the latter rather than the former, it requires an altogether different procedure. And here is a conundrum that immediately becomes apparent, Remi-Post, a quandary that a postman such as your good self needn’t ordinarily concern himself with, but I shall enlighten you because it is the wish of our president that wisdom is shared for the collective understanding of our entire nation and for the evolutionary betterment of future generations.’ He paused. ‘If it is just a letter, we needn’t worry our president with it. He is a busy man with an election to prepare for, and it is our job, as ministers, to act as filters and remove all that

is trifling or troublesome from his immediate concern. If I were to go now to his chambers and interrupt his work with just-a-letter I cannot begin to second guess the consequences, but they would be grave.' Signor Posti sighed heavily for dramatic effect. 'If, however, it transpires that this is indeed a formal application from a foreign entity, and I were to hesitate before presenting it to our president, or to presume I had the resource or acumen to deal with it independently, then he would be quite correct to consider my action, or my non-action, as an act of gross treason.'

He glowered at the men in the room. The palace guards were almost imperceptibly retreating, a backwards half-step at a time, in a silent bid to put distance between themselves and these treasonous associations. Signor Lucaccia, meanwhile, who had been listening intently to the exchange, was now eyeing the older minister. The younger minister's scrutiny sported a glint of nervousness and he was chewing his lip anxiously, but he knew, too, that there was much he could learn from studying the older man's handling of the situation. All the power was in the interior, everybody knew that, and progressing from his own inferior ministerial duties would be easier if he took his lead from this sagacious elder statesman.

Signor Posti drew himself up in his chair and looked coolly at his audience. Now was a time for decisiveness and clear thinking. A letter would be quicker to deal with, but there was no precedent for receiving one at Parliament Hall and the stamps upon this communication certainly appeared to bear the mark of the United Kingdom's most

senior stateswoman. The minister was a cautious man, and his caution was one of the virtues that had earned him high office. It would be safer – both for the sake of his career and for the sanctity of his country – to assume this was not just-a-letter but an official communiqué. In this instance, hasty action would mitigate any potential risk to the president. With the first part of the decision already made, it was now simply a case of determining the correct protocol.

Swivelling his chair, Signor Posti turned slowly and deliberately to the shelves behind him and heaved one of the tomes back to his desk. He wetted his finger and flicked through the pages, conscious of four pairs of eyes upon him as he scanned the headings and subsections, many of which he had authored over the years. After several tense moments he found the right page and, smiling knowingly to himself, began the laborious task of form filling. This required the dispatching of the hovering minister for the exterior for two fresh sheets of carbon paper to allow the execution of the paperwork in triplicate. Glad once more to have volunteered interest, the less-experienced man hurried off importantly.

Remi jiggled from foot to foot, anxious to learn his fate and, if protocol decreed it, to take hold once more of the important document. A lifetime of training had prepared him for this very scenario and, while the minister before him had an evolved understanding of the machinations of Parliament, he alone understood that the royal blue of the *par avion* sticker, fixed jauntily to the left-hand corner, insisted upon the most urgent of handling at all times.

But, as anxious as he was, his strict sense of hierarchy ensured that he must do nothing to interrupt the process of government. As patiently as possible, he observed the complex ritual, quietly respectful of the enormous amount of bureaucracy his not just-a-letter had already generated.

At last, the postman's conscientious approach was rewarded. After a brief discussion between the two ministers, who huddled forehead to forehead in a corner while they decided on the best course of action, Remi was invited to hand-deliver the not just-a-letter to its final destination, proceeding further into the echelons of Parliament Hall, using another, narrower, flight of stairs. Shaking with excitement and accompanied now by two guardsmen, one short, eager minister for the exterior and one tall, craggy, breathless minister for the interior, he hesitated, then politely rapped on the carved wooden door of his president's private chambers. Upon hearing the call from within, he was barely able to still the knocking of his knees.



In Which a Formal Communication From a Foreign Entity Is Delivered

UNTIL TWENTY-TWO MINUTES past ten, when Remi's bicycle had bounced its way, riderless, to a halt in front of the railings, President Sergio Scorpioni had been contemplating life and the complex paradigms it dealt him. Each new dawn seemed to reveal to him another bewildering puzzle to solve, and nightfall brought disappointment and impotence in place of the sense of completion and resolution he craved. Today his own dissatisfaction was the source of his troubles. 'To what do all men aspire?' he asked himself. 'Great wealth? Good looks? A beautiful wife with generous hips?' Pausing for effect, even though the conversation was playing out in the confines of his own mind, he answered, 'No, the ultimate status symbol comes in the shape of a position of power.' And there he was, appointed to the highest office in the land, with all its associated amenities and privileges. At his disposal he had catering staff and cleaning staff, he had a dozen vice-presidents, who were the clear-

est thinkers and his dearest friends in the land, yet he remained unfulfilled.

