

Permesso?

PAUL WILLIAMS

No one has knocked at the Cavedaschi's door for years. When neighbours call, they simply call out '*permesso?*' (Can I come in?) and enter.

But today someone is knocking loud. With a baton.

Lina's mother calls: get the door, but don't let them in yet...

'Che?'

'Delay them. Smile, silly girl.'

Her mother arranges Lina's hair, licks a finger and gives her a cat wash, presses down her dress, slips it off the left shoulder. Lina pulls it up again. Her mother pulls it down.

'Be nice. No wide eyes.' Her mother raps her on the head with her thimble. Kicks her shin. 'Via!'

That familiar crunch, crunch in her stomach, like when soldiers march down the street or when her father chews apples.

'*Sono venuti per noi, finalmente!*' (They have finally come for us!) her father mutters. He has flattened himself against the kitchen wall. Her mother bangs past him down the steps. 'You two girls tidy up the kitchen while your father trembles in his boots. I'll tidy the cellar.'

The knocking stops. Lina can hear their boots outside on the small stones.

Her father stuffs tobacco into his pipe. Lights it. What a time to smoke, she thinks.

Her mother lunges at the mantelpiece and props up the large photo of Mussolini. Pushes the bric-a-brac aside so the madman with bald head and bulging eyes resumes pride of place in their low-ceilinged living room. They always lay him flat. Can't stand him watching them while they eat.

Lina unlatches the bolt and pulls open the door. Two men block the sunlight. She sees the red armbands on their left sleeves, black swastikas in a white circle, worn like bandages, as if they have broken their elbows. Then the grey furry material of their jackets. The medals, dangling things sewn onto their collars, their pocket lapels, even on their thin khaki ties. Their shirts are so tight around the neck it pinches the skin. Someone did a lot of sewing here. A sparkling shiny belt, another Swastika, this time metal on material, and slash of a brown leather strap around their shoulder and to their waist. Crisply ironed shirts, trousers.

She wants to reach out and feel the material between her fingers. Touch the dazzling medals. Smell the starch, the wet lamb felt of the coats. The neat sewn embroidery of two

lightning strikes on the first man's right collar. Such detail. Even the cotton matches and is sewn in even strokes.

She is supposed to delay them outside, but she forgets and the men push open the green wooden door and duck into the living room kitchen dining room with its uneven stone floors and its closed shutters and its fireplace and its mantelpiece with Mussolini staring into a bright future. *Permesso...* she says for them. *Entratta!*

The room is suddenly dark and the stone floors are suddenly hard and mean, the ceiling lower than usual and the smell of her father's pipe smoke asphyxiating. They are big men, stand tall, and Lina realises that she is hunching her shoulders. Her dress is dirty and dull and her bare feet unwashed and stained with purple.

There is no electricity, and the latrine is a hole in the ground. There is no phone, no cars, no radio in the house. No books either. Her parents are illiterate. They never bath or shower. Lina suddenly knows this, sees it for the first time, through their eyes, as these men poke around the living room with their clean smell, scrubbed skin, perfect teeth and polished boots.

One man cradles a snub nosed machine in his hands, like a pet.

'*So kleines Mädchen, wo sind deine Eltern?*' (German: 'So little girl, where are your parents?')

The language is harsh with 'k's but she understands. Even so, the second man, softer, gentler, asks her in what he thinks is Italian. '*Quindici bambina, bimba, dove sei i tuoi gianitori.*'¹

She would laugh if she were not so awe struck. In school you put people in the corner with the word '*asino*' (ass) written on their paper hats for saying sentences like that. The teacher would take a ruler to your knuckles if you spoke like that. *Dove sono* (Where are), plural, she wants to say.

The first man fondles her ears and hair, as if this is a way to get her to speak. It burns where he touches. '*Ciao bella. Belli. Belle. Vieni qui.*'²

He pulls her hair as if it is a question his hands are asking. Where are your parents? In hair language. The bare shoulder is a hit too, as he cannot keep his strong fingers off the skin, brushing her neck, arranging her hair on the skin. Her mother was right. His eyes do not follow the dark shadows of her parents' guilt of the scuttling traces of the meal last night for ten, in a house where only five live.

