

**Three Sisters:
Life in the
Shadows**

Thomas T. Thomas

THREE SISTERS: LIFE IN THE SHADOWS

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“Fine. Since the tea is not forthcoming, let’s have a philosophical conversation. Let’s talk nonsense.”

“There will come a time when everybody will know why, for what purpose, there is all this suffering, and there will be no more mysteries. But now we must live ... we must work, just work!”

“Do you see that tree? It is dead but it still sways in the wind with the others. I think it would be like that with me. That if I died I would still be part of life in one way or another.”

—Anton Chekhov, *The Three Sisters*

Sisters

1. Just Visiting

JULIANA ORSINI'S ELECTRIC toothbrush died on the third day of her trip to Rome. Obviously, she had left the charging base at home. But it wouldn't have made any difference, because she didn't have the right plug—one with three little round pins—for the wall socket. And anyway, the quaint, family-run *pensione* where she was staying, second floor up in an ancient building, three blocks east of the Piazza Navona, hadn't bothered to wire an outlet into the bathroom.

She shrugged and dabbed toothpaste on the tiny, round brush head, put it in her mouth, and started stroking back and forth twenty times, just as if the motor had been running. Twenty times, inside and out, right side and left, lower jaw and upper, until the job was done. Then she spit white foam into the sink and rinsed her mouth.

As Juliana came up in the mirror, she showed her teeth, beautiful white pearls, and smiled at herself.

Even on the far side of thirty, she was still a beautiful woman, with a pert mouth, dazzling blue-gray eyes, and long blonde hair with just the slightest curl where it crossed her shoulders. It looked especially good, as she had just finished touching up the color. Juliana's was hair made for wearing a crown, or at least a tiara. And she had actually packed one—or at least a pair of silver clips sparkling with flashes of cubic zirconia—with which she could secure a swirling bun on top of her head, which she did on formal occasions.

In her mind, the clips went with the title she had inherited from her father, David Orsini, as *Conte*—or in her case, *Contessa—delle Fate*. The family was descended from old Italian nobility, of course. But something told Juliana it would not be wise to wear the clips and flaunt the title while in Rome. It just seemed ... vulgar.

An hour later, dressed in a white pleated blouse with the sleeves rolled up; a blue-striped silk scarf at her throat; a full,

flowing skirt in the color called “burnt umber”; and ballet slippers with the ribbons crossed at her ankles—the classic Audrey Hepburn look from *Roman Holiday*—Juliana took coffee on the patio of the Bistrot al Pantheon Di Rienzo, which had a lovely view of the portico of the ancient church. The little plate in front of her held a cream-filled bun, one of two, of which she had already eaten the other and licked the powdered sugar from her fingertips.

The sun was just starting to move past noon. The shadow of the building behind her had already covered her patio and was creeping across the piazza. Juliana was feeling the chill and thinking about going in. But then a man with broad shoulders, dark curly hair that had gone gray at the temples, and the kindest pair of eyes stopped directly in her view and put a hand on the back of the chair facing hers at the table.

“*Mi scusi, signora,*” he said. “*Questo posto è occupato?*”

“I’m sorry,” she said with a smile. “I don’t speak Italian.”

Of course, she spoke it, but she wanted to see his reaction.

“Ah! I said, is this seat taken?” He kept his hand on the chair.

If he sat down, he would block Juliana’s view of people in the square—but that would be all right. He looked interesting. She took another sip of her coffee. “Of course not. Please, take it.”

With that invitation, he pulled the chair out. Rather than moving it to another table, where there were already plenty of chairs, he sat down at hers. And that was his intention all along. Hers, too.

His name was Andrea. For three days, she let him show her the sights of Rome. Mostly they zipped through traffic on his Vespa—until her backside got sore and she insisted on paying for a taxi. For two nights, he tried to make love to her in his tiny apartment in Trastevere, across the Tiber. On the first evening, even with her senses a bit clouded by two old-fashionedes and a half-bottle of chianti, she found a couple of artful dodges to keep him from clinching the deal. On the second,

with a clearer head, she had to speak loudly and employ more forceful measures. On the third day, she gently explained to Andrea that, although she was a rich American, she was not rich enough to keep him in the kind of money he needed. And so they parted friends.

