

The Secret Motorcycle

by Chris Rose

Roccia del Castello was one of those towns that even people who lived in the town next door never knew about. It was nowhere, it was nothing. It was a boring, uninteresting little town somewhere in the middle of Italy, the part of Italy the tourists don't go to because it's too far from Rome or Florence or Venice. The tourists didn't go there because there was nothing interesting to see there and it wasn't surrounded by any interesting or romantic scenery. There was nothing there, apart from a rock, which was why the town was usually just called "Roccia" (the Italian word for "rock"), as the castle, or "Castello", had disappeared centuries ago. Some people said that there never really was a castle in the town anyway, and that the word "Castello" didn't really mean "castle" at all, but was a version of "cestello", which meant a "basket".

Giacomo de Filippo liked it that way. He liked his home town of Roccia del Castello just like that. He liked the fact that he lived in a boring little town where nothing ever happened, and there was never anything to do. Indeed, even though it meant that his mechanic's garage never had much business, Giacomo still liked the place. There were only four cars in the town at the time in which this story takes place, and because Giacomo was actually a very good mechanic, the four cars in the town (which belonged to the mayor, the priest, the mayor's son, and the owner of the only bar in the town, who people said was the priest's son, though nobody ever talked about this in public) always ran very well. Later, of course, there would be many more cars, but in the middle of the 1950's, when this story happened, there were only four.

Giacomo didn't care that there was never much business. He didn't need to spend much money, as he lived alone in the old house that had always belonged to his family. The fact that there was never much work meant that he had lots more time to do what he really loved doing – looking after his motorbike. During the long, quiet, slow, empty days in Roccia del Castello Giacomo got up late, walked slowly down to his garage, stopping on the way for a small black coffee in the town's only bar, where everyone

stopped and said hello to him, then opened up the garage, waited for a while to see if the mayor's car, or the priest's car, or the mayor's son's car, or the bar owner's car was going to come that day. When, as usual, no cars came, Giacomo closed the door to the garage and went into the room at the back. In the back room of the garage, he kept his motorcycle.



Of course, motorcycles were common in those days, as they are now in many parts of Italy, and especially at a time when cars were expensive and difficult to get hold of. But Giacomo's motorcycle wasn't a common one. No, not at all. Giacomo's was a vintage 1930s Moto Guzzi. One of the very first ever made by the famous company. There were only three such motorcycles left in the whole country, Giacomo had heard. And his was the fourth. Nobody else knew about Giacomo's motorcycle, because he had told no one about it. The vintage Moto Guzzi was Giacomo's own personal, private little secret. Everyone in the village had their secrets (secrets which, really, everyone else in the village knew all about), but no one knew anything about Giacomo's motorcycle.

Giacomo had found the motorcycle abandoned by the side of the road five years before. It had looked just like an old pile of rusty metal, and nobody had taken any notice of it. But Giacomo knew exactly what it was as soon as he saw it. He carefully picked it up and took it back to his garage. The motorcycle was in very bad condition, he knew, but over the years he had carefully restored it, using his expertise and skill.

He had found original parts for the bike, and when it was impossible to get original parts, he made his own. He painted the bike bright red, exactly how it had been when it was first made.

Now there was little to do to the bike, but Giacomo spent his days carefully polishing and cleaning it, tuning the engine, making tiny adjustments to make the motorcycle even better.

Giacomo never took the Moto Guzzi out during the day because he never wanted anyone else to see or to know about his secret motorbike. Sometimes, though, at night, when it was dark and he was sure that everyone in the quiet little town of Rocca del Castello was in bed asleep, Giacomo took the bike out from the back room of his mechanic's garage, started the engine and roared around the streets of the town. Sometimes he went out of the town and around the little roads on the hills which surrounded the town. The next morning when he went into the bar to have his morning black coffee, he heard people say "Did you hear a motorbike last night?" and he would shake his head, saying that he had heard nothing.

It was an ordinary day in this ordinary little town, sometime in the middle of June in the middle of the 1950's in the middle of Italy, when Giacomo's life changed.

It didn't seem like much at first. It didn't seem like something that would change Giacomo's life, but you never recognise when things that are going to change your life actually begin. A car stopped outside Giacomo's garage. It was about midday. Giacomo was in his back room cleaning his bike. He immediately stopped, closed the door of his back room and walked out. He recognised the sound of the car immediately. Or rather, he *didn't* recognise the sound of the car. He knew the sounds of all the four cars in the town, and knew who was going to come and visit him just by the sound of the engine. But this was a sound he didn't recognise. For the first time in years, another car had stopped at his garage. Giacomo was curious.

He walked out onto the road in front of his garage. There was a large black car parked

there. It was a very impressive car, an Alfa Romeo. Giacomo was impressed. He was even more impressed when the door opened and a woman got out.

"There's something wrong with my car" said the woman, but Giacomo didn't really listen to what she said because he was too busy looking at her. She was very tall, and had long red hair. Red hair was quite unusual in this part of the country. Giacomo wasn't sure if he'd ever really seen a woman with red hair before, except at the cinema. She was wearing a long black coat, even though the weather was quite warm, and under the long black coat Giacomo could see that she was wearing a long red dress. She looked like she had just come from a party, or perhaps she was just going to a party, even though it was only midday.

"There's something wrong with my car" said the woman again, as if she knew that Giacomo hadn't been listening to her.

"Er, ok" said Giacomo. "What's wrong with your car?"

"I don't *know* what's wrong with my car. That's why I came to a mechanic, of course." Giacomo said nothing. "If I knew what was wrong with my car" continued the woman, "I wouldn't have come to see a mechanic, would I?"

Giacomo said nothing. He didn't know what to say. The woman was certainly unfriendly, but he still thought she was interesting. She didn't wait for him to reply.