Shame reddens her face. '*Kann ich die Medallia toccare.. er.. ber..ber ..*'

'Berühren?'³

He nods.

'Is it real gold?'

'*Wirklich. Wo haben Sie so gut Deutsch gelernt? Und ohne Akzent?*'

The second man taps his boot against the low table. 'Your parents? We asked you a question.'

'Papa? Mama?' she calls into the darkness behind the cloth that separates the living area from the bedrooms. 'We have visitors.'

Can they see, with their sharp translucent eyes, that this is all staged?

Her father enters the room, his shirt undone, unshaven: he looks like a fool. He sucks on his pipe. The man of the house. '*Buon giorno.*'

He does not play the role well. Cringes. Shrinks. Acts guilty. Even when he has done nothing wrong, he looks guilty of whatever people accuse him of. Years of being knocked about by her mother makes him skulk around the edges of walls like a dog.

'*Mein Vater,*' she says. '*Il mio papa.*'

Her father has many bad habits, the main one being that he is incapable of deceit.

She, on the other hand, takes after her mother, a maternal skill passed down the generations. She has been apprenticed in the art of lying from a very young age.

If only her father were not so... *trasparente.*

The first German, attracted to a victim as a dog is to a running rabbit, lunges at her father and pushes him up against the wall so hard that the sideboard shudders and the Mussolini picture claps onto its face.

'*Die Kommuniste!*' he spits. '*Wo sind sie?* (Where are they?') He reaches into his leather holster with his free hand and pulls out the steel gun. It's a scene from her nightmares. The man holds the gun to her father's head. Her father drops his pipe. '*D...dio santo.*'

Lina is holding onto her childhood. They have chickens, goats, and grow grapes which in season, she collects into big wooden vats and treads until her feet are stained purple. The damp cellar is lined with green bottles of wine. She collects *acqua minerale* from a spring in the hillside. Her mother bakes bread in the black-bellied oven, and they make pasta to dry in the sun on the stones outside the house, covered in lace to keep the flies away. It is all gone now. With one bullet to her father's head, it is all gone.

Her head hurts where they are pressing the gun into his. Can this *Tedesco* see in her father's eyes the nightly visits, the *partigiani*⁵ who have eaten them out of house and home, who take whole cakes of their cheese, who doss down in the cellar?

Her father clutches a pouch of American tobacco, tobacco that cannot be purchased anywhere in Italy. Will they see that her father reeks of partisan? If so, they will kill him.

But Lina is an Alfieri. From a long line of stout women in black with tight headscarves who kick and bash their way through the world. Alfieri, a sign bearer, a fire!

'*Smettila! Lascialo solo.*' ('Stop that! Leave him alone.') Without thinking, she lunges at her father and holds onto him. The man pushes the gun barrel into her father's cheek so that his mouth is skewed. '*Dio santo,*' he says again.

The second man raises his machine gun so that she can see right down the small 'o' of the barrel.

She squeezes her body between her father and the man. 'If you kill him, you'll have to kill me too.'

The man pulls his weapon away. Laughs. Both Germans laugh. Is this funny? She clings to her father so he does not collapse into a heap of old clothes on the floor.

The German tousles her hair with the barrel of the gun, tickles her bare shoulder with its hard steel point. 'No one is going to kill you, *Tesoro*, (treasure) you are too beautiful.'

She stares with fierce eyes.

He plays with her hair with the gun, then holsters it.

She pulls her shoulder strap over her neck and hugs her dad tight. He is trembling; she is trembling.

In walks her mother, squeezing a rag. The man snaps back to attention as if his commandeer has walked into the room. Her mother does that to people. She may be dumpy and bent, but she commands. The man with the machine gun pushes it down so it stares at the ground. It looks ashamed.

'Mama.'

Her mother does not flinch. She is a perfect liar. Whatever fear inside her she has packed away tightly in the wet rag she squeezes. She shows her missing teeth and pink diseased gums in lieu of a smile. And then she makes a careless dismissive gesture towards her husband. 'Leave him alone. He's a *cretino.*'

That stops them. She elaborates. '*Dumkopf.*'

The second man smiles. '*der Dorftrötel?*'

She would normally rage at this, but like her mother she lies well. Her eyes are fierce. The *Tedesco* stares at her, his eyes making her swim.