Then she packed her bags and was off to ... wherever.

CATERINA ORSINI WAS running late—well, *walking* late, and that was only for short distances—to her lunchtime appointment with the QwikWork people. They were a budding employment consulting firm, whose business was engineering resumes, providing networking strategies, and offering a brand-new social media program, on the model of the ubiquitous *linkedin.com*, but exclusively for hopeful executives in the six-figure range. They were in town to obtain backing for an initial public offer, and they expected to start at the top. Their first contact, so they said, was being made with Caterina's company, Bayesian Financial Group.

As an investment banking analyst in her third year, Caterina's main job was to fend off such people. However, she was also supposed to keep her eyes and mind open and her instincts sharp. Because, you never know, sometimes the rock that rolls in through the front door, trailing mud and moss, turns out to be a diamond. Not always, but sometimes.

In line with their aspirations, the QwikWork people—Rose and Steven Winstead, by name, of Indianapolis, Indiana—had also started at the top in choosing, for their appointment with the “big people,” the Hole in the Wall restaurant on Cliff Street, because they had heard it was the “best lunch in town.” Unfortunately, it was also halfway across town—true, at the narrow end of Manhattan, through the Financial District—but Cliff Street was still more than ten blocks east—and by crooked, badly joined blocks, too—from her office on West Street, in the Battery Park City district.

Caterina had been delayed, first by an impromptu hallway meeting with her boss, Brian Silverman, then by the lunchtime

rush on the elevators in her building, and finally by the fact that her back problems kept her from climbing down and then up the stairs of the crosstown subway line. Instead, she tried to hail a cab. But again, with the lunchtime crowd, and her limited mobility making her reluctant to step off the curb into the middle of traffic to hail one, getting transportation took longer than she had imagined.

As she was passing the restaurant's plate-glass window on the way to the door, she caught a glimpse of her own reflection: dark brownish hair, made darker by shadows in the glass, with blonde highlights streaked into her bangs and the rest pulled back in a French braid; staring blue-gray eyes; and a small mouth with a determined grimace, which she managed to turn into a bright smile for the people she was meeting.

Still, the Winsteads did not appear happy. Before he would rise to meet her, Steven Winstead looked at his watch, and Rose just barely nodded. At lunch—a Cobb salad for herself, grilled salmon for Rose, and a big steak for Steven, all on Caterina's card—they were cagey about their numbers and had not brought along any documentation or spreadsheets. Their actual, enrolled client base, as they described it, seemed so far to be local to the Indianapolis area. And they bristled when Caterina suggested that, in order to go nationwide, they would probably have to change the company name, because it was already trademarked and in use. Caterina had checked on that before coming down here.

Overall, it was a disappointing meeting. Steven ended it by saying, "Well, Bayesian wasn't our first choice, anyway." And Rose pursed up her mouth and nodded.

And sometimes, what rolls through the door is just a rock.

GISELLA ORSINI FORCED herself to get out of bed when the sun came around to her west-facing window. She didn't think it was all that late. She drifted out into the living room and saw the mantel clock said it was still only ten. Then she noticed that the four little brass balls, the counterweights that made

the thing go, weren't spinning. So, somebody had forgotten to wind it.

Another sign of the world coming to a slow and painful end.

She went to the living room window, which faced the same way as the apartment's one bedroom. From the sixth floor of her Morningside Heights building, Gisella could usually see the Hudson River and the shoreline of eastern New Jersey, from Edgewater down to Fairview. But today that view was shrouded in fog, or mist, or maybe heavy smog. Whatever. And the light coming through the window wasn't really sunbeams but a kind of soft glare reflected off whatever was out there. Not that it mattered.

Gisella walked into the tiny kitchen to see if she could find some coffee or a teabag and maybe something to eat. There was a kettle on the stove's back burner, and she knew there was a jar of instant in the cabinet to the right of the sink. She picked up the kettle and shook it. Empty, of course. She let the hot-water tap run into the sink until it had turned from cold to moderately warm, filled the kettle but not more than halfway, so it would boil faster, turned on the gas stove's front burner, and put on the kettle. Then she would have to find a clean cup and that jar of instant. All of this was too much like work.

