

After Rain  
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(1996)

## *After Rain*

In the dining-room of the Pensione Cesarina solitary diners are fitted in around the walls, where space does not permit a table large enough for two. These tables for one are in three of the room's four corners, by the door of the pantry where the jugs of water keep cool, between one family table and another, on either side of the tall casement windows that rattle when they're closed or opened. The dining-room is large, its ceiling high, its plain cream-coloured walls undecorated. It is noisy when the pensione's guests are there, the tables for two that take up all the central space packed close together, edges touching. The solitary diners are well separated from this mass by the passage left for the waitresses, and have a better view of the dining-room's activity and of the food before it's placed in front of them – whether tonight it is *brodo* or pasta, beef or chicken, and what the *dolce* is.

'Dieci,' Harriet says, giving the number of her room when she is asked. The table she has occupied for the last eleven evenings has been joined to one that is too small for a party of five: she doesn't know where to go. She stands a few more moments by the door, serving dishes busily going by her, wine bottles grabbed from the marble-topped sideboard by the rust-haired waitress, or the one with a wild look, or the one who is plump and pretty. It is the rust-haired waitress who eventually leads Harriet to the table by the door of the pantry where the water jugs keep cool. 'Da bere?' she asks and Harriet, still feeling shy although no one glanced in her direction when she stood alone by the door, orders the wine she has ordered on other nights, Santa Cristina.

Wearing a blue dress unadorned except for the shiny blue buckle of its belt, she has earrings that hardly show and a necklace of opaque white beads that isn't valuable. Angular and thin, her dark hair cut short, her long face strikingly like the sharply chiselled faces of Modigliani, a month ago she passed out of her twenties. She is alone in the Pensione Cesarina because a love affair is over.

A holiday was cancelled, there was an empty fortnight. She wanted to be somewhere else then, not in England with time on her hands. '*Io sola,*' she said on the telephone, hoping she had got that right, choosing the Cesarina because she'd known it in childhood, because she thought that being alone would be easier in familiar surroundings.

'*Va bene?*' the rust-haired waitress enquires, proffering the Santa Cristina.

'*Sì, sì.*'

The couples who mostly fill the dining-room are German, the guttural sound of their language drifting to Harriet from the tables that are closest to her. Middle-aged, the women more stylishly dressed than the men, they are enjoying the heat of August and the low-season tariff: demi-pensione at a hundred and ten thousand lire. The heat may be too much of a good thing for some, although it's cooler by dinnertime, when the windows of the dining-room are all open, and the Cesarina is cooler anyway, being in the hills. 'If there's a breeze about,' Harriet's mother used to say, 'it finds the Cesarina.'

Twenty years ago Harriet first came here with her parents, when she was ten and her brother twelve. Before that she had heard about the pensione, how the terracotta floors were oiled every morning before the guests were up, and how the clean smell of oil lingered all day, how breakfast was a roll or two, with tea or coffee on the terrace, how dogs sometimes barked at night, from a farm across the hills. There were photographs of the parched

garden and of the stately, ochre-washed exterior, and of the pensione's vineyard, steeply sloping down to two enormous wells. And then she saw for herself, summer after summer in the low season: the vast dining-room at the bottom of a flight of stone steps from the hall, and the three salons where there is Stock or grappa after dinner, with tiny cups of harsh black coffee. In the one with the bookcases there are Giotto reproductions in a volume on the table lectern, and *My Brother Jonathan* and *Rebecca* among the detective novels by George Goodchild on the shelves. The guests spoke in murmurs when Harriet first knew these rooms, English mostly, for it was mostly English who came then. To this day, the Pensione Cesarina does not accept credit cards, but instead will take a Eurocheque for more than the guaranteed amount.

'*Ecco, signora.*' A waitress with glasses, whom Harriet has seen only once or twice before, places a plate of tagliatelle in front of her.

'*Grazie.*'

'*Prego, signora. Buon appetito.*'

If the love affair hadn't ended – and Harriet has always believed that love affairs are going to last – she would now be on the island of Skyros. If the love affair hadn't ended she might one day have come to the Cesarina as her parents had before their children were born, and later might have occupied a family table in the dining-room. There is an American family tonight, and an Italian one, and other couples besides the Germans. A couple, just arrived, spoke what sounded like Dutch upstairs. Another Harriet knows to be Swiss, another she guesses to be Dutch also. A nervous English pair are too far away to allow eavesdropping.

