

*This appeared on Purple Clover in 2018.*

## **That's Not Amore**

*It was after the first dozen or so women came forward to tell their stories of sexual abuse by men in power that I was transported back to a summer's day in Italy, some 30 years ago. It's there I encountered a tour guide named Giovanni.*

Over the course of my working life I've endured my share of male bosses whose behavior was questionable. As a journalist I have been in the presence of many powerful men. But none of the above have demanded sexual favors from me, made leering double-entendres, groped me, pressed themselves against me so I could feel their erections, grabbed my ass, or masturbated in my presence.

What's become clear to me is there's a dance that predators do, and it seems to be the same dance everywhere.

I was young, and fit enough to fight Giovanni off of me. Unlike so many of the female victims who've recently come forward to tell their stories, people believed me, even if they found my experience to be funny.

"Was he hot?" my gay friends would teasingly ask.

He wasn't. Giovanni was short, pudgy and balding, an Italian George Costanza. Like George, he even wore wire-rim glasses. An English teacher and historian, Giovanni didn't come across as harboring a hidden agenda.

I had travelled to Italy to be with my then boyfriend, Paul, who worked for an Italian clothing line. Its Manhattan office was on 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue, walking distance from the apartment we shared on 58<sup>th</sup> Street.

Every year Paul would spend the month of August in Mantua overseeing the company's spring line. He begged me to come visit him. "Nothing happens in Mantua," he told me. "It's so boring." Being bored in Italy sounded OK to me.

I booked a flight.

I read up on Mantua (also called Mantova) in my Fodor's Guide. It didn't sound boring. Located in the "enchanted lakes" section of northern Italy, Mantua was a cultural hub during the Renaissance, where some of the world's most famous painters produced their masterpieces. Mantua's most famous attraction is still the Palazzo Ducale, or Duke's Palace. A sprawling complex of connected buildings, it's where the city's nobles once lived and ruled.

When the factory supervisor at Paul's company heard I was coming, he arranged for me to have a private tour of the palace, which is now a museum. I was thrilled. It was an easy walk from the apartment Paul had rented to the palace, which is just off the Piazza Spoleto in the heart of the city.

On a sunny, weekday morning, I headed out. Giovanni was waiting for me at the museum's arched entranceway. He looked very much the tour guide, wearing slacks and a light-colored blazer.

During the first half-hour of the tour Giovanni proved himself a very informative guide. The palazzo was practically empty, devoid of noisy school children and tourists taking photographs.

It was in the Corte Vecchia section of the palace where Giovanni performed the first steps of his manipulative dance. As I was looking up at an arched ceiling where Pisanello had painted fulminating gods, I heard Giovanni say under his breath, "You have such beautiful eyes." Did I hear him right? Was he talking to me? I couldn't be sure so I ignored him.

The jewel of the palace is "La Camera degli Sposi," or bridal room. Giovanni led me there next. "The best is ahead of us," he told me.

Located across a courtyard in the Castillo di San Giorgio section of the palace, it's where Andrea Mantegna painted his illusionistic masterpiece. In the center of the room's ceiling he created a circular dome that appears to open into a blue sky. Peering at you from the dome's balustrade is an assortment of figures, including a turbaned sheik, a peacock, and a dozen or so cherubs – one who appears to be dropping a pear on your head.

"Que bella, que bella," Giovanni said as I was staring up at the fresco. Again, I let the remark go. He seemed harmless enough even if it were flirting.

Giovanni asked me if I liked music as we were about to conclude the tour. When I said I loved music, he offered to show me the palace's private theater. "It's off limits to visitors," he told me. I had to see it. After all, Mantua is where opera took hold. Monteverdi premiered "L'Orfeo" there in 1607.

Taking a key from his pant's pocket, Giovanni unlocked the theater door, closing it after we had stepped inside. I was in awe. From where I stood, looking down on the stage, I could picture Mozart at the podium. The theater was an intimate, gilded gem, straight out of "Amadeus."

What I hadn't pictured was myself on the floor, Giovanni on top of me unbuckling his belt. I had been broadsided.

I managed to quickly shove Giovanni off of me and get to my feet. Emotions straight out of a grand opera coursed through me. Speechless, I watched him as he got up and brushed off his slacks.

"What?" he asked, in a hurtful, little boy voice, "You don't like me?"

I made a dash for the door, stepping over his blazer, which he had shed before he lunged. Thank God for small miracles; the door wasn't locked from the inside. I scurried down empty, chandeliered corridors until I found an exit out of the palace. Cinderella had nothing on me.

Giovanni wasn't giving up easily. He followed me outside, and across the Piazza Sordello. I tried to out pace him. "You know," he said, catching up with me as I was trying to cross a busy street, "You're very special. I like my women like Audrey Hepburn, and I like my men like you."

"I don't like my men like you," I said to him, angrily.

Giovanni was still in pursuit when I got to the apartment that Paul was renting. Turning to face him, I realized he wasn't wearing his blazer. Sweat dripped from his face and onto his white shirt.

"You need to leave now," I said to him.

“But I really like you,” he insisted.

I was telling the truth when I told him Paul was meeting me at the apartment in 20 minutes. “We have 20 minutes,” he said.

I went inside and quickly shut the door. This was one door Giovanni didn't have a key to. I told Paul when he got home what had happened. “I guess Mantua isn't so boring after all,” he said to me. “But why did you ever go into the theater?” he asked. “You must have seen it coming.”

Did I? No, I didn't.

Paul wasn't as heartless as he was clueless. This was not the kind of thing that would happen to him. A farm boy, he was a stocky, imposing figure.

The next day Paul took me on a tour of his clothing factory. Mario, the supervisor, asked me how I liked my palace tour. When I told him what had happened, I assumed he would pick up the phone and call the museum director.

But Mario only grinned. “Ah, then, you met Giovanni,” he said.

Hearing this, two men who were seated at sewing machines tweaked each others cheeks. “Amore” they said to each other, “amore.”

But it wasn't amore, and they knew it.

Soon everyone in the factory was laughing. At me.

As humiliating as the whole experience was, I was lucky. I didn't have to see Giovanni again, ever. I didn't work for him. He couldn't derail my career. He had no power over me. He was only a few hours in my life.

But it was enough time to make me never want to step foot in Mantua again. And that's a pity. It's a magical city.