

# The Story Knife

## The Priest, the Alaska Cruise, and the Cabin Boy from Genoa

After Skagway in Alaska, in the long Arctic light of the summer solstice, Brian Kelly, heading north, heading toward true north, realized the twilight of the gods must not be desperate. On his American cruise ship docked against the granite mountains of the North Pacific, he had caught Himself catching the eye of a cabin boy from Genoa.

The boy was, in fact, freshly tipped over the cusp of adolescence, a young man, the Italian kind who gives occasion to sonnets, whose innocence beguiles, whose dark curls and darker eyes and supple-shouldered body cause notes of invitation, of assignation, accompanied by a cabin number and a hundred dollar bill, to be written in hope and then crumpled and thrown away in confusion.

Sex was not the quest. Beauty was. Love was on dangerous times. To touch a stranger put life at risk, but the need to touch beauty, to trace the curling hair of the head and thigh and foot bit into his fifty-year-old heart. He Himself had always worshiped beauty. Sex was the perfect hook to distract beauties in their tracks long enough to savor beauty itself incarnate in them. Brian Kelly, Chicago-born out of a Dublin Dempsey come over to marry a Boston Kelly, was not some feckless rover traveling ignorant through the world. He was a priest who knew what people are for. The young man from Genoa may have hired on as ship's crew. But he was not for that. His beauty was his true vocation.

The cruise ship flying flags and streamers had put to sea from Vancouver and headed north up the calm waters of the scenic Inland Passage, passing fjords and forests, washing away the anxiety that had become his habit at home. He traveled alone for a week's

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**HOW TO LEGALLY QUOTE FROM THIS BOOK**

retreat. He was happy keeping to Himself, that third-person High Irish pronoun of importance that helped him bear his otherness and his soul's alienation from his body. In San Francisco, days before, at the jammed "Bloomsday Fleadh Festival 1989" in Golden Gate Park, he had stood separate from the sunburnt crowd cheering Van Morrison and Elvis Costello singing out the anthem of the "thousand miles of the long journey home." On the cruise ship, he skirted the wine-tastings, the karaoke, and the whale-watchers playing canasta in the fitness salon. He made Himself invisible. As the ship cruised northwards, he walked the wooden decks, sometimes warm with June sun, sometimes cold with pelting Arctic rain, purposely neither smoking his cigarettes nor saying his rosary, leaving his senses open to what flow of smell or thought or feeling might come from the sea, the passing blue ice, the mountains.

Always his *Daybook*, full of scribbled notes, was in the pocket of his long Australian duster that flapped like a priest's cassock around his ankles. Always he carried his camcorder, shooting with exotic angles the wake of the ship, the rain dripping on the decks, and the empty chairs and empty tables of the piano salon in the last hour before dawn.

The Reverend Father Brian Kelly purposely kept people out of his rectangular video frame. His footage, viewed and re-viewed alone on his monitor in his cabin, made the ship, built in 1957 and never done up for disco, look empty of the present, and so reminiscent of romance he wondered that no Hollywood location scout had exploited its varnished wood decks and steep stairs and long corridors. He brooded that the rental movies he viewed late nights alone in his bedroom in the parish rectory were no longer musical comedies and dramas about shipboard love affairs to remember. The way of the world had turned Hollywood to crash-and-burn action scripts with no use for the nostalgia of the vintage ship but to blow it up.

His camera eye zoomed in across the decks and cubbyholes and doors and brass handrails, and tracked down the upper-deck gangways with an aching need for the years he had wasted on purity that taught him nothing but denial. His blazing blue eyes searched the

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shadows for ghosts of shipboard romance from times past when, long ago, as a young priest sitting in the dark confessional, whispered sin had once been interesting, even tempting in the Sixties and Seventies before the fundamentalist whining of neurotics seeking reconciliation face-to-face had caused him to laugh out loud because he was only a priest and not a therapist.

Other passengers nodded to his head of red hair haloed gold by the bright summer sun, nearing solstice, but could not penetrate his aura of privacy. He protected Himself from the presumptuous privilege of strangers thrown together for a week, eager to unload their life stories on new acquaintances, unsuspecting lone travelers wishing to God there were boundaries sailing over the bounding main.