'*Va bene?*' the rust-haired waitress enquires again, lifting away her empty plate.

'*Molto bene. Grazie.*'

Among the other solitary diners is a grey-haired dumpy woman who has several times spoken to Harriet upstairs, an American. A man is noticeable every evening because of his garish shirts, and

there's a man who keeps looking about him in a jerky, nervous way, and a woman – stylish in black – who could be French. The man who looks about – small, with delicate, well-tended good features – often glances in this woman's direction, and sometimes in Harriet's. An elderly man whose white linen suit observes the formalities of the past wears a differently striped silk tie each dinnertime.

On the first night of her stay Harriet had *The Small House at Allington* in her handbag, intending to prop it up in front of her in the dining-room, but when the moment came that seemed all wrong. Already, then, she regretted her impulse to come here on her own and wondered why she had. On the journey out the rawness of her pain had in no way softened, if anything had intensified, for the journey on that day should have been different, and not made alone: she had forgotten there would be that.

With the chicken pieces she's offered there are roast potatoes, tomatoes and zucchini, and salad. Then Harriet chooses cheese: pecorino, a little Gorgonzola. Half of the Santa Cristina is left for tomorrow, her room number scribbled on the label. On the envelope provided for her napkin this is more elegantly inscribed, in a sloping hand: *Camera Dieci*. She folds her napkin and tucks it away, and for a moment as she does so the man she has come here to forget pushes through another crowded room, coming towards her in the King of Poland, her name on his lips. 'I love you, Harriet,' he whispers beneath the noise around them. Her eyes close when their caress is shared. 'My darling Harriet,' he says.

Upstairs, in the room where the bookcases are, Harriet wonders if this solitude is how her life will be. Has she returned to this childhood place to seek whatever comfort a happy past can offer? Is that a truer reason than what she told herself at the time? Her thoughts are always a muddle when a love affair ends, the truth befogged; the truth not there at all, it often seems. Love failed her

was what she felt when another relationship crumbled into nothing; love has a way of doing that. And since wondering is company for the companionless, she wonders why it should be so. This is the first time that a holiday has been cancelled, that she has come away alone.

'*Mi dispiace,*' a boy in a white jacket apologizes, having spilt some of a liqueur on a German woman's arm. The woman laughs and says in English that it doesn't matter. '*Non importa,*' her husband adds when the boy looks vacant, and the German woman laughs again.

'*Mais oui,* I study the law,' a long-legged girl is saying. 'And Eloise is a stylist.'

These girls are Belgian: the questions of two Englishmen are answered. The Englishmen are young, both of them heavily built, casually turned out, one of them moustached.

'Is stylist right? Is that what you say?'

'Oh, yes.' And both young men nod. When one suggests a liqueur on the terrace Eloise and her friend ask for cherry brandy. The boy in the white jacket goes to pour it in a cupboard off the hall, where the espresso machine is.

'And you?' Eloise enquires as the four pass through the room, through the french windows to the terrace.

'Nev's in business. I go down after wrecks.' The voice that drifts back is slack, accented, confident. English or German or Dutch, these are the people who have made the Pensione Cesarina move with the times, different from the people of Harriet's childhood.

A bearded man is surreptitiously sketching a couple on one of the sofas. The couple, both reading, are unaware. In the hall the American family is much in evidence, the mother with a baby in her arms pacing up and down, the father quietening two other children, a girl and a boy.

'Good evening,' someone interrupts Harriet's observations, and

the man in the linen suit asks if the chair next to hers is taken by anyone else. His tie tonight is brown and green, and Harriet notices that his craggy features are freckled with an old man's blotches, that his hair is so scanty that whether it's grey or white doesn't register. What is subtle in his face is the washed-out blue of his eyes.

'You travel alone, too,' he remarks, openly seeking the companionship of the moment when Harriet has indicated that the chair beside her is not taken.

'Yes, I do.'

'I can always pick out the English.'

He offers the theory that this is perhaps something the traveller acquires with age and with the experience of many journeys. 'You'll probably see,' he adds.