They get it now. Maria is the *padrona della casa*. (mistress of the house) The father can be ignored. He bends slowly to pick up his pipe, stuffs it back into his mouth.

'*Frau...*'

'*Maria Cavedaschi. And this is my daughter Lina.*'

'Lina.' The *Tedesco* bows slightly to her and to her mother. 'Frau Maria, we are looking for the partisans who were here last night.'

'Here?'

She looks frightened. Clutches her apron. 'P...*partisani*? Here? *Madre di dio*.' Good old mama. She says the word partisan as if Satan himself is in the room.

'We have been watching. At night, there have been many people coming in and out of your house.'

Papa Andrea, the *padrone della casa*, fumbles with his matches. He cannot light his pipe, he trembles so much. He is guilty, guilty, guilty.

But she doesn't turn a hair. '*Partisani*? Those low down scum of the earth. We lock our doors. Did they try to get in here? You saw them? When? Where did they go? If I catch one, I will...'

The *Tedesco* is taken aback. What he thought was going to be an interrogation is now a defence. 'Well. We have reports. We did not see them. But they blew up a bridge at *Passo della Cisa*⁶ and then were tracked down to this village.'

'The bastards.'

He stares at Lina's bare shoulder as if trying to read something in small print on the nape of her neck. The dress keeps slipping down.

'Scum. They try to steal our food. They raid our vegetable patch. They take anything we do not lock up.' The mother reaches for Lina's flesh and pinches her cheek. 'See? Skin and bone. Wasting away.'

Lina is pushed into the centre of the room.

'No, she's...beautiful. You have a very beautiful daughter.' The man's cheeks redden.

'Wait... before you go, we have something for you. *Cretino* here works in the cheese factory. We want you to taste some of our cheese.'

She is not lying here. Their Reggiano is the best cheese in the whole of Reggio Emilia. 'Rosanna, bring the cheese!'

The youngest daughter, aged nine, who has been watching from behind the curtain, walks steadily into the room as if she is walking on a long tightrope. She carries a cake of cheese on a wooden platter the size of a man's head.

'You have another beautiful daughter, *Frau Cavedaschi*.'

'Three beautiful daughters. Lina, Rosanna and ...Ida? '*Vieni qui*'.(Come here)'

Ida uncoils herself from the wooden pole in the corridor and stands in the framed doorway.

The German nods to her too.

Maria pulls Ida, the middle girl, aged ten and a half, in line with the other two. 'Which of them is the prettiest, do you think?'

'Mama,' hisses Lina.

The *Tedesco* looks like a wolf with way too many teeth in his mouth. 'They are all equally desirable,' he says.

But a quick look at Lina betrays his preference.

Her mother cuts three thick slices of the cake. It crumbles onto the plate. Lina eyes it. She is forbidden to eat this cheese. She was once thrashed with her mother's belt for nibbling at the side like a mouse.

'Cavedaschi, get the plates.'

Her father is grateful to do something. He slides along the wall into the kitchen. Her mother makes the sign with her fingers around her ears that signifies madness.

She watches as the *Tedeschi* both bite into the cheese. Nod, smile, and then take more. '*Gud. Gud*.'

'Sorry, no bread. Bread is scarce.'

But food is their best weapon. And Lina's shoulder. And her blue eyes.

'You must be thirsty, too. Did Lina not offer our guests anything to drink? *Una bicchiere di vino?*' (A glass of wine?)

The *Tedeschi* are the clumsy ones now, politely declining. But she insists. 'Follow me to the cellar, you can choose one of our wines. We make it ourselves.' We have wine in our cellar, not partisans, she is telling them. We have nothing to hide.

They follow her, snoop around the dank corners. Lina hears them in the cellar, clinking bottles, their voices a rumbling repartee. When they emerge, each man clutches a green bottle of their best wine. Her father carries another bottle. He places it on the low table and uncorks it. This is something he is good at. He twists and pulls and pops. The smell of the red wine is strong. She can hear the effervescence.