His cabin stewardess, a worldly little blonde from Strathclyde, Scotland, hardly surprised him with her openness. At first he had been uncomfortable with her constant attentions, making up his room, turning down his bed. He felt the visceral class distinctions of the world. He had never felt comfortable around the faithful old parish housekeeper because he always took to heart workers hired to do what people could but won't do for themselves. But his stewardess put him at ease. She too knew what people were for.

He figured she knew what he was for.

She was fluent in gaydar, earning his confidence, kidding him that the Roman priest collar in his closet was the très perfect costume for the Captain's party. She told him what no one else would tell. She told him how some passengers boarded to die. Some knowing they might; some planning they would. How one or two a month died; how they were rolled away to refrigeration below deck. Old people, ancient ones, and sickly people, terminal ones, and young ones, viral ones, sometimes in their beds, sometimes slipping overboard silently into the icy water, the quick icy water, unseen in the twilight of the midnight sun, unmissed by the crowds of robust breeders and feeders. That was not what the cruise ship's festive television commercials had promised.

Father Brian Kelly after sitting twenty-five years in the

confessional was not surprised at her tale. But he had not expected the dark surprise of the cabin boy from Genoa.

He'd thought he was beyond temptation.

The young man slept below the passenger decks with the crew. His stewardess told him of their small rooms with no windows. "We sleep below sea level. This is a prison for us, it is," she said. His own cabin had a porthole with three brass bolts he had unscrewed to let in the cool North Pacific air. Small icebergs flowed south past his porthole north of Ketchikan in the Inland Passage. He kept to his cabin surrounded by his books and papers and cameras.

The other passengers were swanning through a catered week above their station, foraging for croissants and custards and cocktails from breakfast to midnight buffets, feasting through Roman banquets, soup to nuts, each day appearing in new clothes unpacked in expanding sizes as they boozed their way northward intent on getting their money's worth from the all-inclusive cruise which did not, he rued, include the boy from Genoa. The wives of businessmen and contractors and doctors were ice queens unto themselves: plump, pink, junk-jeweled members of the wannabe classes, women in cruise-ship fashions towing what was left of their conquered husbands, impatient wives waiting for the man of the house to keel over leaving them free at last to enjoy the life insurance benefits footing the bill of the real merry widows on board.

None of them, old or young, husband or wife, bothered him. He tried to be charitable and tolerant, because, between the fat and the dead, he found the silent thin thread of his own solo gay life so unlike their noisy endurance of each other. Anyone who thought priests should marry could be cured by listening to the confessions of married people. Yet somehow their lively eating and drinking lifted and changed his condescending heart because their binging was so opposite the slim disease of plague. They seemed so ordinary, so harmless, so nice, he wondered if sins any longer existed, because God could hardly take offense from such poor creatures. If all the old traditions and taboos were fading away, was he Himself as a priest irrelevant? When everything's all-inclusive, can you do anything you want?

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The cruise was a mercy ship carrying him away from his daily life, his daily things, his daily routines of Mass and prayer and counseling. No priests of his acquaintance could telephone him from the Cardinal Archbishop's office with gossipy updates rattling beads about who was doing what to whom, or who was drunk or dying of you-know-what, or dead. He read no news. He watched no television. He attended no films, and the less he saw and heard, the more visible he became to Himself.

Writing in his *Daybook*, he mused about the magical thinking of priests forgiving sins, exorcising devils, and conjuring the white magic of the Seven Sacraments. His Jesuit spiritual director counseled him he could never read or write too much for his own good. His ordination made him a Catholic priest standing daily at the altar casting spells transforming bread and wine into the flesh and blood of the handsome young Christ with the ritual words "Hoc est enim corpus meum." He understood why non-Catholics called such literal dogma "hocus-pocus." Cognitive dissonance, his poetic Jesuit said, especially for a priest born under the sign of Gemini, was the blessing of the road that rose up to meet him on the long journey of his Irish soul. He believed in the sacred and the profane. He was a priest, fully a priest, and more than a priest. His reading made him feel like a pagan magus, writing in his *Daybook*, spelling the twenty-six runes of the alphabet into erotic words raising the living flesh and blood of divine young men.