The companion of the bearded man who is sketching the couple on the sofa leans forward and smiles over what she sees. In the hall the American father has persuaded his older children to go to bed. The mother still soothes her baby, still pacing up and down. The small man who so agitatedly glanced about the dining-room passes rapidly through the hall, carrying two cups of coffee.

'They certainly feed you,' Harriet's companion remarks, 'these days at the Cesarina.'

'Yes.'

'Quite scanty, the food was once.'

'Yes, I remember.'

'I mean, a longish time ago.'

'The first summer I came here I was ten.'

He calculates, glancing at her face to guess her age. Before his own first time, he says, which was the spring of 1987. He has been coming since, he says, and asks if she has.

'My parents separated.'

'I'm sorry.'

‘They’ve been coming here all their married lives. They were fond of this place.’

‘Some people fall for it. Others not at all.’

‘My brother found it boring.’

‘A child might easily.’

‘I never did.’

‘Interesting, those two chaps picking up the girls. I wonder if they’ll ever cope with coach tours at the Cesarina.’

He talks. Harriet doesn’t listen. This love affair had once, like the other affairs before it, felt like the exorcism of the disappointment that so drearily coloured her life when her parents went their separate ways. There were no quarrels when her parents separated, no bitterness, no drama. They told their children gently, neither blamed the other. Both – for years apparently – had been involved with other people. Both said the separation was a happier outcome than staying together for the sake of the family. They used those words, and Harriet has never forgotten them. Her brother shrugged the disappointment off, but for Harriet it did not begin to go away until the first of her love affairs. And always, when a love affair ended, there had been no exorcism after all.

‘I’m off tomorrow,’ the old man says.

She nods. In the hall the baby in the American mother’s arms is sleeping at last. The mother smiles at someone Harriet can’t see and then moves towards the wide stone staircase. The couple on the sofa, still unaware that they’ve been sketched, stand up and go away. The agitated little man bustles through the hall again.

‘Sorry to go,’ Harriet’s companion finishes something he has been saying, then tells her about his journey: by train because he doesn’t care for flying. Lunch in Milan, dinner in Zurich, on neither occasion leaving the railway station. The eleven-o’clock sleeper from Zurich.

‘We used to drive out when I came with my parents.’

‘I haven’t ever done that. And of course won’t ever now.’



‘I liked it.’

At the time it didn’t seem unreal or artificial. Their smiling faces didn’t, nor the pleasure they seemed to take in poky French hotels where only the food was good, nor their chattering to one another in the front of the car, their badinage and arguments. Yet retrospect insisted that reality was elsewhere; that reality was surreptitious lunches with two other people, and afternoon rooms, and guile; that reality was a web of lies until one of them found out, it didn’t matter which; that reality was when there had to be something better than what the family offered.

‘So this time you have come alone?’

He may have said it twice, she isn’t sure. Something about his expression suggests he has.

‘Yes.’

He speaks of solitude. It offers a quality that is hard to define; much more than the cliché of getting to know yourself. He himself has been on his own for many years and has discovered consolation in that very circumstance, which is an irony of a kind, he supposes.

‘I was to go somewhere else.’ She doesn’t know why she makes this revelation. Politeness, perhaps. On other evenings, after dinner, she has seen this man in conversation with whomever he has chosen to sit beside. He is polite himself. He sounds more interested than inquisitive.

‘You changed your mind?’

‘A friendship fell apart.’

‘Ah.’

‘I should be on an island in the sun.’

‘And where is that, if I may ask?’

‘Skyros it’s called. Renowned for its therapies.’

‘Therapies?’

‘They’re a fashion.’

‘For the ill, is this? If I may say so, you don’t look ill.’

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'No, I'm not ill.' Unable to keep the men she loves in love with her. But of course not ill.

'In fact, you look supremely healthy.' He smiles. His teeth are still his own. 'If I may say so.'

'I'm not so sure that I like islands in the sun. But even so I wanted to go there.'

'For the therapies?'

'No, I would have avoided that. Sand therapy, water therapy, sex therapy, image therapy, holistic counselling. I would have steered clear, I think.'

'Being on your own's a therapy too, of course. Although it's nice to have a chat.'

She doesn't listen; he goes on talking. On the island of Skyros tourists beat drums at sunset and welcome the dawn with song. Or they may simply swim and play, or discover the undiscovered self. The Pensione Cesarina – even the pensione transformed by the Germans and the Dutch – offers nothing like it. Nor would it offer enough to her parents any more. Her divided parents travel grandly now.