She did manage to pull a clean spoon out of the utensil drawer. She held it up to make sure it was really clean and saw her own face, distorted, in its bowl. Her dirty blonde hair was frizzy and sticking out all over her head. She had last brushed it—when? Two days ago? Maybe. Her blue-gray eyes were dull and bloodshot. Her mouth was small and pinched and not very attractive. Oh, well ...

Gisella knew there should be a box of Cheerios in the cabinet to the left of the sink—if she remembered to go to the grocery store this week, which was doubtful. And milk in the fridge—if it hadn't outlived its pull date since the last time she went shopping. A clean cereal bowl would be in the same place as the cups, but one shelf up, she remembered. She already had

a spoon for the coffee, and that would make do for the cereal, too.

This was all getting very complicated. Making her breakfast would have been too much trouble and confusion if Gisella also had to dress nicely and make up her face to go to work.

She had held a job, once, some months—maybe it was years—ago. She had been a salesclerk in the Versace store on Fifth Avenue, which was very swank. The store had marble and some light-colored stonework across the front, with those big, square panels carved into curlicue patterns, like worm tracks in mud. The building had originally been owned by the Vanderbilts as a townhouse, a century ago, or so the store's literature said.

Gisella had been good at that job, too. She had just the right tone with all those upscale customers. Most of them reminded Gisella of her sister Juliana, who had an aristocratic flair and educated sense of style. But Gisella could only keep smiling for just so long, and then the absurdity of it all, the pretentiousness, the hoity-toity madness, simply got to her. One day she went off on a customer about the exact name for a certain shade of blue—the snobby lady wanted to call it “turquoise,” when to Gisella's practiced eye it was more “aquamarine.” And, of course, the customer was always right. That was store policy. And Gisella had gotten fired.

Since then, she had been living in the West Side apartment. It was actually paid for by Caterina, her rich sister, who did something in finance downtown. But Gisella could never follow all the ins and outs of that business, the math problems, the hard decisions about placing decimal points. Let Caterina worry about all of that nonsense.

Gisella just took care of herself. And she planned her comeback in the world of the rich and beautiful people—if she ever got the chance.

But then the kettle started whistling, and she had not yet found the jar of instant or a clean cup—although she did have a clean spoon to measure from the one and stir into the other.

It was all too much like work.

2. Opportunists and Opportunities

ANYTIME SHE WENT to Paris, Juliana Orsini stayed with Rene and Claire Chennault, who had a spare room in their three-bedroom apartment in the Marais District. Their building was supposed to be “early nineteenth century,” but to Juliana’s practiced eye, it was more like early twentieth, especially the plumbing and electrical work. But those might also have been part of a postwar renovation, which was common after the Germans went through.

The Chennaults had once told her that the bed was “always yours”—provided, it turned out in later exchanges, she limited her visits to no more than twice a year, preferably in the off-season spring and autumn months, and didn’t stay too long. So, not wanting to wear out her welcome, Juliana planned her trips accordingly.

Her favorite things to do in Paris were to drink coffee in outdoor bistros and wander through art galleries, and the Marais offered plenty of both. She spent part of one morning in the Galerie de Medici, on the Place des Voges, which was offering several small works by the American glass artist Dale Chihuly—small works, because the ceilings were not high enough for his larger installations.

Juliana liked the forms in richly colored glass that resembled seashells and jellyfish. She was not so much in love with the two that looked like knotted ropes and wicker baskets in clear glass.

After a moment, she was aware of someone standing next to her. Without looking directly, just a sidelong glance, she perceived a tall man, taller than Juliana herself, with an erect bearing and long white hair under a Panama hat. He was old, with lines in his face. And he carried a black wooden cane, but she saw with a downward glance that he merely held it at his side with two fingers, rather than using it to support his weight. So, not that old. The cane had a knob that, after a second glance,

resolved itself into a lion's head that appeared to be carved out of solid gold.