He stood naked in his cabin with the sea breeze from the port-hole cooling his body, and his camcorder taping his solo movements. He danced the exotic slow-motion choreography gay men do when stoned alone, heads spinning with ballet and mimes and Judy jazz hands and the man that got away. After a port-of-call at a lake where he had helped row a long Tlingit canoe with twenty other male passengers who meant more to him than they knew talking baseball over included reindeer sandwiches, he returned to his cabin and danced for his camera, a slow undulating male dance to ancient music no one but he Himself could hear. The ship's engines hummed white noise under the rhythmic slap of waves against the hull.

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He was more than naked. He was not his telephone ringing. He was not his car driving. He was not his Roman collar. Not his sermons. Not his books. Not his face smiling at the sick, blessing children, comforting widows, telling gays quivering inside the confessional box they were not sinners, telling the priests who confessed to him they were forgiven. He was stripped clean by sea and sky and ship, simply becoming Himself behind his smile, behind his Irish eyes, behind what breezy conversation he sometimes felt obliged to make as a reality check to keep himself grounded, behind his gentlemanly stroll rubbing shoulders with cordial strangers who did not perceive him as clergy to see if he was, behind the priestliness that isolated him, still a human man.

He was Himself in his cabin. Despite his abiding grief that his priestly life had turned into a disaster movie because no one needed priests anymore, he was overflowing with energy, imagining the ship taking the sick and the old, and the dying from his tribe, sailing toward the cold comfort of ice floes. He admired their courage. They no longer bothered to ask priests for Last Rites.

Love and death. The death of love. The love of death. He had fled everything familiar at home because his Rolodex of priests who were friends read like the Tibetan Book of the Dead. He could no longer cry when a classmate from the old seminary died. His grieving had run out of tears. So many priests, some of them great beauties, faded so quickly, died so young, with death certificates forged against the final stigma of AIDS. His own suspicious blood coursed through his veins hiding what horror? He had bought passage on the cruise to be alone for healing his head. He had to think over his Jewish doctor's advice. Was it cynical or not?

"Father Brian," Dr. Bernie Wiegand had said. "If your test comes out negative and you play safe, the plague is over for you. Keep your act together."

What act he had was driven by beauty more than lust, but driven all the same. "What do I know?" he wrote in his *Daybook*, "I'm a burnt-out case."

The third night, his stewardess pulled him aside. "A man must

have jumped overboard. One of the thin ones. A lad. A grown boy.” He was as horrified to listen to her as she was insistent to prove what she had said was true. Her trilling Strathclyde burr chilled her voice opposite his Dublin-born mother’s warm brogue that still entertained him during their late-night telephone conversations. “He’s nowhere on board. The crew’s looked everywhere. Jumping is better, better for me, better than finding them in the morning lying there cold in their beds. I leave them till last. The dead ones. Clean the other rooms first, I do.”

She was progressive enough, and Protestant to boot, a Calvinist, not caring a fig for priests, but he could not bring Himself to ask her about the cabin boy from Genoa who smiled knowing full well what was wanted and what he was for. Remembering their first exchange of looks, that first look, Brian could not deny the rush in Himself. He had no poker face. He knew the boy recognized the look. The boy knew what the man was for.

Brian could only hint to the stewardess about the looks men exchange with the gay cast in the eye that identifies them to each other. He was confused, unfamiliar with shipboard etiquette, uncomfortable, yet turned on by the pinch of class distinction that made the boy and him inaccessible to each other. Was the boy’s look really beauty smiling back? Did the boy really know what he was for? Was he an innocent at sea, a stammering naive Billy Budd, or was his the come-on of a Mediterranean rent boy hustling trade in the North Pacific?

On the fourth morning, the ship docked at Skagway. The other passengers flocked to the curio shops that were the same as all the other curio shops in all the other ports. Brian stood quietly in the center of the village to listen for the sound of hammers, following the sound, finding the local men, talking with them, telling lies, pretending he was a teacher, saying his principal had made him promise to bring back to his students some documentary truth about the people of Alaska. The men, tuned to humor all the quirky cruise-ship characters who brought money to town, kept nailing up fence

boards as the priest knelt before them worshiping their natural male grandeur with his camcorder.

Only minutes before returning to the ship, he approached a mountain man sitting in a beat-up van with a canoe strapped on top, a stove pipe jutting through the rear roof, and a large Husky with one blue eye and one brown panting on the passenger seat. The mountain man talked utopian anger about big government and oil companies and clear-cutting and how stupid the voters of Ketchikan had been to allow a nuclear warship to home port in their fishing waters.