'I see *The Spanish Farm* is still on the shelves.' The old man has risen and hovers for a moment. 'I doubt that anyone's read it since I did in 1987.'

'No, probably not.'

He says goodnight and changes it to goodbye because he has to make an early start. For a moment, it seems to Harriet, he hesitates, something about his stance suggesting that he'd like to be invited to stay, to be offered a cup of coffee or a drink. Then he goes, without saying anything else. Lonely in old age, she suddenly realizes, wondering why she didn't notice that when he was talking to her. Lonely in spite of all he claims for solitude.

'Goodbye,' she calls after him, but he doesn't hear. They were to come back here the summer of the separation; instead there were cancellations then too, and an empty fortnight.

‘*Buona notte.*’ The boy in the white jacket smiles tentatively from his cupboard as she passes through the hall. He’s new tonight; it was another boy before. She hasn’t realized that either.

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She walks through the heat of the morning on the narrow road to the town, by the graveyard and the abandoned petrol pumps. A few cars pass her, coming from the pensione, for the road leads hardly anywhere else, petering out eventually. It would have been hotter on the island of Skyros.

Clouds have gathered in one part of the sky, behind her as she walks. The shade of clouds might make it cooler, she tells herself, but so far they are not close enough to the sun for that. The road widens and gradually the incline becomes less steep as she approaches the town. There’s a park with concrete seats and the first of the churches, its chosen saint Agnese of this town.

There’s no one in the park until Harriet sits there beneath the chestnut trees in a corner. Far below her, as the town tails off again, a main road begins to wind through clumps of needle pines and umbrella pines to join, far out of sight, a motorway. ‘But weren’t we happy?’ she hears herself exclaim, a little shrill because she couldn’t help it. Yes, they were happy, he agreed at once, anxious to make that clear. Not happy enough was what he meant, and you could tell; something not quite right. She asked him and he didn’t know, genuine in his bewilderment.

When she feels cooler she walks on, down shaded, narrow streets to the central piazza of the town, where she rests again, with a cappuccino at a pavement table.

Italians and tourists move slowly in the unevenly paved square, women with shopping bags and dogs, men leaving the barber’s, the tourists in their summery clothes. The church of Santa Fabiola dominates the square, grey steps in front, a brick and stone façade. There is another café, across from the one Harriet

has chosen, and a line of market stalls beside it. The town's banks are in the square but not its shops. There's a trattoria and a gelateria, their similar decoration connecting them, side by side. 'Yes, they're all one,' her father said.

In this square her father lifted her high above his head and she looked down and saw his laughing, upturned face and she laughed too, because he joked so. Her mother stuttered out her schoolgirl French in the little hotels where they stayed on the journey out, and blushed with shame when no one understood. 'Oh, this is pleasant!' her mother murmured, a table away from where Harriet is now.

A priest comes down the steps of the church, looks about him, does not see whom he thought he might. A skinny dog goes limping by. The bell of Santa Fabiola chimes twelve o'clock and when it ceases another bell, farther away, begins. Clouds have covered the sun, but the air is as hot as ever. There's still no breeze.

It was in the foyer of the Rembrandt Cinema that he said he didn't think their love affair was working. It was then that she exclaimed, 'But weren't we happy?' They didn't quarrel. Not even afterwards, when she asked him why he had told her in a cinema foyer. He didn't know, he said; it just seemed right in that moment, some fragment of a mood they shared. If it hadn't been for their holiday's being quite soon their relationship might have dragged on for a while. Much better that it shouldn't, he said.

*The fourteenth of February in London was quite as black, and cold, and as wintersome as it was at Allington, and was, perhaps, somewhat more melancholy in its coldness. She has read that bit before and couldn't settle to it, and cannot now. She takes her dark glasses off: the clouds are not the pretty bundles she noticed before, white cottonwool as decoration is by Raphael or Perugino. The clouds that have come up so quickly are grey as lead, a sombre panoply pegged out against a blue that's almost lost. The first drops fall when Harriet*

tries the doors of Santa Fabiola and finds them locked. They will remain so, a notice tersely states, until half-past two.

