

Chapter One

This is by no means the saddest story I have ever heard, nor for that matter is it the happiest, but then happy marriages have never seemed any more alike to me than unhappy ones; and not until I had known Dominique Lo Bianco more than seven years, by which time she had for quite a while been Socrates Livadis' wife and borne him a son, did I have an inkling of how unhappy they were. Bishop Berkeley was right. Kick any stone! It doesn't matter. It's all in our minds and kicking stones does no more than mash up your toes and scuff your shoe leather; it proves nothing except how misleading are our notions of what is real. Not that I consider myself an authority on reality, but over the almost six decades of my life, I have observed enough about human life to persuade me that as a species we don't see stones or rocks for the obstacles a commonsensical mind might take them to be. Look at all those agglomerations of stones human beings have piled up over history! Pyramids and pyres, tombs and towers, all those monuments to human pride and power, to greed, and yes, just plain can-do omeriness. Very likely that goes a way towards explaining the kind of weakness which has afflicted me from boyhood, a sort of flawed vision which accounts for my admiration for that scrofulous old Englishman whose dumb answer to the Bishop was to kick a stone, and my inordinate

uneasiness with that brilliant Irish cleric who held that no matter existed independently of perception — *esse est percipii* — that all qualities were known only to the mind; and, moreover, God was always comfortably out there keeping our world sensible so we could perceive not only the world's continuing material existence but behold it in a coherent and orderly fashion. In heaven's name, as one of the Bishop's subsequent scientific (and Jewish) inheritors would ask, would God ever considering shooting dice with the universe? No, He would not! Though of course who can tell these days who is a member of Gamblers Anonymous? Hail to thee, blithe Bishop of Cloyne, certain as you were that once and for all you had given the lie to the likes of us weaker mortals who did not blindly believe and, consequently, fell afoul of godlessness.

All that is exactly the sort of talking and writing that would send Willy Devlin up the wall. Not that he was confounded by it, only he had no patience with such abstractions; besides, he didn't want anyone to imagine that he might understand them, perhaps didn't even care to acknowledge to himself that he did. Such language and anecdote Willy would have taken to be showing off, putting the Man on or putting on the dog, whatever, and Willy would have growled, "Why don't you cut the bullshit, Matthew? All those fancy words, those recondite — see, I know fancy words too! — Latin quotes. Get down to it! Tell me like a regular dude what's bugging you."

Bugging me? How to speak of being permanently bereft of belief, of falling away from God, to Willy Devlin in a way that that he would feel comfortable enough to acknowledge? One way might have been to tell him that it was like never again having a chance to toke up on Acapulco Gold, but as you can see, and so too would Willy. that was both a condescension and reductivism. Yet for all that put-on, Willy was raised a Roman Catholic, as was Dominique Lo Bianco, strictly, parochially, devoutly, and probably each of them could still recite all of the Nicene Creed. If none of that seemed to have taught Willy what being denied God's presence meant, Viet Nam surely had.

Oh, I forgot to mention that my name is Matthew Millard, senior professor of literature at St. Bernard's College here in Upstate New York, sometime department chairman, erstwhile businessman, journalist, fiction writer and former passionate devotee of the arts. All those references you will note are to the past, which is no accident; it tells you plainly that I am what I am: A has-been. Willy Devlin sniffed that out quickly enough — he was nothing if not streetwise shrewd in such matters — but he was kind enough never to make a point of it. At least not to me. Though confused about success and failure — and who in America isn't? — it was a subject with which Willy Devlin was obsessed, though I doubt he'd have appeared that way to a cursory glance, including his own, or that Willy would have confessed it even to his closest friend, if he was aware that it troubled him. Nam and the Marines had done that for him too, given him what one might rightly call an essentialist view of success: Success meant having a safe place to sack out, keeping your feet dry enough to avoid trench foot, eating three meals and drinking a six-pack a day, and, if you were lucky, blowing enough good smoke to forget where you were, what you were doing there, and how lonely and scared you were — even if you had never heard a shot fired in anger.