His camcorder worked like a magic confessional. The lens sucked in people eager to spill their opinions and their secrets. Everyone wanted to be on television. The mountain man, smooth-talking into the camcorder, showed him, through the driver's window, objects he had crafted while snowed in till the May thaw.

Brian was fascinated by a small knife, its tiny blade an ancient striated mammoth tooth polished flat as an arrowhead, its six-inch handle a burnished willow twig, honey-colored, with dark wood knots. He instantly liked the delicate object held like a talisman in the mountain man's hand.

"It's a story knife," the mountain man said. "When the Tlingit or the Eskimo elders tell a story, they use this knife. They smooth out the snow. They draw a rectangle with the knife. The kids watch the knife draw the story in the snow. The knife draws the stick figures of one or two images inside the rectangle. The story unfolds when the storyteller wipes out the drawing, smoothing the snow, drawing a new rectangle for the next part of the story."

Brian turned his camcorder off, hung it from his shoulder, and reached into the pocket of his duster where he kept mad money in the flap of his *Daybook*. "I'd like to buy it."

"You want to know how much?"

"You made it. You tell me."

"At those shops over there? Cost you twice as much. Me? I don't have any overhead. I can let you have it for a hundred."

Brian wondered how people arrived at a price for beauty. "I'll take it," he said.



“No haggling?”

“I don’t know how to haggle. I don’t usually shop at all.”

“I should’ve said two hundred.”

“Okay. I’ll haggle. Here’s a hundred.”

That easily he bought the story knife which he planned to keep next to the white screen of his new laptop computer. He imagined Himself teaching Bible stories and Catechism and the Lives of the Saints to children in a whole new way. He’d tried everything else.

The fourth night at sea, after the morning at Skagway, he stood aside in the lobby outside the main dining room, purposely leaving the table a bit hungry, holding his camcorder and watching a scrum of a dozen young Aussie doctors clowning, glad-handing, offering cigars, inviting everyone to come hear the infectious-disease papers they were presenting in the Jack London lounge. They waved an invitation at him across the room. He gave a thumbs-up, smiled, pointed at his camera, raised the viewfinder to his eye, and slowly zoomed his telephoto lens into their exhibitionist antics and the laughing stream of passengers ducking the quacks, looking at their watches, and running away.

“We’ll give any other health professionals on board a letter saying you attended our seminar. For tax purposes.”

Videotaping their horseplay in that carpeted lobby on the main deck outside the Purser’s Office, surrounded by the tax-dodgers and their cheerio wives, he saw, suddenly, walking into the frame of his long lens, the cabin boy, all innocence, so dark and young, coming toward him, flesh and blood conjured through blue swirls of cigar smoke, his angel’s face smiling a smile more genuine than the smiles of crew cadging tips for doing almost nothing. Brian held the shot steady on the boy who in a growing close-up in his viewfinder came cutting courteously through the doctors straight toward him. Brian lowered his camera. Face to face, neither having spoken to the other, the young man crossed all bounds. He placed his left hand on Brian’s left shoulder in a quick glamouring pass noticed by no one but Brian Himself who said nothing in his flush of surprise. It was the boy who spoke. He used his baritone lightly, as if the upper register would

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promise more than threaten. “Come stai questa sera? How are you this evening, signore?”

Brian Kelly, born with the gift of gab, could say nothing. His fair skin blushed red as his hair. As fast as he had appeared, the boy was gone down the stairs. In years past, before the world was scared sexless, Brian might have dared follow the boy down the stairs to some private place.

Pacific whales would have spouted in the northern sea.

Brian, that night, could not, would not, by a conscious act of will, follow. Assassination required discussion. The boy was pretty, but was he pretty poison? A thousand doubts of language and reason and vexed passion sent him careening down the long tunnel of sloping passageway to his cabin.