"Listen", she said, "I'm going to find a bar, if there *is* a bar in this town. I'll sit there and have a coffee. While I do, I'd like you to take a look at my car? Can you do that?"

Giacomo didn't even have time to tell her where the bar was, because she didn't even wait for a reply, but just walked off in the direction of the bar, as if she knew where it was already.

Giacomo walked over and took a look at the car. He spent the next hour looking at the car. He looked at the engine, at the brakes, at the wheels, at the steering wheel. He looked at all the parts of the car. He started the engine and the car ran perfectly. There was nothing wrong with the car.

Giacomo took a walk to the bar, where he found the woman sitting at a table, drinking a coffee and smoking a cigarette.

“There’s nothing wrong with your car” he told her.

“I didn’t think there was” said the woman.

“Why did you come to me, then?” asked Giacomo.

“I want your motorbike” said the woman.

Giacomo was silent for a while. He didn’t know what to say, again. He thought about telling a lie, and saying that he didn’t have a motorbike, but then he realised that was stupid. Obviously the woman knew.

“How did you know?” he asked her.

“I know lots of things that you don’t” she replied.

“Why do you need my bike?” he asked her.

“I don’t only need your bike” she said.

“What else do you need?”

“I need you. I need you to take me somewhere on your motorbike.”

“Where?”

“As far as the sea.”

“What for?”

“That’s not important now. Do you want to take me or not?”

Giacomo didn’t say anything.

“Ok, here’s my number” said the woman, and she wrote down her telephone number on the back of a box of matches. “When you’ve decided, call me.” Then she got up, and walked out of the bar.

Giacomo sat in the bar for a while before going back to his garage. When he got back to his garage there was no sign of the woman or her car. They had gone.

That night Giacomo went to bed with the box of matches and the phone number next to his bed, but he didn’t call anyone. The next morning when he woke up, he went to the bar as usual, drank his black coffee as usual, spoke to nobody, then went to work. He didn’t call anyone.

He wasn’t too surprised when, around midday, he heard a car stop outside his garage. It was the same car as yesterday. He went out to meet the woman. But the woman wasn’t driving. The woman wasn’t in the car at all. A big fat man got out of the car. He was smoking a cigar. He was wearing a big black fur coat, even though it was hot. He was completely bald. He walked straight into Giacomo’s garage without being invited in. Giacomo followed the big fat man into the garage. When he got in, he found that the

big fat man had already sat down at Giacomo’s desk.

“My wife was here yesterday” said the big fat man. Giacomo said nothing.

“She asked you to do something for her.”

Giacomo said nothing. The man looked impatient.

“She asked you to take her somewhere on your motorcycle, didn’t she?” he asked. Giacomo was silent for a while, then said

“Perhaps she did. Perhaps she didn’t.” The man looked even more impatient, but didn’t say anything. He took a big fat wallet out of his big fat pocket. He pulled a big fat pile of money out of his big fat wallet. He put the pile of money on the table. It was more money than Giacomo made in a month, in a year, perhaps.

There was a silence between the two men for a moment. Then Giacomo spoke.

“Well, sir” he said. “If you’re going to offer me that much money, well, then, of course, I’d be happy to take your wife anywhere she likes on my motorbike...”

The big fat man laughed, and put his big fat hand on the pile of money. He shook his head.

“No, no, no, my friend. Oh no. No, no, no. I don’t think you understand. I’m offering you this money if you *don’t* take my wife anywhere on your motorcycle. I am offering you this money to make sure you never, ever see my wife ever again.”

Giacomo said nothing. The big fat man said nothing. After a while, the big fat man stood up. “Think very, very carefully before you make any decisions” said the big fat man as he walked out of the garage.

Giacomo sat down. He pulled the matchbox out of his pocket and put it on the table. He looked at the phone number written on the matchbox. He looked at the pile of money. He looked at the matchbox. He looked at the money.

About forty years later, I was travelling across Italy on my motorbike. I had got lost on the way from Rome to Florence, in the middle of the long thin country, and had to stop somewhere to get petrol for the motorcycle I was travelling on. I stopped in a small town, but I couldn’t find a petrol station. In the main square of the town there was a small bar. I parked my bike outside the bar and walked in. I ordered a beer and sat down at the bar. I asked the man behind the bar if there was a petrol station in this town.

“Yes” he said. “But it’s closed at the moment.”

“When does it open? I asked.

“I don’t know” replied the man behind the bar.

“Ask him.” He pointed at a man sitting at the bar next to me, drinking a beer. “He’s the man who owns the petrol station. He’s the mechanic, too, if you need any help with your bike.”

The man sitting next to me looked up. I pointed to my motorcycle parked outside the bar.

“I need some petrol” I said.

“Nice bike” he said. “I had a nice motorcycle once...”

I spent a whole day in that town, even though there was nothing to see or to do there. I spent a whole day listening to the man who was a mechanic telling me a story about when he was young. He told me a story about how once, a long time ago, he had refused the offer of a lot of money, and decided to take a mysterious woman on a long trip across Italy on his motorcycle. He told a story about how he had

eventually arrived at a city by the sea, where he was surprised to find that there was a competition for vintage motorcycles. He told a story about how his motorcycle, driven by him with the beautiful and mysterious woman passenger, had finished second in the competition. And how the winner of the competition was a big fat bald man who always smoked a cigar. He told me about how the big fat man and the beautiful woman with the long red hair had laughed at the end of the competition, and kissed. He told me that the woman said to the big fat man:

“You lost the bet!”

And he told me that the big fat man had replied: “Yes, but I won the competition!”

And he told me about how he had then been left alone, in that city by the sea. He told me that sometimes you think that you are the main actor in your life, but then you find out that you are only a minor character in someone else’s.

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