Once, before I understood what a ninny Blake was for believing that “We have Art that we may not perish from Truth,” I used to believe that Art — with a capital A of course — would bring us wisdom, solace, serenity in the face of tragedy, but in due course I learned better. Such learning took me the largest part of a lifetime to acquire, but it is another story, for which I shall not pause here, except suffice it to say that it is also a part of this story to be ignored at one's peril.

It was as a consequence of the arts that I first met Dominique Lo Bianco and much later Willy Devlin. *Willy* Devlin was never William to anyone, though that was his given name. If much later I was half-affectionately, half-sardonically to call him Sir William, the Knight of the Grail, he allowed me that only in deference to my age and then uneasily, and if on occasion I changed that name to Don Guillermo to commemorate the Knight of the Windmills, I do not believe he took it amiss, although now that it's all over, who's to say that

such minor matters were not more important to him by far than they were to me? In any event, I met Dominique Lo Bianco when she had just turned twenty, a junior at St. Bernard's enrolling in the first creative writing workshop I taught there. It was not a course I was eager to offer, but the powers-that-be thought it might give the school a bit of cachet, and how eagerly the school was in search of whatever small distinctions it could unearth. Given the caliber of the school, I thought few enough would be interested in the course and that those who were would not probably be able to write a simple declarative sentence. I was quite right about that, but in addition there were a dozen students who wrote relatively fluently, a handful of whom had some talent: The most gifted of these was Dominique Lo Bianco.

From the very first day in class, her looks called my attention to her, long before I was able to make the connection between her face, her name and her remarkable first short story. The sheaf of dark-blond hair severely drawn back behind her ears and tied on her neck with a thin silver thong accentuated a face filched from the walls of some Northern Italian fresco — the group of women in Piero della Francesca's "Visit of the Queen of Sheba to King Solomon"? — her skin so pale it seemed like gesso, altogether untouched by the sun. While the firm jut of nose, cheekbone and jaw were prominent it was her sea-blue Mediterranean eyes that were most memorable. If the entire face appeared to be languorous, her slender body sparked like a loose flickering electric wire whose brunette passions seemed to be clamoring for release from the oppressive blonde stillness. However, my response to Dominique Lo Bianco was not carnal but esthetic, not sexual but affectionate, avuncular not incestuous. After all, she was only twenty then, young enough to be my daughter, the daughter I had never had, and though there will be those among you who will mark that down as convenient self-deception, let me assure you that it wasn't. For the usual mysterious chemical reasons, Dominique was not the kind of female who kindled my desire, though there were at least half-dozen of her contemporaries, a few of them my students, whose aspect could easily ignite my flesh were I to permit it, but whom I found sufficiently callow so that the occasion never did seem worth pursuing, even if I could have

squared such conduct with my conscience. Yes, call it what you will, super ego, peer pressure, social norms, fear of reprisal; I shall stick to the older, more honorable term. Conscience doth not make cowards of us all, only some of us; occasionally it even makes brave men of others and at least generally it keeps us as honest as the species gets.

It was perhaps that clearly defined distance that gave Dominique leave to permit me to become her mentor, subsequently her friend, though I cannot claim that over the years she took any of the always well-intentioned and often very good advice I gave her.

A few weeks into the semester, when Dominique submitted her first short story, late — being late I soon came to know was the rule for her — she did so privately, in my office rather than with the others in class. She sat there opening and closing her purse, zipping and unzipping her briefcase, but she couldn't seem to take her manuscript out of it. Finally, in a voice shrill as a violin double stop gone awry, she asked if she could smoke, rummaged in her pocketbook before her trembling hands merged with a packet of Virginia Slims. She smoked a cigarette down to the filter before stubbing it out in my ashtray, whose white china was imprinted with large black capital letters that spelled out the word *Teacher* in old-fashioned Gothic script. "The gift of a grateful student," I told her.

By then she had her manuscript in hand but before she was willing to hand it over, she wanted my personal guarantee that no one — and she meant no one! — would be told she'd written it. I explained the methods I'd taken to assure students' privacy by eliminating their names from the copies of their stories, which were distributed to the members of the class. Only I got a cover sheet, because for grading and consulting purposes I had to know whose stories were whose. Reluctantly, she shook her head but her hooded eyes made clear she wasn't trusting anyone, surely not anyone over thirty and a teacher to boot. "I want you to say it to me," she-declared.