In the bygone dream time before the viral horror, on one of his trips to the monastery hotels of the Amalfi Coast or the blue-domed churches of the Greek isles or that guided Von Gloeden photo tour to Taormina, this boy could have made his heart sing. He threw his porthole open to the velvet gloaming of the midnight sun. He braced Himself against the force of the wind. Desire beat his brain with lust for the boy's beauty. He had been careful so long, he would be safe if he continued his care, but the only care he knew for Himself, because he had taken a vow of chastity he had only rarely broken, was abstinence. Life wasn't a cabaret; it was a conundrum. He loathed the discipline of purity. He hated the contagion of plague.

He sat at his desk writing in his *Daybook*. His face hard with desire. He slammed the book shut and wrote three notes, throwing all three away, not knowing how to navigate access to the young man. He walked from his desk to the open porthole. The solstice wind below the Arctic Circle blew silken and silent around him. The Alaska midnight, at this longest daylight, was the constant twilight his life had become. He slept fitfully.

The ship cruised northward fast under the strengthening aurora borealis of the Northern Lights.

He rose early for the docking at the village of Sitka. A Russian church filled with gold icons sat in the town center. He hadn't fled

one church to tour another. Not this time. Not this trip. He pulled away from the crowd of passengers flocking into the little wooden cathedral and headed to the combustion-engine sounds of a hundred small fishing boats bobbing at mooring. The crews of one or two men in rubber deck-boots, yellow slickers, and watch caps, smoking and talking, drinking their coffee from steaming paper cups, paid him no attention as he shot them, men whose hands and labor he envied, close-up with his telephoto lens.

He could look and long for everything through the gazing crystal of his viewfinder, but he could not touch anyone. He could only look at them re-run at night, saved and safe on his video screen. How had he become so dead? He was beside Himself. He became Himself watching Himself. How had fear made him a voyeur of his own life?

At Juneau, Brian boarded a helicopter tour which set him down twelve miles away on top the windswept ice desert of the Mendenhall Glacier. The tiny chopper lifted off leaving him and three strangers alone to wander for an hour. He set out on his own, away from them and their voices, finding solitude behind a tall palisade of ice. He set his camcorder down steady on the glacier, his wide-angle lens recording in the distance, the mountains, and, in close up at the bottom of the rectangular frame, the ancient ice running rivulets of topaz blue water.

He walked into focus in front of his own camera. He knelt down. He was his own best director. Who else would bother shooting his private dances? Who else would shoot his private rituals? He was a lone pilgrim kneeling on the ice-cap at the top of the world. He reached into his pockets for the dozen crystal rosaries he had bought as therapeutic souvenirs when he took his arthritic mother on pilgrimage to the Shrine of Our Lady of Knock in Ireland. He laid the rosary chains down flat into the freezing blue trickles where the crystal beads became one with the glacier ice. If his priest friends believed in miracles, then his dunking the rosaries into the mystic Arctic ice, steeping them in the clear water in the bright light, might empower all the more the gifts he was taking back to the silent ones desperate for any hope.

Later, in his cabin, reviewing his glacier footage on his monitor, he thought his anointed hands looked very young for a man his age who, if he could dare work sacramental magic, could certainly dare write a mash note to the divine boy from Genoa.

After Juneau on the fifth night heading from the smooth flow of the Inland Passage out to the open sea of the Gulf of Alaska, northwest, hundreds of nautical miles towards Anchorage, he realized the cruise was passing him by. Only two nights remained. He had to decide. He wrote lists in his *Daybook*.

If the young man found him a fool wanting to discuss safety, he would not have too long on board to be embarrassed. He felt unreasonable being safer than safe. Was his life reduced to a search for safety? What was living without risk? He had always, almost always, disciplined his passion with absolute purity. Had he no trust in his reason to govern his lust? If alone with the young man, would abstinence turn to abandon? It would be simpler to throw Himself overboard.

He was not afraid to die quickly. He was afraid to die slowly.

He felt sick. He was fasting. He had not eaten all day. He headed down the corridors toward the main dining room. He could not walk a straight line. He pitched from wall to wall. The choppy open sea of the North Pacific was lifting and dropping the ship. The line at the buffet was short. Nausea was turning the Roman banquet into a vomitorium. He fled back down the stairs to his deck. He skirted around two passengers with gasping faces. He noticed white paper bags had appeared, stuck every ten feet into the railings along the passageways going to all the cabins. He had will power. He willed he would not be sick. He slammed his door behind him. His *Daybook* slid from the desk to the floor. The story knife flew through the air. The room was hot as a furnace. He pressed his hands to his temples. He was wet with sweat.