'*Bicchieri*, come on, girls!'

Her mother pours generous glasses, motions the men to sit on the tiny stools and spread their legs wide, their leather creaking. Even her father sits.

'Well... a toast. *Cin cin*. To the men who are protecting us.' Her mother's lies are as thick as the cheese slices, so bad that she does not know how the *Tedeschi* do not see though her. But these men live on the surface of words too, their whole *Weltanschauung* a trough of words and lies and postures and stereotypes. This is the language they understand. They point their chins out like Mussolini. Here is someone they can talk to. Not muddy and dark Italians tangled with emotion, but light and blonde and blue eyed.

If she could count the times that the *Tedesco* stares at her, it would be a hundred. Every time she looks away, he steals a hang dog look, with calf eyes. And he stammers when she looks at him. This is the woman power her mother has been lecturing her about. You can make a man do anything you want him to if you have that power.

But it is not a good thing. She feels dizzy when she looks at him. Her body feels raw, her gut tight and her hands tingly. It is his uniform, she says to herself.

The *Tedeschi* drink, munch and nod, their eyes wandering to each daughter who stands on display, hands clasped in front of them as they have been taught at school to be ladies.

Or rather, bric-a-brac.

'We need to have the Fuehrer next to him, to complete the picture.'

Maria adjusts the portrait. 'If someone would give us a picture of the Fuehrer, he would find a good place here on the mantelpiece. There is room for him here.' She pushes aside the china statue of the Virgin Mary praying.

Her father is more at ease now, after a glass of wine. He pours a second round, his hand steady as he fills up his own glass. He downs the whole glass, burps. '*Dio santo.*'

'Cavedaschi. *Bastanza.*' (enough)

What other trick has Maria up her sleeve? It is overkill, but she reaches over to pull a thread in the man's uniform.

'*Lina e una sarta.*' (Lina is a seamstress)

'No mamma.'

'She learns these things at school. She could perhaps repair your jacket. Anything you need doing. You must be far away from home, from your wives?'

The man smooths down the thread. Laughs. 'I am not married, *frau* Maria. What makes you think I am married? I am only nineteen years old.'

'But you, a handsome man like you, have someone waiting for you?'

'No, no, no one waiting at all.'

'Maybe you will meet a pretty Italian girl while you are here?'

'Yes, maybe.' He laughs.

The second *Tedesco* places his glass down.

'Thank you for your hospitality.' Again that look. As if hospitality means something different, as if it is a promise.

'Your jacket?'

'I will return tomorrow.'

He is speaking to the mother, but he is really speaking to her.

At the door, he again speaks to the mother in low tones. 'A truly wonderful daughter you have.'

Lina is used to being talked about as if she is not there.

'Lina is going to be a singer when she grows up,' says her mother.

'Mama!'

'She will perform the opera in *La Scala* in Parma. You know *La Scala*?'

Her mother has never even heard opera. None of them

have ever been to *La Scala*, but neighbours from Fornovo have been telling her stories of the magnificence, the plush scarlet curtains, the stage and the applauding crowds.

'I am sure she will.'

He reaches for Lina's shoulder. 'Perhaps your daughter would like a ride in our jeep? Has she ever been in a car before?'

Lina opens her mouth but finds herself without words. Her cheeks are flushing now. Her mother pushes her away. 'Sorry, no. She... has a lot of work to do. The farm is a busy place. But maybe next time?'

She milks the cows in the morning, collects the eggs, picks vegetables, shells peas, husks the corn, but in the afternoon all her work is done.

'Next time then. I will bring some sewing?'

'*Afidesen.*'

She watches the men crunch on the gravel and down the road. She watches them mount the jeep, roar it into life, and sputter back along the road. Grey smoke lingers in the air. Only when she closes the door does her mother speak. The relief is like a high ringing in the air.

'*Brividi. Salamandi. Rospì. Sifilidi.*' (Creeps. Lizards. Toads. Syphilitics)

'Mamma?'

Her mother spits into the *Tedesco's* glass. 'Clean them,' she tells Lina. 'I don't want their filthy Nazi fingerprints on our glassware.'

'But mamma?'

