

NAPLES

By

AvramDavidson

This story opened the first Shadows. I almost didn't buy it. When I received it from Avram's agent, I dithered because at the time I still wasn't sure exactly what I wanted—although I thought I'd know it when I saw it. Finally I said, "the hell with it," sent out the contract, and... Avram Davidson won the World Fantasy Award for Best Short Story. Since then, I don't dither very much at all. This is the perfect example of instinct overruling whatever "editorial requirements" means.

It is also quintessential Avram Davidson, and you just cannot get any better than that.

IT IS A curious thing, the reason of it being not certainly known to me—though I conjecture it might be poverty—why, when all the other monarchs of Europe were still building palaces in marble and granite, the kings of that anomalous and ill-fated kingdom called Of Naples and the Two Sicilies chose to build theirs in red brick. However, choose it they did: These last of the Italian Bourbons have long since lost their last thrones, nocastrato singers sing for them from behind screens to lighten their well-deserved melancholy anymore, and their descendants now earn their livings in such occupations as gentlemen-sales-clerks in fashionable jewelry stores—not, perhaps, entirely removed from all memory of the glory that once (such as it was) was theirs. But the red-brick palazzi are still there, they still line a part of the waterfront of Naples, and—some of them, at least— are still doing duty as seats of governance. (Elsewhere, for reasons equally a mystery to me, unless there is indeed some connection between red bricks and poverty, buildings in the same style and of the same material usually indicate that within them the Little Sisters of the Poor, or some similar religious group, perform their selfless duties on behalf of the sick, the aged, and the otherwise bereft and afflicted; and which is the nobler function and whose the greater reward are questions that will not long detain us.)

Some twenty years ago or so, a man neither young nor old nor ugly nor comely, neither obviously rich nor equally poor, made his way from the docks past the red-brick palazzi and into the lower town of ancient and teeming Naples. He observed incuriously that the streets, instead of swarming with the short and swarthy, as foreign legend implies, swarmed instead with the tall and pale. But the expectations of tradition were served in other ways: by multitudes of donkey carts, by women dressed and draped in black, by many many beggars, and by other signs of deep and evident poverty. Almost at once a young man approached him with a murmured offer of service; the young man clutched the upturned collar of his jacket round about his throat, and, as the day was not even cool, let alone cold, it might have been assumed that the reason for the young man's gesture was that he probably did not wish to reveal the absence of a shirt. It was not altogether certain that the young man had no shirt at all, probably he had a shirt and probably this was its day to be washed and probably it was even now hanging from a line stretched across an alley where the sun did not enter in sufficient strength to dry it quickly.

There were many such alleys and many such lines, and, it is to be feared, many such shirts. There were also many such men, not all of them young; and if a count had been made, it might have been found that there were not enough shirts to go around.

Naples.

The traveler continued, with frequent pauses and considerings , to make his way slowly from the port area and slowly up the steep hill. Now and then he frowned slightly and now and then he slightly smiled. Long ago some humble hero or heroine discovered that if the hard wheat of the peninsula, subject to mold and rust and rot if stored in the ear, be ground into flour and mixed with water into a paste and extruded under pressure in the form of long strips, and dried, it would never rot at all and would keep as near forever as the hunger of the people would allow it. And when boiled it formed a food nutritious as bread and far more durable, and, when combined with such elements as oil or tomato or meat or cheese and perhaps the leaves of the bay and the basil, be good food indeed. However, the passage of time failed to bring these added ingredients within the means and reach of all. So, to vary in some measure at least the monotony of the plain pasta, it was made in the widest conceivable variety of shapes: thin strips and thick strips, ribbons broad and narrow, hollow tubes long and hollow tubes bent like elbows, bows and shells and stars and wheels and rosettes and what-have-you. And, if you have nothing, it is anyway some relief to eat your plain pasta in a different design... when you have, of course, pasta to eat.

At least every other doorway in the narrow streets and the narrower alleys kept a shop, and many of the shops sold pasta: for the further sake of variety the pasta was not merely stacked up in packages, it was also—the straight kinds—splayed about as though the stalks held flowers at their upper ends. And when

the traveler saw these he faintly smiled. The young man who paced him step for step also looked at these modest displays. But he never smiled at them. In fact, although he continued his soft murmurs, he never smiled at all.