"Say what?" I was beginning to be annoyed.

“Say that you won’t tell anyone I wrote ‘The Florentine Face.’”

“You have my word.”

“Say it!” Her voice was commanding, frightened.

“I won’t tell a soul that Dominique Lo Bianco wrote the short story entitled, ‘The Florentine Face.’”

She knew she was being mocked and didn’t enjoy it. Those Mediterranean eyes looked implacably into mine, cold, stony. She shifted the manila folder with the manuscript from left hand to right, then back again. “Oh, come now, Ms. Lo Bianco, why should I want to embarrass you? Trust me, I’m a very discreet man.”

As though someone were moving her arm, she put the folder down on the desk between us. I let it remain there while I tried to make it plain that I did understand how personal writing fiction was, but that for most writers writing was not a private exercise alone but a public one, for if you wrote, you did so for other people to read, and publication inevitably would have to expose you to them.

“Don’t even want *you* to read it, to know that I wrote it. I’m not even sure I want to read it, or see it again myself. I want to destroy it, to tear it to shreds.” For a moment, I thought that was exactly what she was going to do, then suddenly she said, “You’re one of the few teachers here who even wants to teach us. I do learn from you.” Before I could speak a word, with the fingernails of one hand, she flicked the manila folder across my desk like a gambler desperate to place her last bet before an indifferent croupier could say, *Fâites vos jeux*, and spin the wheel. The folder almost skidded off the desktop, but I managed to trap it, awkwardly, with my elbow.

Generally, out of some misguided sense of fairness, I read student papers in the order in which I receive them, but in Dominique’s case, I made an exception, as I was to do for her so many times thereafter. Because I wanted to read “The Florentine Face” as soon as I could, that evening I took the manuscript home with me. It turned out to be a story of grievous loneliness and pain inflicted unremittingly on a young

woman who was driven into a nervous breakdown. Over the years I'd read more than my share of stories which reeked of conflict with parents, cruelty, melancholy, even madness, but this story brought me up short; because it had genuine literary power, it was especially convincing and alarming. Though I do not now, nor did I then, make the error of identifying authors with their creations, "The Florentine Face" was so close to the life that Dominique had described in her class autobiography that I could only conclude she was writing out of her own most intimate experiences, real or imagined. And she was a born writer, the first truly talented student I'd taught since coming to St. Bernard's; I did not wish to have her life go awry into insanity or suicide, nor did I wish to see her gifts diminished or diverted.

Even as over the weekend, I worked on "The Florentine Face" manuscript, writing criticisms, suggesting emendations, correcting the text — Dominique's talents had yet to be constrained by the formal disciplines of grammar, syntax and diction — I racked my brain as to how I might help her and concluded that the best thing was sincerely to praise the work in class and privately, in conference, to tell her of my misgivings. Which was what I did. In the workshop, Dominique gave no sign that in the face of my public accolade the story belonged to her as I talked about how passionate and scintillating the style, how apt an achievement the half-mad voice of Catherine Malfitano, how grimly accurate the morose portraits of the father and grandmother, how adroitly rendered the feelings of humiliation and exile. I did not touch on the elements of insanity and suicide. The only negative remarks I permitted myself publicly concerned the operatic aspects of the plot which I suggested might be improved by muting the melodrama.

Privately, in my office, confronted by the proud Piero della Francesca face and those curtained blue eyes, I found it more difficult to broach the other comments I had formulated, and Dominique took the initiative by asking why I never called her by her first name since all the other instructors at St. Bernard's did. I explained that for most effective teaching I believed in maintaining distance and decorum between teacher

and taught, that such formality also encouraged maturity because calling students by their first names was a way of infantilizing them; moreover, since I had no intention of having her call me Matthew, I didn't think it fair to call her by her Christian name. Once she was graduated, we could, if she wished, be on a first-name basis. Her whole demeanor was disapproving.