He opened his door to let the cold air blow through.

He was not prepared for the sudden spectacle.

There stood his stewardess. Her face wide-eyed in astonishment.

An overstuffed woman, supported by two other graces, had just,

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as he opened the door to his cabin, thrown up on his stewardess's shoes.

"You bitch!" the stewardess screamed.

He ran past the four women, hitting first one wall, being tossed against the other wall, down the stairs to the Infirmary where the good ship's Doctor Marcello told him, "I've just the thing. A shot of Promethazine. Fix you in minutes."

He rolled up his shirt sleeve as three new patients arrived tossing at the tiny Infirmary door. He watched with his gay eye to make sure the straight doctor knew enough to snap open a new syringe with a new needle because what kind of decent doctor becomes a ship's doctor. Calmed almost instantly by the injection, he felt suddenly superior to the rough seas. He lay on the gurney smiling, relaxed, freed, his blue eyes staring up into the bright light, feeling thoroughly Himself, slowly calming, balancing, finding his sea legs again as he had once before with his mother on that trans-Atlantic cruise to Ireland. Always in his life he had decided what he would do; and what he had decided to do, he decided he could undo.

He returned through the deserted passageways to his cabin. He was no longer at sea. He was on the sea, happy he was high on the high seas. The desperate self he had felt the first days alone on board seemed anemic to the sense of giddy self-purpose throbbing in his veins. He stripped off all his clothes. He paused once to consider if the Promethazine might be affecting his judgment. He opened his porthole and thrust his slender upper body out into the bright evening air, a pink human torso with flaming red hair sticking out the port side of the white ship. The waves made by the cutwater prow spread out on the running sea of topaz water like foaming chevrons under the midnight sun. He trembled remembering it was Midsummer's Eve, the twentieth of June, his fiftieth birthday, the solstice, the year's longest day when a person can, his mother always said, be gifted with wisdom or madness or death or be spirited away by mischievous faeries. He felt chilled by the wind. He could not afford to catch a cold. He pulled Himself back into his cabin. His teeth chattered. He had never intended to jump, not really, but he laughed

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at how easily he could have flung Himself, live on camera, into the freezing sea when he realized the siren call of the open porthole. The scenario offered so perfect an exit it was ridiculous. He was getting pleased with Himself. That was a good sign. He had the luck, he did. His mother and father both told him so.

The throb of white noise from the ship's engine excited his senses soothed by the injection. The Arctic swells rocked the rising tide of pagan Irish blood flushing his baptized body. An ashtray slid across his desk to his laptop whose white screen lit the cabin. The story knife rolled into his lap. At that moment, so abrupt, so crystal clear, it surprised him that he suddenly knew what he would do and how he would make the best of bad times. It was not the twilight of the gods. It was the call of the wild. He congratulated Himself that he and his kind, sacred and profane, were always so goddam clever. He sat down at his desk and wrote in his *Daybook* that he who had told a mountain man he could not haggle had actually perfected haggling into a lifestyle. He had to take action to escape his scrupulous conscience of outmoded prohibitions. He took the story knife into his consecrated hands and invoked the power of its nature. He set it down intentionally next to his fountain pen and spelled a decisive message on a white sheet of ship's stationery: "Se tu per favore. If you wish. E il mio compleanno. It's my birthday. 11 PM, Cabin 336," and stuck a precious hundred dollar bill with the note inside the envelope. He rang for his stewardess.

"Did you see what that pig did to my shoes? Now she's off early to the midnight buffet!"

He was glad she was madly distracted. She took the envelope, glanced at the name of the young man from Genoa, and smiled. It was not her first billet-doux. He gave her ten dollars, left the door unlocked, and carefully placed the crystal rosaries in his Dopp kit on the table next to the bed. He set up his tripod and aimed his camcorder into the soft light, framing the bed, framing the waiting rectangle of cold white sheet like a Tlingit elder smoothing snow for a story about to be told. He sat in his chair, contemplating the delicate story knife, and waited. There were safe ways, clever new

ways, as good if not better than the old ways, for worshiping beauty live in person and forever on screen.

“Ah, signore,” came the knock, came the boy, came the envelope, came the hundred dollar bill. “Buona sera.”