The man had seen her noticing because he turned to speak with her.

"I know him, you know," he said in slightly accented English.

"Excuse me?" she replied coldly. "Who do you know?"

"Chihuly, the artist. He's one of your Americans."

"I knew that," Juliana replied, still frostily.

"Of course you did," he said, smiling.

"Now that we've been introduced," he continued—but of course they had been no such thing, "let me suggest that it is almost eleven o'clock. I would like to buy you a coffee ... espresso, if you like, and a ... I'm guessing, a chocolate croissant?"

"But we haven't been introduced. I don't know your name."

"Ulysse Bourdon, at your service. And your name would be?"

"Juliana Orsini," she replied. "Contessa delle Fate ... at yours."

"Ah! A member of the nobility! One so rarely meets you people."

Juliana was about to bristle at "you people." It sounded so vulgar.

"And?" he prompted. "You are hungry? Will take coffee? A pastry?"

Juliana considered. "Oh, what harm could a chocolate croissant do?"

It took her a second cup of coffee and almost all of a somewhat wilted croissant for her to begin sensing trouble. Bourdon not only knew Chihuly personally, but he mentioned several other famous artists on a first-name basis. He claimed to have known the American Jean-Michel Basquiat, too, and that was entirely possible, given Bourdon's age and the fact that the artist died young in the late 1980s. But when he said he had met not only Pablo Picasso but also Henri Matisse, an

alarm went off in Juliana's head. The one had died in 1973, which made it just barely possible for Bourdon as a young man to have met Picasso, if not know him particularly well. But the other passed in 1954, which would make Bourdon a toddler at the time—unless he was extremely well preserved for his age.

And then she remembered something from her penchant for French artworks. It was the name *Ulysse*, the francophone form of *Ulysses* or the original Greek *Odysseus*, the warrior king who wandered out of the Trojan War and spent ten years getting home. There had been a famous painting, something about Ulysses finding someone in a tomb. It was a gaudy thing, full of bright colors, by a seventeenth century painter whose name was also Bourdon. There were reproductions of that painting all over the place.

Juliana put her cup down, wiped her mouth, and smiled as politely as she could.

"Thank you for the coffee and croissant," she said. "But I really *must* be going."

"So soon?" he replied sorrowfully. "We are just getting to know one another."

"Yes, and it's been *most* enlightening. However, I do have appointments."

"I shall be *désolé*."

"Yes, I know."

Juliana kept her eye on that gold-headed cane as she picked up her things and left the bistro. She looked over her shoulder when she got to the street. Then she kept on going, putting another two blocks between herself and him.

"Ulysse Bourdon," whoever he might have been, was at best a fabulist and at worst a liar. That would make him manipulative and possibly dangerous. And Juliana understood all this instinctively. After all, it took one to know one.

CATERINA ORSINI WAS getting restless. Or rather, the investment banking group was getting restless, and the fidgets were

spreading—like shear waves in an earthquake—throughout her workplace.

Her base salary as an investment analyst was paid out for her routine work: taking assignments from her boss, performing investigations and due diligence, calculating returns, and writing reports. That was the day-to-day job. And any analyst content to do only that much never lasted long. Her annual bonus—which was what Caterina and every other investment banker lived for—was paid on account of her personal initiative, her developing and bringing in new business, and her ability to call down the lightning.

It had been a couple of months since anyone in the group had seen the lightning. Now bonus time was coming up, and everyone was getting antsy.

In her ever-diminishing spare time—because their vice president, Nathaniel Putnam, was also getting antsy and piling on prospects he wanted everyone to examine in his name—she turned over paper files, digital reports, and obscure websites, looking for the golden breadcrumbs that could lead to a strike of her own.

But the U.S. and world economies were in transition. That meant the financial markets, investors looking for a new idea, and entrepreneurs looking for backing, were also in transition. After the years-long pandemic, the easy pickings were evaporating, and the trend lines were wandering in the desert. Home improvements and entertainment streaming were winding down. Travel opportunities and booking services were not yet taking off. Theme parks and cruise lines were stagnant. Personal services like ride sharing, shopping support, and home delivery were going sideways. And employment services—like those QwikWork people—were floundering in a labor market that was awash in jobs but scarce of bodies.