He shook his head and chewed his lip as he surveyed the material manifestation of his power. As a centrepiece, his sumptuous private chambers boasted an intricately carved mahogany four-poster bed, with a firm but forgiving mattress on which to rest at night, several goose-down pillows on which to lay his head, cool cotton sheets and warm angora blankets, surrounded by the finest bombazine hangings.

Throughout his chambers the floor was covered with layer upon layer of hand-woven carpets, each overlapping the next and telling its own elaborate tales. Their rich and complex threads wove the stories of many lifetimes, winding together the narratives of peasant childhoods with high holidays, of marriages made in Heaven and useful lives reflected upon from the comfort of an old age well accounted-for. Carpets owned by his mother, stitched by his grandmother, trodden on by his father and forefathers before him.

His desk, carved, like his bed, of the very finest hardwood, was solid, vast, and shone with decades of polish. With inset inkwells and a large blotter that was regularly refilled with a clean sheet, that desk had been the seat of power for his father, and his father's father. And look! It was all his! As he paced from bed, to desk, to window and back again, in a circle that showed, after four and a half years of office, a faint trace of a path in the carpets, he tried to count his blessings on his fingers. 'One, I have my health. Two, I have the tools

for change. Three, I don't have to make my own bed in the morning ...'

It was no good, his face crumpled and his fingers balled into fists as the full weight of the responsibility that was attendant upon his comfortable life came crashing back upon his shoulders. As he continued to pace, his lips formed silent pledges but the acid that rose from his stomach, giving him almost constant pain in his lower chest, came from a dark, dismal place that countered those promises and told him that he would never, ever, be as successful as his father.

He stopped at the window, resting his forehead against the damp glass and allowing a little pool of condensation to gather there. Below him, Piazza Rosa was gloomy. Puddles from the previous night's rain had gathered between the cobbles, and wastepaper clung miserably to the rims of gutters, refusing to be swept away out of sight but lingering to add to the forlorn landscape. Plastic webbed chairs were tilted forward against moulded white tables, and metal shutters were drawn at the majority of shop windows, giving the country's finest meeting point an air of neglect and dejection. Sergio looked at his watch, which showed twenty-five past ten, and then up at the landmark clock opposite him. It remained stubbornly, accusingly, at ten to seven and the painted clay figurines, crafted to represent the finest attributes of Vallerosa, who should have been lining up to announce the next fifteen-minute interval, had long been stilled. Today was the beginning of spring, a time of festivity, traditionally used to commence courtship and slaughter the last of the

winter pigs, but no one was celebrating. Even Franco, the town's alcoholic, would have been a welcome sight, but not even he was prepared to liven up the square with his clumsy lurching and unintelligible mutterings. Sergio scanned the piazza, his eyes sweeping across the left edge, with its arched walkway, along the grand façade of the town hall and clock tower and back down the right edge, but all was damply silent.

Inside, the electrics hummed, the ancient heating system clicked and sighed, and the building itself creaked under the oppressive atmosphere of a period of celebration when the public had chosen – unanimously – not to celebrate.

The winter months were dismal, as for any city that thrived on its long, hot summers, whose very livelihood depended on clear blue skies by day and clement nights. Each year, work in the tea plantations remained at a standstill until the sun heaved itself over the mountaintop to awaken the first shoots in April, when labour could once again resume. A sluggishness of pace that was forgivable in the unrelenting summer sun took on a less condonable tenor, tinged with apathy and inertia, when the days shortened and the thermometer seldom rose above twelve degrees.

The red façade of the city's main square that, under the kind light of the summer months, shone with every tone from a pale, dusty rose to a deep, bottomless burgundy, looked tired in the winter, shrinking in fear from each day's onslaught. The flaking plaster and crumbling stone glared accusingly at the president, reminding him of the enormous cost involved in maintaining the

piazza in its present state, let alone restoring it to its pre-1900s glory.

He returned to his desk and took up his pen. After allowing it to drink thirstily from the ink, he resumed writing. His current train of thought was complex and the recent round of pacing had done little to unlock his dilemma. He reread the last passage he had written.

Choice exists to liberate your electorate. But, what a responsible leader must ask is, does his constituent really hanker after choice? No, of course they don't. What the constituent demands – nay, deserves – is flawless leadership. And providing that flawlessness is evident throughout government, elected or otherwise, if perfection has already been attained, then how can further choice ever equate to liberation? That choice, that freedom, which the democratic world so craves, is redundant if the only choice the state can proffer is that between perfection and mediocrity. What, then, are you offering your people? Your people are the backbone of the society, yes; they are the bedrock of the country, the foundation on which any great nation is built. They are the flour, the eggs and milk, but without the wooden spoon, they cannot be the pancake. They are the proletariat, not the elected, and as such they cannot possibly begin to interpret the discourse of politicians. Nor are they equipped to decipher the devious ruses that politicians will utilize, the depths to which they'll sink, in pursuit of a vote. And why are they unable to enter the twisted mind of a power-crazed despot, hell-bent on

seizing control of a country? Because the state has governed in such a way that its people only understand fairness, citizenship, fellowship, a society working together for the benefit of society. This country's people have not been educated in the art of insidiousness. You give your people a vote without giving them the warped mind needed to make an educated decision and they are in danger of choosing to exercise their vote for change just because they can. You, through the so called tools of liberation, have given them the very rope with which they will unwittingly hoist themselves from the petard.