*It had been finally arranged that the marriage should take place in London,* she reads in the trattoria. *There were certainly many reasons which would have made a marriage from Courcy Castle more convenient. The De Courcy family were all assembled at their country family residence, and could therefore have been present at the ceremony without cost or trouble.* She isn't hungry; she has ordered risotto, hoping it will be small, and mineral water without gas.

'*C'è del pane o della farina nel piatto? Non devo mangiare della farina,*' a woman is saying, and the gaunt-faced waiter carefully listens, not understanding at first and then excitedly nodding. '*Non c'è farina,*' he replies, pointing at items on the menu. The woman is from the pensione. She's with a lanky young man who might be her son, and Harriet can't identify the language they speak to one another.

'Is fine?' the same waiter asks Harriet as he passes, noticing that she has begun to eat her risotto. She nods and smiles and reads again. The rain outside is heavy now.

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The Annunciation in the church of Santa Fabiola is by an unknown artist, perhaps of the school of Filippo Lippi, no one is certain. The angel kneels, grey wings protruding, his lily half hidden by a pillar. The floor is marble, white and green and ochre. The Virgin looks alarmed, right hand arresting her visitor's advance. Beyond – background to the encounter – there are gracious arches, a balustrade and then the sky and hills. There is a soundlessness about the picture, the silence of a mystery: no words are spoken in this captured moment, what's said between the two has been said already.

Harriet's eye records the details: the green folds of the angel's dress, the red beneath it, the mark in the sky that is a dove, the Virgin's book, the stately pillars and the empty vase, the Virgin's

slipper, the bare feet of the angel. The distant landscape is soft, as if no heat has ever touched it. It isn't alarm in the Virgin's eyes, it's wonderment. In another moment there'll be serenity. A few tourists glide about the church, whispering now and again. A man in a black overall is mopping the floor of the central aisle and has roped it off at either end. An elderly woman prays before a statue of the Virgin, each bead of her rosary fingered, lips silently murmuring. Incense is cloying on the air.

Harriet walks slowly past flaring candles and the tomb of a local family, past the relics of the altar, and the story of Santa Fabiola flaking in a side chapel. She has not been in this church before, neither during her present visit nor in the past. Her parents didn't bother much with churches; she might have come here on her own yesterday or on any day of her stay but she didn't bother either. Her parents liked the sun in the garden of the pensione, the walk down to the cafés and drives into the hills or to other little towns, to the swimming-pool at Ponte Nicolo.

The woman who has been praying hobbles to light another candle, then prays again, and hobbles off. Returning to the Annunciation, Harriet sits down in the pew that's nearest it. There is blue as well as grey in the wings of the angel, little flecks of blue you don't notice when you look at first. The Virgin's slipper is a shade of brown, the empty vase is bulb-shaped with a slender stem, the Virgin's book had gold on it but only traces remain.

The rain has stopped when Harriet leaves the church, the air is fresher. Too slick and glib, to use her love affairs to restore her faith in love: that thought is there mysteriously. She has cheated in her love affairs: that comes from nowhere too.

Harriet stands a moment longer, alone on the steps of the church, bewildered by this personal revelation, aware instinctively of its truth. The dust of the piazza paving has been washed into the crevices that separate the stones. At the café where she

had her cappuccino the waiter is wiping dry the plastic of the chairs.

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The sun is still reluctant in the watery sky. On her walk back to the Pensione Cesarina it seems to Harriet that in this respite from the brash smother of heat a different life has crept out of the foliage and stone. A coolness emanates from the road she walks on. Unseen, among the wild geraniums, one bird sings.

Tomorrow, when the sun is again in charge at its time of year, a few midday minutes will wipe away what lingers of this softness. New dust will settle, marble will be warm to touch. Weeks it may be, months perhaps, before rain coaxes out these fragrances that are tender now.

The sun is always pitiless when it returns, harsh in its punishment. In the dried-out garden of the Pensione Cesarina they made her wear a hat she didn't like but they could take the sun themselves, both of them skulking behind dark glasses and high-factor cream. Skyros's sun is its attraction. 'What I need is sun,' he said, and Harriet wonders if he went there after all, if he's there today, not left behind in London, if he even found someone to go with. She sees him in Skyros, windsurfing in Atsitsa Bay, which he has talked about. She sees him with a companion who is uncomplicated and happy in Atsitsa Bay, who tries out a therapy just to see what it's like.