Most of these ways seemed hardly wide enough for outside displays, but such there were; there were second-hand clothes and fewer by far displays of some few new clothes; there were whole cheeses, although none hereabouts were seen to buy them whole, and perhaps not very many very often bought them by the slice or crumbling piece. And there were small fish, alive, alive-o, and larger fish in dim slabs that had not been alive in a long time, dry and hard and strong-smelling and salty, redolent of distant and storm-tossed seas. Tomatoes and peppers lay about in baskets. Oil was poured in careful drops into tiny bottles. There were also olives in many colors. Pictures of saints were sold, and the same shops sold, too, odd little emblematic images in coral and silver and—this was surely strange in such a scene of poverty—even gold: behind the narrow windows of narrow shops, crosses, too, yes, and beads: the universal signia of that religion. . . . But what were these horns? What were these tiny hands, fingers tucked into a fist with the thumb protruding between first and second fingers?

Best not to ask, you would empty the street in a trice. Everybody in Naples knows, no one in Naples would speak of it above a whisper. . . . to a stranger, not at all. Speak not the word, lest it come to pass. Look not overlong at anyone in these streets, particularly not at the children they produce in such numbers of abundance. Who knows if your eye be not evil?

The eye of the traveler passed over the swarming and ragged bambini without stopping, and in the same manner he glanced at the scannel cats and the charcoal braziers fanned by the toiling housewives: When one's home is but one room, one may well prefer the street as a kitchen.

When one has that which to cook, and fuel with which to cook it.

At length the passageway widened into a sort of a piazza. At one end was a church, on either side were the blank walls of some palazzio a good deal more antique than the brick ones down below: perhaps from the days of Spanish viceroys, perhaps from the days of King Robert. Whoknows. There were anyway no more shops, no stalls, no wide-open-to-the-street one-room "houses" . . . and, for once, no masses of people. . . . no beggars, even. . . . there was even a sort of alley that seemingly went nowhere and that, surprisingly, held no one. And the traveler, who had so far only from time to time looked out from the corners of his eyes at the young man cleaving close to him as a shadow does, and who had made no reply at all to the soft murmurs with which the young man (ever clutching his jacket round about his naked throat) continually offered his services as "guide"; now for the first time, the traveler stopped, gave a direct look fleeting-swift, jerked his head toward the tiny passageway, and stepped inside.

The shirtless one's head went up and he looked at the heavens; his head went down and he looked at the filthy worn stones beneath. His shoulders moved in something too slight for a shrug and his unclad throat uttered something too soft for a sigh.

He followed.

The traveler turned, without looking into the other's eyes, whispered a few short words into the other's ears.

The face of the young man, which had been stiff, expressionless, now went limp. Surprise showed most briefly. His brows moved once or twice.

—But yes—he said.—Surely—he said.

And he said, with a half bow and a small movement of his arm—I pray, follow . Very near—he said.

Neither one paused at the church.

And now the streets became, all of them, alleys. The alleys became mere slits. The shops grew infrequent, their store ever more meager. The lines of clothes dripping and drying overhead seemed to bear little relation to what human beings wore. What actually dangled and napped in the occasional gusts of flat, warm, and stinking air may once have been clothing. Might once more, with infinite diligence and infinite skill, with scissors and needle and thread, be reconstituted into clothing once again. But for the present, one must either deny the rags that name, or else assume that behind the walls, the scabby walls, peeling walls, broken walls, filthy damp and dripping-ichorous walls, there dwelled some race of goblins whose limbs required garb of different drape.

The traveler began to lag somewhat behind.

How often, now, how carefully, almost how fearfully, the youngman guide turned his head to make sure the other was still with him. Had not stepped upon some ancient obscenely greasy flagstone fixed upon a pivot and gone silently screaming down into God knows what. Had not been slip-noosed, perhaps, as some giant hare, hoisted swiftly up above the flapping rags... Rags? Signal flags? What strange fleet might have its brass-bound spyglasses focused hither? Or perhaps it was fear and caution lest the other's fear and caution might simply cause him to turn and flee. In which case the youngman guide would flee after him, though from no greater fear than loss of the fee.

When one has no shirt, what greater fear?

Turned and into a courtyard entered through a worm-eaten door whose worms had last dined centuries ago, perhaps, and left the rest of the wood as inedible. A courtyard as dim, as dank as the antechamber to an Etruscan Hell. Courtyard as it might be the outer lobby of some tumulus, some tomb, not yet quite filled although long awaiting its last occupant. Shadow. Stench. The tatters hung up here could never be clothing again, should they in this foul damp ever indeed dry. At best they might serve to mop some ugly doorstep, did anyone within the yard have yet pride enough for such. And yet, if not, why were they hanging, wet from washing? Perhaps some last unstifled gesture of respectability. Whoknows.