Sergio flexed his writing hand and leaned back in his chair, which groaned beneath him. He rested his eyes and immediately, uninvited, the image of his father sprang before his closed lids. He rubbed them with the back of his hands and opened them again, preferring the look of his writing to the ever-wagging finger of Sergio Senior. He sighed deeply, wiped away the small beads of sweat gathering on his upper lip, and continued.

Give an honest man the choice between good and evil and he might inadvertently choose evil, because he has no experience from which to recognize the traits of the perfidious.

As Sergio came decisively to this conclusion, a resounding thud in his heart seemed to echo his thinking. He took up his pen to begin writing once more when, startled, he realized the noise came not from inside his head but from

somebody knocking repeatedly at the door. Glancing around the room to assure himself that there were no visible traces of his inner turmoil, Sergio barked permission to enter.

Expecting a butler with a tray of tea, as was customary at this time, he was surprised to find he was giving audience to a posse of visitors. Their sheer numbers as they filed through the door gave him a moment's anxiety that, as foretold in any one of his recent nightmares, a coup might be unfolding before his eyes. But quickly he recognized them all as friends, the young postman, whom he himself had promoted, his trusted minister for the interior, the younger, ambitious minister for the exterior, for whom he had high hopes, and two palace guards, who were hanging about in the background, onlookers, it appeared, rather than active protectors of the realm.

After an awkward silence, Remi stepped forward and, unsure whether he was presenting a letter, a not just-a-letter, or an official communication from a foreign entity, simply held out the blue envelope to his president. He was not quite far enough forward for Sergio to reach it without standing up, and even when the president had pushed himself up from his chair and leaned across his desk, there was still an unmet gap of some inches. It seemed that the stalemate might never be broken. Sergio stretched further but Remi, clearly terrified by the proximity of the president, dared not look at him and affixed his eyes instead to the intricate pattern in the carpet.

Sergio relented, and came around his desk to pluck the letter from the postman's hands. At this moment, perhaps

unsure that he wanted his adventure to end, Remi clung to a corner and Sergio had to use surprising force to tug the envelope away. Flustered, he retreated to the safe haven behind his desk and took a long-handled letter-opener from beside the blotter.

One of the ministers, either interior or exterior, made a murmur as if to excuse the party but Sergio silenced the onlookers with a wave of his hand. He removed the elegant letter-opener slowly from its leather sheath, inserted the tip into the top seal and, with unhurried decorum, used the blade to separate the three gummed sides. The letter tumbled out to its full length and the president read its contents from top to bottom, taking in the London address, the velvety quality of the flimsy yet luxurious paper, the superb penmanship, with its loops and curves, unlike any he had seen before, and the evenly applied ink of the signature. Some of it was almost impossible to decipher but he peered at the English words, identifying several as his eyes flicked from one line to the next. 'Please ... visit ... research ... success ... Duke of Edinburgh ... 5 June ... for one month.'

A slow smile spread across Sergio's face, softening his features and letting the careworn frown disappear. His only regret, which passed through his mind at lightning speed, was that his father (who had made it quite clear that his son would probably amount to nothing) was no longer alive to witness this triumph. For a triumph it most certainly was, and that it had fallen during Sergio's tenure allowed the president to take this success as a personal one.

His country had finally been recognized beyond its borders and, as clear as the blue ink with which the signature had sealed its intent, a visit from British royalty, of those distant but hallowed islands in the North Sea, was imminent and had been humbly begged by, presumably, the personal secretary of the Duke of Edinburgh, to whom the letter referred on a number of occasions.

He put the letter down. Placing a hand firmly on either side of it, he leaned forward and looked thoughtfully at each man before him. 'Gentlemen,' he announced grandly. 'It seems we are to expect a royal visit later this year. Sound the fanfare. I shall be making an address to the people on this matter of national importance at ...' he glanced at his watch, then calculated the time he would need to write a short speech and change into his formal attire '... noon. I shall speak to them from the balcony. That will be all. Carry on.'

The five men hastily backed out of the room, leaving the president to the solitude of his chambers. As soon as he was sure he was alone, he punched the air and danced a little jig on the spot.

Meanwhile, the minister for the exterior headed directly to the press office, the minister for the interior went to the army's control centre while the postman made for Il Gallo Giallo to ensure that word quickly spread. Within the hour, those at home, or in either of the city's two bars, downed tools, drinks, laundry or children and headed out into Piazza Rosa to hear the president's news.