Jeannie Galeazzi
Segue 9: Fall 10

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Fan Club

Saturday afternoon at bustling Café Thalassa Java overlooking San Francisco Bay, Alexander “Sasha” Smith, forty-two, was cleaning up the tabletop mess his son Dmitri had made with the loukamàdes—fried doughballs drizzled with honey—and doing his best to ignore the way Dmitri was squinting up at him through eyes like black tacks anchoring an onion-dome nose. The boy had broadened and squared over the past fifteen years to resemble a steam roller, not quite the image that Sasha’s late-lamented wife had put forward (two years into their lovely uncomplicated marriage) when she’d broached the subject of adoption. Uxorious to the end and unable to say no, Sasha had let himself be shanghaid into fatherhood, and now saw no way out.

And, as he grimly wiped his son’s slack lips, he really didn’t appreciate hearing their tablemate, Regina Maria Rinaldi, say, “Yuck.” Reggie was a window-washer on her brother’s crew at Rinaldi Sure Shine, and she looked the part with her tousle of black curls sprouting red at the roots, her blunt nose and wind-scoured cheekbones framing keen eyes colored a laundered blue. Sasha had been seeing her for about a month now, the shaky result of a blind date. After his wife’s death six years ago, it had taken him three years to start dating, and by now he’d nearly given up on finding a companion for himself who stood any chance of doubling as a mother for his challenging son. But Reggie hung on, as desperate as Sasha yet plainly all wrong for him just as he was all wrong for her and Dmitri was all wrong for the world. For days now, Sasha had been agonizing over how best—how soon—to let her down gently. “Yuck indeed,” he replied, still plying the napkin. “You know, Reggie, it might be a good idea—”

“What,” she said, startling him with one of her abrupt utterances. She’d been straightforward about her problem, about rehab and recovery, and not once in the past month had she sounded, acted, looked, or smelled under-the-influence. “What,” she said.

Sasha continued, “For you and Dmitri to get your afternoon under way before Nuccia and Xari arrive for their interview.”

“Nuh!” said Dmitri, getting his face mopped.

“Too late,” said Reggie. “Here’s Noochie now.”

Sasha glanced perhaps too rapturously toward the bright doorway and saw Nuccia Rinaldi, thirty-five to Reggie’s thirty-nine, threading toward them between the tables with her portfolio under her arm, her voluminous red curls backlit in a fiery haze. Sasha rose from his chair but hung back as the sisters exchanged a hug, Reggie in the usual jeans and sweatshirt, Nuccia in a bronze 1920s-style tea dress with a black velvet sash, doubtless one of her own designs. Sasha, resuming his seat in his coffee slacks and cinnabar pullover, felt overdressed for one Rinaldi and underdressed for the other. Reggie sat her sister down in the chair next to her own, opposite Dmitri.

At whom Nuccia did not glance; she nodded at Sasha. “Hello again,” she said. They’d met last weekend at an ill-fated family birthday party. “Thanks so much for arranging this meeting with Xari LaVraïette. I’ve always wanted to try my hand at thea...ter costuming.”