The younger girls are wide eyed at the change of personality of their mother. But Lina knows her mother to be a chameleon. She too is one: be whatever they want you to be.

'Can we go for a ride in the jeep too?'

Maria snatches her straw broom and sweeps around the girls' feet and they have to dance out of the way. 'No one is ever going for a ride in a German army vehicle while I am alive.'

The broom thwacks into corners, hitting table legs.

'And you?' Her father knows he is trouble. He collects his pipe and makes for the roof. This is where he can smoke in peace, watching the far off hills, the washing dancing in the breeze on hundreds of other rooftops. Today he stares at the dust road that passes Casa Bernini and traces the vehicle by its dust cloud and the tinny whine of its engine.

'But you invited them here tomorrow,' says Lina. 'You offered me to sew their clothes.'

'They won't come back. Just German politeness. And if they do, don't you go for a ride in their Nazi truck. Ever.'

Lina reddens, thinking of the man's eyes. She knows something her mother does not know.

'They won't come back. They were playing the same game we were playing. You just have to know the rules of the game. They knew perfectly well what we were doing.'

'What were we doing?'

For that, Lina gets a clip around the ear with the thimble.

But she knows differently. She feels it. She feels sick, she feels a wrenching in her gut, a dizzy sinning head. Like when you have the influenza. But more. Something is missing in her life that was not missing a few minutes before. That man has taken something of hers.

The room is darker and smaller and smellier, and her clothes shabbier than before.

Author

Paul Williams has a PhD in Creative Writing from the University of Wisconsin. He has lectured in universities in several countries and is currently a Lecturer in Creative Writing at the University of the Sunshine Coast (Australia). He has published a wide range of fiction, young adult novels, a memoir, educational readers, short stories, articles and crime fiction. His books have been set in schools across Africa.

End Notes

1. Poor Italian: 'Fifteen child, small child, where is your parents?' He means to translate his previous question into Italian ('So little girl, where are your parents?')
2. Poor Italian: 'Hello Beautiful. Beautiful (masculine plural). Beautiful (feminine plural). Come here'
3. Poor German: 'Can I touch the medal? (she uses the Italian word here as she does not know the German one, and he corrects her: 'Touch?')
4. German: 'Really? Where did you learn German so well? And without an accent.'
5. Italian: Partisans (antifascist guerrillas who fought against Mussolini and Hitler and aided the Allies in World War II).
6. A mountain pass in Italy that marks the division between the Ligurian and Tuscan Apennines. It is located on the border between northern Tuscany and Emilia-Romagna.

Five Haiku

people at the beach
gazing at the sea –
watched by gulls

a man putting leaflets
in letter boxes –
talking to himself

so quiet –
i hear a fly
land on the window!

late summer –
a young magpie
studies the campus grounds

at the library –
a woman holding a book
watching people

GRANT CALDWELL

Robert Linhart's wife

Theory frequently has the actual effect of killing the power to come to conclusions and to take action' Kurt Eisner'.

In 1968, while the other students of Paris lifted pavés from the streets of the Latin Quarter, the Maoists of the *Ecole Normale Supérieure* on rue d'Ulm, locked themselves in a meeting room.

The Maoists (*pur et dur* – hardcore) of the *Ecole Normale Supérieure* dismissed the student uprising for its lack of 'proletarian content' and argued about the revolution of the *filis à papa* (rich kids).

At the meeting of the Maoists, when a woman (who happened to be his wife) spoke up in favour of joining the students, Robert Linhart responded:

'Leave!
You do not have the right
to speak here.'

SHANE STRANGE

Face

Water rolling down the face of
the weir pattern after pattern
sliding down the face of the
weir drumbeat in my earphones
stuttering tentative repetition
rolling clear hey genius it is
clear falling repetition and each
wave is different rolling pattern
after pattern so clear water is
sliding tentative down the face
of its own drama washing white
in a pattern like a drumbeat like
a repetition stuttering like a
candle form the same thing as
well as the first time I was
wondering how much you can
find out how to get the latest
version rolling pattern like a
white brushstroke friction on
the cement face of the weir
wonder no more it is crisp and
clear and completely
irreversible

SHANE STRANGE