After she'd read my typewritten sheet of criticisms and seen the corrections I'd scrawled on her manuscript, she cried, "How can you believe I have any talent?" With a gesture of despair, she tossed the manila folder back on my desk. "You think I'm crazy, don't you?"

"No, not for a minute, but I do think you're troubled."

"Aren't all artists what you call troubled?" The blue eyes emerged from behind the lashes.

"I'm not sure artists are any more troubled than most other people."

"Do most people cut off their ears?"

Ah, Vincent, I thought, what a bad example you've set with your ear. "I don't think you're crazy, Ms. Lo Bianco, or that Van Gogh was crazy either, least of all when he was painting. Most of us are a little crazy sometimes."

"Do you really believe I have any talent?"

"I think you're a very gifted young woman. If you work hard, you might turn out to be a very good writer indeed." But her blue eyes gave me credit for neither judgment nor candor; they remained remote and untrusting.

The phone call a week or two later took me unaware. The gravelly voice with just the slightest singsong Italian inquiring whether I was Professor Matthew Millard, "the author," made me eerily certain I was talking to Dominique Lo Bianco's father even before he identified himself as Nunz Lo Bianco. "I'd like to talk to you, if you could spare the time.

You're encouraging my daughter to be an author, and we don't want that. Get it?"

"I get it, Mr. Lo Bianco. Have you discussed this with her?"

"She's like her mother, stubborn, hard-headed, like all the Abruzzese. You know what that is, Professor?"

"I know what that is." I heard my voice grow frosty. "I've traveled in the Abruzzi."

"You have!" The gravelly voice softened. "You been to Italy a lot?"

"Several times, the first during the Second World War."

"Oh, you're an older guy then?"

If his concerns were not so patently painful to him, I might have laughed. "Yes, I'm an older guy, probably older than you are, Mr. Lo Bianco, old enough to be Dominique's grandfather." Still he did not sound reassured.

We made our appointment for the following day, and when he came to the open door of my office, I'd already finished my work and in the early fall evening was watching a cold, orange sun burrow its way into a nearby hill. He introduced himself and suggested immediately that I call him Nunz, a little disconcerted that I neither took him up nor reciprocated by asking him to call me Matt. A man about my own height, a shade shorter than six feet, broad in the chest and shoulders, he was just beginning to show the first signs of middle-aged thickness under the vest of his grey suit. I'd have guessed him to be a decade younger than I, in his early forties then, with a square Italian peasant face to match the peasant body. Like his daughter, his prominent cheek and jawbones gave his face its headstrong, impatient look, forever ready to take affront or give offense. With a fine full head of black hair and suspicious olive eyes, he was a handsome man, but wherever Dominique's aristocratic features and meager whipcord body came from, they were not from her father.

"My wife and I," Nunzio Lo Bianco said very carefully, his tone mollifying, not at all like the one he'd used on the

phone, “would appreciate it if you could discourage Dominique from becoming an author.”

“Why is that?”

Those ancient olive eyes narrowed, his expression just like his daughter’s, gauging just how much he had to tell to this stranger before he could get what he was after. He took a few puffs of his cigarette before he decided to inform me that his daughter was too intense and emotional for her own good, that she’d been that way from childhood. Spent too much time alone, too much buried in books, and only recently, since she’d been at college, had she begun to come out of her shell. The Catholic schools they’d sent her to earlier had made things worse because the Sisters were too severe with Dominique, but his wife insisted that all the girls be sent to the nuns. He didn’t give a damn. “D’you understand what I mean?”

“You want her to meet suitable young men she might marry.”

“Right. But that’s only one part of it, Professor.” Again, the olive eyes gave me the once over. “You a father?”

“I have two grown sons.”

Lo Bianco perked up. “They live here with you?”

That wasn’t a subject I cared to discuss with a stranger, but I saw the justice of his asking me, so I told him that my sons lived on the West Coast, which elicited his immediate and sincere sympathy. “Too bad, too bad, I’m sorry for you. Ever get to see them?”

“Usually Christmas and Easter. Their jobs are out there, they’ve got families, and they’re busy with their own lives.”