“You’re most welcome,” said Sasha, admiring the sisters side by side, tracing their shared bone structure under the filigree lyricism of Nuccia’s features and the armored epic cast of Reggie’s (Reggie, no second fiddle, led the brass). He’d been amazed to learn that Nuccia was single. “But it’s Reggie who deserves the thanks. It was her idea.”
Reggie nudged her sister. “Anything to jump-start your fashion career.”
Nuccia nudged her back. “And to get a look at this old flame of your beau’s.”
“Whatever.”
Sasha ignored this reference to Anaxàrete “Xari” LaVraïette, a longtime friend with whom Sasha, since Vera’s death, had spent the occasional recreational night according to the ebb and flow of men in Xari’s life and to the trickle of women in Sasha’s.
An Aztec-looking gal in a blue apron whisked up to their table with three espressos on a tray. “Compliments of Ms. LaVraïette,” she said and, with a flourish that showed off the words “Fractal Queen” tattooed in Gothic script across her wrist, set a coffee at every place but Dmitri’s. “Ms. LaVraïette called, stuck in traffic, ten more minutes.”
Sasha smiled up at the girl; ten Xari-minutes meant twenty. “Thank you.”
The Fractal Queen blushed at him and scurried back to the counter.
Nuccia leaned teasingly toward Reggie. “Better hang on tight to this lanky, luscious man of yours, Sis. Someone sure developed a lightning crush on him.”
“Huh,” said Reggie. “I could take her.”
Sasha pretended not to have heard. Dmitri engulfed another doughball with an obscene smack of lips. Sasha sent the sisters a tense smile; tensely, they smiled back.
Sasha turned in quiet despair toward the window and feigned absorption in the tugboat traffic out on the bay. Vera and her obsession with adopting. At the outset of the application ordeal, Sasha had suggested they seek an Asian child, preferably Korean and of school age, but Vera had insisted on Russian—“a baby boy,” she said, “a little Sasha for Sasha”—since she herself was blessed with so much Kim family nearby, and since Sasha had no one.
And at the airport fifteen years ago, standing breathless at the gate, Vera had hugged Sasha’s arm as they’d watched the zombified passengers disembarking from their flight. Any minute now, surely, a matronly Russian flight attendant would emerge from that tunnel, all fond smiles, with a sweet-dreams infant swaddled in the downiest of blankets. But the passenger stream dwindled and ceased. No flight attendant. No downy bundle. Sasha looked at Vera; Vera looked at Sasha. Next moment, from the bowels of the tunnel, there rose an exorcistic shrieking and a deluge of guttural epithets that Sasha did not translate for his wife. A ruddy-faced man in a captain’s cap came barging out at them, thrust into their arms a foul-smelling buzz-saw, and marched back down the tunnel. No papers. Nothing. That was their introduction to Dmitri.
Despite the harrowing assessments from doctors and psychologists, despite the child’s utter intractability and the horror-show dawning of his physical abnormalities, Vera swore to mold Dmitri into a citizen. Years later, in dropping dead from food poisoning (her system weakened, Sasha believed, by Dmitri-induced stress), Vera had been spared the latest expulsions from schools and ejections from restaurants, the banishments from play groups and boycotts by babysitters, the retreat of the Kim family. Countless times, around other people, Sasha had intuited the unspoken refrain, “Put the kid in a home,” or its variant, spoken firmly by pamphlet-proffering administrators, “There are ‘places’ for people like your son.” Sasha still had the pamphlets.

Now, staring out at the tugboats schlepping their barges across the bay, he riffed his thumb over the pages of War and Peace, the new translation, a chunk of which he still needed to prepare for next week’s recording sessions. He was banking on prep time this afternoon while Nuccia had her
interview and while Reggie and Dmitri went off together to Fisherman’s Wharf in yet another attempt (at least on Reggie’s part) to bond. Overhead, hidden speakers wafted forth the strum of a bouzouki and the *chik-ching* of a tambourine, the placid tune mingling with aromas of coffee beans and honeyed pastries but doing little to mitigate the silence shrouding their table. Was there nothing to say?

Nuccia perked up. “This place is a dream,” she said, gesturing at the whitewashed chairs and tables, the walls painted an Aegean sapphire glittering with swirls of mirrored tiles, blue ceiling fans to match. “Xari’s the cash behind it all?”

“And the brains and soul,” said Sasha. “Xari’s quite proud of her Greek-Tunisian heritage, as she’ll be the first to tell you in her New Jersey Franglais.”

“Can’t wait to meet her,” said Nuccia, and reached for her espresso. Dmitri leaned across the table toward Reggie and, with great purpose, belched. Reggie simmered at him. Nuccia sipped her espresso, made a fleeting face, and set the cup down. “So,” she said, “a café and a theater company. Any danger Xari’s spreading herself too thin?”

“Xari has a knack,” said Sasha, treading cautiously, aiming to present his glamorous associate in a light that was positive (for Nuccia’s ears) but not too positive (for Reggie’s), “a gift for hiring talent capable of managing itself.”