Naples.

Around a corner in the courtyard a door, and through the door a passageway and at the end of that a flight of stairs and the end of the flight of stairs a doorway that no longer framed a door. A thing, something that was less than a blanket, was hung. The youngman paused and rapped and murmured. Something made a sound within. Something dragged itself across the floor within. Something seemed simultaneously to pull the hanging aside and to wrap itself behind the hanging.

At the opposite side to the door a man sat upon a bed. The man would seemingly have been the better for having been in the bed and not merely on it. On the cracked and riven and flaking, sodden walls some pictures, cut from magazines. Two American Presidents. Two Popes. And one Russian leader. And two saints. Comparisons are odious. Of those whose likenesses were on that filthy fearful wall it might be said they had in common anyway that all were dead.

—Good day—the youngman guide said.

—Good day—the man on the bed said. After a moment. He might, though, have been excused for not

having said it at all.

—This gentleman is a foreigner—

The man on the bed said nothing. His sunken eyes merely looked.

—And he would like, ahem, ha, he would like to buy—

—But I have nothing to sell—

How dry, how faint, his voice.

—Some little something. Some certain article. An item—

—But nothing. I have nothing. We have nothing here—

His hand made a brief gesture, fell still.

A very small degree of impatience seemed to come over the face of the older visitor. The younger visitor, observing this, as he observed everything, took another step closer to the bed.—The gentleman is a foreigner—he repeated, as one who speaks to a rather stupid child.

The man on the bed looked around. His stooped shoulders, all dirty bones, shrugged, stooped more.—He may be a foreigner twice over, and what is it to me—he said, low-voiced, seemingly indifferent.

—He is a foreigner. He has, fool, son of a jackal, son of a strumpet, he has money—the youngman turned, abruptly, to the traveler. Said—Show him—

The traveler hesitated, looked all about. His mouth moved. So, too, his nose. His hands, no.

—You will have to show, you know. Can you pay without showing—

The traveler suddenly took a wallet from an inner pocket of his coat, abruptly opened it, and abruptly thrust it in again, placed his back not quite against the noisome wall, crossed his arms over his chest.

Slowly, slowly, the man on the bed slid his feet to the floor.

—Wait outside—he said.—Halfway down—he added.

On the half landing they waited. Listened. Heard.

Dragging, dragging footsteps. A voice they had not heard before.—No NO—A voice as it might be from behind the curtain or the blanket or the what-was-it in place of the door. The faint sounds of some faint and grisly struggle. Voices but no further words. Gasps, only.

Something began to wail, in a horrid broken voice. Then, outside the doorframe, at the head of the stairs, the man, tottering against the wall. Extending toward them his hands, together, as though enclosing something within.

—Be quick—he said. Panting.

And, all the while, the dreadful wail went on from behind him.

The youngman sprang up the stairs, his left hand reaching forward. Behind his back his right hand formed a fist with its thumb thrust out between first and second fingers; then both his hands swept up and met both hands of the other. The youngman, face twisted, twisting, darted down the steps to the half landing.

—The money—

Again, hands met. The traveler thrust his deep into his bosom, kept one there, withdrew the other. Withdrew his wallet, fumbled.

—Not here, not here, you know—the youngman warned.—The police, you know—

One look the older man flung about him.—Oh no. Oh God, not here—he said.—On the ship—

The youngman nodded. Roughly divided the money, tossed half of it up and behind without looking back. He did not come close to the older man as they hurried down the stairs.

Above, the wailing ceased. That other voice spoke, in a manner not to be described, voice changing register on every other word, almost.

—Curse the day my daughter's daughter gave you birth. May you burn, son of a Strega and son of a strumpet, burn one hundred thousand years in Purgatory without remission—

The voice broke, croaked wordlessly a moment. Resumed.

—One dozen times I have been ready to die, and you, witch's bastard, you have stolen my death away and you have sold my death to strangers, may you burst, may you burn—

Again the voice broke, again began to wail.

The two men reached the bottom of the stained stairs, and parted, the younger one outdistancing the other and this time never looking back.

Above, faintly, in a tone very faintly surprised, the man who had been on the bed spoke.

—Die? Why should you die when I must eat?—

Naples.