Nunz Lo Bianco nodded, before leaning forward, elbow on my desk, to confide that that was just what he wanted to avoid, having his kids go three thousand miles away. And they were daughters! They had only girls, three of them, Dominique the eldest, and they wanted to keep them close by. “You know what I mean, family, *real* family.”

I asked how he thought writing would take her away, and Lo Bianco replied that Dominique had told him I'd encouraged her to go to graduate school at a larger university like Iowa or Columbia or Michigan, and he didn't care to have her that far away. "I don't want to see her only Easters and Christmases."

"Your daughter's a very gifted and intelligent young woman, and St. Bernard's is not up to her needs or abilities."

"Well, you're here, aren't you?"

I pointed out that I was only one instructor of many, not equal to the task, that Dominique, if she were to grow as she should, required a faculty of greater gifts and varied scope. "So she grows a little less. Who cares? She stays here. She marries a local, Italian boy, she has my grandchildren right here. I know the kind of people she marries into. I don't need her to be a thousand miles away and become a stranger."

I surprised him by agreeing, then took myself by surprise by blurting that I wished I'd kept my own sons there. It was a confession I'd not made to anyone before, not even to myself.

"Then why'd you let 'em leave?"

"For the same reasons I advised your daughter to go. Better opportunities. A chance to make a better living and a better life. Besides, you know you can't tell your kids what to do, Mr. Lo Bianco. They only resent you for it, and they don't listen anyway."

"Dominique thinks a lot of you, of what you tell her. She listens to you. That's why I'm here."

I laughed. "I doubt your daughter listens to anyone. She has a mind of her own."

"Like I said, she's hard-headed, like her mother's side, those Abruzzese, but Dominique says she wants to work on a newspaper or in television. She wants to be an author, like you."

"You know there's no journalism school in this town."

“She can go to Syracuse or Buffalo. They’re not too far.”

“If Dominique becomes a newspaperwoman, do you think she’ll stay here?”

Lo Bianco’s face was stubborn. “Maybe she gets to teach, like you. Or she gets on the newspaper in town, even one of the TV stations. Then she gets married, she has kids, lives normal. There’s teaching jobs here, even at St. Bernard’s, and I know a coupla people in this town too.”

I sympathized with Nunzio Lo Bianco’s desire to keep his children close by, to enjoy the generational continuity I once prized, and still do, but to which neither Robert nor Eric, when they went off to university, had given a second thought. Both of them maintained that they had picked the place to study for their professional needs, for connections they thought might influence, even determine, the rest of their lives. They were convinced that the friends they made at college were more important than family, and I’d seen enough of that old-boy network to know just how influential and effective it was in operation. For the long haul, to choose between bosom buddies and the bosom of the family struck me as, at best, a parlous business, and at worst, chancy, very chancy. Yet, to this day, I believe that like so many other young people, like Dominique Lo Bianco, my sons left simply to get away from home, from their mother and me, from their native heath, and even now, despite everything, a part of me sympathizes with their desire. In its own way it was and is a valid enterprise, perhaps the only way unequivocally to declare oneself an adult and legitimized in America. Lighting out for the territory.

“All I’m asking is that you talk to her.” It was as close as Lo Bianco came to pleading. “Just you talk to her. You got more influence than you think, Professor.”

Even if I had, I would have wanted to exercise such influence delicately, but I agreed to talk to Dominique. What I didn’t mention to her father was that I would do my best to present both sides of the situation as I saw them, the opportunities on the one hand and the prices — oh, yes, the prices always to be paid — on the other.

“I don’t want Dominique running on the fast track,” Lo Bianco said. “Know what I mean?”

“I know what you mean.”

“It’s gonna turn out okay. You’ll see.” Stretching, Lo Bianco stood. “I travel a lot, on business, so it’s good for the wife to have the girls around. Kinda makes up for me being away so much. You understand? Doesn’t your wife give you the needle for letting your boys go off like they did?”

“I’ve been a widower for quite some time, so the matter never comes up.”

His olive eyes slitted and speculative, Lo Bianco went rigid, then nodding twice, with just the right expression that proclaimed he was sorry, sorry he’d brought up the question, but after all how was he to know, he bid me a terse goodbye.