“Nuh!” said Dmitri, his eyelashes caked with crumbs. Patrons at neighboring tables had turned their chairs away from the spectacle, fed up with being broad-minded, all-embracing, anything-goes San Franciscans. Two couples with kids had already decamped. Sasha couldn’t blame them, though he did wonder if those parents had any inkling what luck they’d enjoyed in the breeding lottery, how narrow had been their escape: one false chromosome, and everyone’s life in shambles. He doubled up on napkins and tackled Dmitri’s latest mess.

The Fractal Queen breezed by their table. “Still stuck. Ten more minutes. Sorry.”

Sasha nodded thanks, and the girl scuttled off.

Nuccia rolled her neck. “Oof. Stress me out.”

Reggie scooted her chair back and stood up. “Okay, Dmitri. If you’re done staring at my sister’s tits, let’s go. Sasha? Keys.”

Nuccia frowned. “Go where? Keys to what?”

Sasha fished the keys to the Volvo out of his pocket and handed them over to Reggie. To Nuccia, he said, “Dmitri doesn’t ‘walk,’ and he doesn’t ‘do’ public transportation.”

“Wait,” said Nuccia. “Reggie’s driving? But——”

And here Sasha glimpsed, if he wasn’t mistaken, a rapid-fire exchange of eye signals: flash— *flare*—FLASH. “Of course I’m driving,” said Reggie, looking hard at her sister. “I’ve been *driving* since I was thirteen, tootling around in Pops’s window-washing vans.”

Nuccia bit her lip and shook her head.

“The main thing is, Reggie,” said Sasha, baffled by the to-do about the keys, but acutely wishing Dmitri gone before the arrival of Xari LaVraïette, a disdainer of children of all stripes, “Dmitri must ride in the back seat, away from the controls.”

“Aye aye, Cap’n,” said Reggie.

“And please be extra-vigilant around other children,” said Sasha. No question, Reggie would know what he meant. Just last night they’d quarreled over the latest incident, an arrested bout of grappling between Dmitri and a young lady in his motor-skills group. Sasha had said, “I am not *going*
to cloister the boy away for my own convenience," to which Reggie had said, “What are you waiting for, a rape?”


Dmitri blinked up at her and huddled himself compliantly enough to his feet, but then sank into a crouch and backed away, a wicked leer contorting his features.

Reggie twitched her lips, clearly unimpressed. “All right, I’m off to the Wharf,” she said, and pivoted toward the exit as, over her shoulder, she added, “but whatever you do, Dmitri, don’t follow me.” With that, she sauntered off.

Dmitri hesitated, visibly befuddled, then grabbed his windbreaker off his chair and went lumbering after her. The relief at nearby tables was palpable. Sasha turned to Nuccia in mute wonder.

Nuccia shook her head. “Boy,” she said, “I don’t know who’s braver, you or Reg.”

“Reggie. No contest.” Sasha busied himself piling the soiled napkins onto his son’s plate, all too conscious of being alone with this knockout of a woman at whom (because of Dmitri and, to some extent, because of Reggie) he had no chance. “Sorry about the delay,” he said. “Xari runs on Xari Time.”

Nuccia fluttered her fingers at the espressos. “Aren’t you having any?”

“Oh, I’m jittery enough already with Reggie and Dmitri off together in the car for the first time, and—”

“And me sizing you up for my report to the famiglia,” said Nuccia with a laugh, her eyes glinting green like shards of glass at the bottom of a swimming pool.

“Not much point in that, alas. Dmitri and I wore out our welcome in record time.”

“What, the birthday cake? Pff! An accident.”

“Nuccia.”

“Okay, no accident.”