The deck-chairs are sodden at the Pensione Cesarina, rose petals glisten. A glass left on a terrace table has gathered an inch of water. The umbrellas in the outer hall have all been used. Windows, closed for a while, are opened; on the vineyard slopes the sprinklers are turned on again.

Not wanting to be inside, Harriet walks in the garden and among the vines, her shoes drenched. From the town comes the chiming of bells: six o'clock at Santa Fabiola, six o'clock a minute

later somewhere else. While she stands alone among the dripping vines she cannot make a connection that she knows is there. There is a blankness in her thoughts, a density that feels like muddle also, until she realizes: the Annunciation was painted after rain. Its distant landscape, glimpsed through arches, has the temporary look that she is seeing now. It was after rain that the angel came: those first cool moments were a chosen time.

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In the dining-room the table where the man with the garish shirts sat has been joined to a family table to allow for a party of seven. There is a different woman where the smart Frenchwoman sat, and no one at the table of the old man. The woman who was explaining in the trattoria that she must not eat food containing flour is given consommé instead of ravioli. New faces are dotted everywhere.

'Buona sera,' the rust-haired waitress greets Harriet, and the waitress with glasses brings her salad.

'Grazie,' Harriet murmurs.

'Prego, signora.'

She pours her wine, breaks off a crust of bread. It's noisy in the dining-room now, dishes clattering, the babble of voices. It felt like noise in the foyer of the Rembrandt Cinema when he told her: the uproar of shock, although in fact it was quite silent there. Bright, harsh colours flashed through her consciousness, as if some rush of blood exploded in a kaleidoscope of distress. For a moment in the foyer of the cinema she closed her eyes, as she had when they told her they weren't to be a family any more.

She might have sent them postcards, but she hasn't. She might have reported that breakfast at the pensione is more than coffee and rolls since the Germans and the Dutch and the Swiss have begun to come: cheese and cold meats, fruit and cereals, fresh sponge cake, a buffet on the terrace. Each morning she has sat



there reading *The Small House at Allington*, wondering if they would like to know of the breakfast-time improvement. She wondered today if it would interest them to learn that the abandoned petrol pumps are still there on the road to the town, or that she sat in the deserted park beneath the chestnut trees. She thought of sending him a postcard too, but in the end she didn't. His predecessor it was who encouraged her to bring long novels on holiday, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, *The Mill on the Floss*.

It's beef tonight, with spinach. And afterwards Harriet has *dolce*, remembering this sodden yellow raisin cake from the past. She won't taste that again; as mysteriously as she knows she has cheated without meaning to in her love affairs, she knows she won't come back, alone or with someone else. Coming back has been done, a private journey that chance suggested. Tomorrow she'll be gone.

In the room with the bookcases and the Giotto reproductions she watches while people drink their grappa or their Stock, or ask the white-jacketed boy for more coffee, or pick up conversations with one another. The Belgian girls have got to know the young Englishman who goes down after wrecks and Nev who's in the business world. All four pass through the room on their way to the terrace, the girls with white cardigans draped on their shoulders because it isn't as warm as it was last night. 'That man drew us!' a voice cries, and the couple who were sketched last night gaze down at their hardly recognizable selves in the pensione's comment book.

He backed away, as others have, when she asked too much of love, when she tried to change the circumstances that are the past by imposing a brighter present, and constancy in the future above all else. She has been the victim of herself: with vivid clarity she knows that now and wonders why she does and why she didn't before. Nothing tells her when she ponders the solitude of her stay in the Pensione Cesarina, and she senses that nothing ever will.

She sees again the brown-and-green striped tie of the old man who talked about being on your own, and the freckles that are blotches on his forehead. She sees herself walking in the morning heat past the graveyard and the rusted petrol pumps. She sees herself seeking the shade of the chestnut trees in the park, and crossing the piazza to the trattoria when the first raindrops fell. She hears the swish of the cleaner's mop in the church of Santa Fabiola, she hears the tourists' whisper. The fingers of the praying woman flutter on her beads, the candles flare. The story of Santa Fabiola is lost in the shadows that were once the people of her life, the family tomb reeks odourlessly of death. Rain has sweetened the breathless air, the angel comes mysteriously also.