Times of transition were tantalizing. There was a big idea out there, just waiting to be snapped up. Caterina could feel it. She could almost taste it. But she could not quite identify it. If she had her sister Juliana's flair for the dramatic, she would

buy a pack of Tarot cards and start dealing them at her desk. She was getting desperate.

Deep in the bowels of the financial market, she considered, rejected, and reconsidered the idea of alternative currencies, decentralized financing or “defi,” the blockchains and cryptocurrencies, money pulled out of thin air by the laws of large numbers. It was a volatile market, subject to the hopes and fears of individual investors, speculative as all get-out, and about as reliable as the market for tulip bulbs in the Holland of the 1630s. It was a place to get burned.

But there were also a lot of new investors out there, people with time on their hands, stimulus checks burning in their pockets, and no real taste for putting together and betting on fantasy baseball or football teams. A lot of money was pouring into decentralized finance.

One opportunity in particular caught her eye. The name of the company—well, startup, or venture, or gleam in the eye at this point—was “Cheops.” Like the pharaoh who built the largest pyramid. That implied something big and stable, long lasting, and built out of blocks. It also implied a tomb and maybe a Ponzi scheme, but she didn’t think the two young men behind the idea had thought of this yet.

What they had was an inspiration—to actively backstop or hedge the value of their proposed currency with options trades, short calls, and derivative futures. For every block of crypto coins sold, they would take positions in sovereign currencies from around the world. This would stabilize the Cheops coins against volatility in their own market.

It was a crazy idea ... but one that just might work.

GISELLA ORSINI ROSE at five o’clock that morning full of energy and excitement. The first thing she did on rising, even before washing her face and brushing her hair, was put rolled oats and milk in a double boiler and set it to simmering on the stove. She was making oatmeal the old-fashioned way, the way their grandmother had made oatmeal on the farm in Virginia.

Now it was ready. She had already taken out the cream and poured it into a pitcher. She had scraped crystals of brown sugar out of the hardened clump in the box from the cupboard and sifted them into her sugar bowl. And now she was working on the raisins. Raisins made oatmeal the perfect breakfast.

There were a handful of them left in that box, and she was determined to get them all, even the last mushy raisin stuck in a corner. She dug at it with her fingernail. And when that merely pushed the wrinkled skin and gooey pulp deeper into the cardboard angle, she got a spoon and used the end of the handle to dig. And when that didn't work either, she tore down the sides of the box along the seam, down to the bottom, and plucked what was left of that last raisin free and put it in the little dish from which she would sprinkle the raisins onto her oatmeal.

Today was going to be a perfect day, and she would let nothing interfere.

The dean of Columbia Law School had agreed to let her audit one of the first-year courses again. This time it was Torts, with the class starting at eight o'clock in the morning. She had already studied up and knew that torts—not “tarts,” as she had first heard it—were civil cases involving alleged wrongful acts or infringements of a right not under contract. Contracts were a separate issue with their own class. She had taken that one already, or at least the first three days of the class, until the headaches made her withdraw.

Even though she had now turned thirty, Gisella had always wanted to study law, become a lawyer, be someone important in the community, someone people looked up to, like her father. Despite everything, David Orsini had been publicly loved and respected. He had grown big and proud with the adulation that total strangers heaped upon him.

And, after everything, Gisella wanted that kind of love and admiration for herself. Getting accepted into Columbia, getting a law degree, passing the bar, starting a practice ... oh, there was so much to do! So many steps!

But the longest journey began with a single step. Buddha had said that. Or maybe it was Confucius. Anyway, it was true. Gisella knew it was true. She had tried so many times.

Law school was hard. Studying and staying focused were hard. Answering the questions when called on, writing the answers down when there was a test—all that took concentration and brain work. But she was smart—when the headaches and the clouds didn't darken her mind.

She knew she had it in her.

All she needed was a good breakfast.

Today was the day she was going to succeed.