Sasha winced at the memory of the birthday party for Reggie’s little nephew over at her brother Lolo’s house, at the memory of Nuccia, stationed at a card table in her jade chiffon party dress, slicing a gigantic frilly-white coconut cake; standing next to her was Lolo’s wife Trish, party-clad as well and manning a punch bowl brimming with a liquid of radioactive pinkness. Nuccia had just offered a towering slice to Dmitri, but Sasha, wary of sugar, had stepped in and said, “No, thank you, we’ll have to pass,” upon which Nuccia had retracted the plate, and Dmitri—with zero warning—rammed the card table. The table flipped. The party guests squealed and scampered, and Reggie shouted “No!” just as Lolo dove, too late, to save the punch bowl. Nuccia and Trish were wearing the cake. Sasha had staggered back from the wreckage, longing for sudden death.

Across from him now, Nuccia tucked a strawberry-ginger curl behind her ear. “Lolo and I were cracking up about it later, after the clean-up. Trish wasn’t amused, but that’s Trish. It’s from growing up ignored around her mother’s show dogs.”

Sasha mustered a rueful smile.

“Gotta hand it to her, though,” Nuccia went on, “she’s got guts to have kids at all. Me, I could never. I mean, there’s the outside world, all the bullies and sickos and predators…” She paused. “And then there’s the inside world, all that bad programming.”
Sasha sensed a shift to a darker tone. “Programming?”

Nuccia rested her fingertips on the rim of her espresso cup, her gaze on her hand. “Genetics, patterns. Nature versus, um, nurture. Our loudmouth lush of a dad was kinda slap-happy—you know?—belly-happy.” Nuccia locked eyes with Sasha. “Let’s just say, if that was *my* kid who’d capsized that cake, there’d be nothing left of his ass. And Reggie was brought up the same as me.”

All at once, over his chest, Sasha felt a spreading bib of frost. He’d suspected some sort of abuse in Reggie’s background—and he could *guess* at the DMV record of a recovering alcoholic—and yet, to clear the kid out for Nuccia’s interview with Xari, he’d entrusted his son and car to Reggie’s care. And he’d done so despite the years that he and his late wife had spent *modeling* good behavior for their son rather than pounding it into the boy, rather than teaching violence to a volatile child. Though Sasha had never shared Vera’s faith that Dmitri’s life would blossom into a tale of heroic disability wherein Society is shown to be more handicapped than the stunted saint in question, he now denied himself this or any excuse. If, today at the Wharf, something were to “happen,” the guilt—in Sasha’s heart, in a jury’s eyes—could only be his own.

Nuccia was looking at him funny. Sasha snapped out of it and said, “Maybe so, but there’s no denying the fine job your brother’s doing of raising your niece and nephew.”

“Lolo and I don’t drink,” said Nuccia. “I don’t go to church, but Lolo won’t even taste communion wine for fear of triggering the family curse.” She bent her elbow in a pantomime of drinking. “You know about the curse?”

“Reggie told me the day we met.”

“Then you also know she’s sober again, doing better than we ever imagined.”

Sasha faltered over the “again” and the “ever imagined,” but said, “Yes.”

Nuccia nodded. “Oh, Lolo and I have our vices, too. For him, it’s pasta with cream sauce. For me, it’s rock-climbing.” She tossed Sasha a grin. “How ’bout you, any vices?”

“None I’ve had time to cultivate.”

“You should try rock-climbing.”

“I’m not insane.”

“Yet.” Nuccia flicked her gaze toward Dmitri’s chair. “Well, just wanted to give you a heads-up about us Rinaldis. But Reggie’s a great gal, and she won’t go blowing it now when she’s finally snagged herself a real gentleman.” Nuccia tipped her head back with a choked little laugh and added, “Hell, I’d make a play for you myself if it weren’t for, well”—another glance at Dmitri’s chair—“you know.” She fanned herself with both hands. “Whew! Okay, disclaimer over.”

Stunned at this confession (if indeed it *was* a confession), Sasha pried his gaze off Nuccia’s face and funneled it up at the spinning ceiling fans, their sapphire-blue blades tipped with chips of mirror to evoke the sun-dappled Aegean, their hum and flutter reminiscent of Vera years ago—and perhaps even now in spirit—hovering with determined cheer over her two “men.” Sasha wondered what Vera would think of him dating bad-ass Reggie and yearning for Reggie’s Pre-Raphaelite corker of a sister. Sasha wondered if it should still matter so much what Vera would think.

The Fractal Queen swept up to their table. “Ms. LaVraïette is parking, two minutes,” she said, and flitted off.

Nuccia pushed the espressos aside and hefted her portfolio onto the table. “Moment of
true,” she said, all brightness as she unzipped the case on a tumble of photos and clippings and sketches and swatches, the spill as kaleidoscopic and merry as a life-with-Nuccia would be. Sasha, unable to take much more, rose from his seat and collected War and Peace. Nuccia glanced up in surprise. “Where are you going?”

“Off to prep my chapters.”

“Now?”

“I’ll pop back over to make introductions,” said Sasha, and hastened across the café’s bouzouki-addled hubbub to the one table still free. He sat down facing the front door, through which Xari would soon make her grand entrance, and opened his book to Monday’s battle scene. Battle-fatigued himself and weary of scrapping for doomed notions and vain inches of turf, he uncapped his yellow highlighter and set about reading, singling out words and phrases to serve as targets during the recording session, textual gooses to perk him up at the microphone, verbal life rafts to save him from drowning if only Tolstoi were any match for the sun-drenched view of Nuccia Rinaldi, her gravitational pull subverting the tides.

Sasha redoubled his efforts to read, but all pretence came to a halt when the café’s front door burst open on a piercing yowl to admit—not Xari LaVraïette, but—Reggie, dragging by the hand into the suddenly-silent milieu a balking and bawling Dmitri. Sasha vaulted out of his chair, attracting his son’s notice, and the boy jerked free of Reggie and came barreling over and drilled himself face-first into Sasha’s stomach. Sasha went taut against the impact and felt cold fingers wrap around his heart and squeeze it in an icy fist that would let loose no words of inquiry or gestures of comfort, no dribblets of the fatherly warmth that is any child’s due.

Reggie strode up to them. “We never made it to the Wharf,” she said in a tight voice over Dmitri’s wailing. “Girl Scouts. Selling cookies.”

“Oh, no,” said Sasha.

“Oh, yes,” said Reggie. She swallowed hard and dropped her gaze to her sneakers, and then clamped her hands on her hips and cocked her head back up. “Listen, Sasha, I care for you, and I wish you well, and I really do feel I’ve given it my very best shot,” she said, “but I think the humane thing—humane for everyone—is if we part company, like, now.”

Sasha took a breath, a moment in which to absorb the shock of her words and their import, and then extended his hand toward her over Dmitri’s hot scalp. “I understand,” he said, admiring her firm grip. “And for all your efforts, Reggie, I’m grateful.”

Supremely grateful. Forever grateful to her for showing him just how it’s done.
Author Notes

Jeannie Galeazzi’s work has twice been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and has appeared in forty-four publications including Fence, The Literary Review, Permafrost, Southern Humanities Review, Main Street Rag, Feathertale (Canada), Dotlit (Australia), Snorkel (New Zealand), and All Rights Reserved (Nova Scotia), and is forthcoming in Bryant Literary Review and Gold Dust (UK). “Fan Club” is for Judy Barr and Betty Houston, with much gratitude for their years of gracious encouragement.

About the Work

Writing is pruning. And knowing when—at each step of the way (researching, mulling the research, plotting, outlining, composing, editing, editing the edits, editing the edited edits of the earlier edits and then editing those to the point of nausea before skulking into the silent read-through phase and then, in disgust and despair, slashing and splicing and editing again before rereading, red-penciling all the while, until the only thing left is to read the damned thing out loud)—when to say “When.”

From inspiration to finished product? “Fan Club” sprouted from the author’s city-gal love of skyscrapers and her neat-freak fixation with skyscraper windows and the huge task of keeping them clean. And what if those windows were kept clean by a character whose life was a mess, who desperately sought to change? That bud of an idea—along with the seedling notion of a foil character through whom to explore themes of limits and obligation and the anguish lurking beneath decorum—bloomed into a novel called Mephisto’s Bluff, one of a handful of novels the author has been trying (and failing) for years to get published. Finally, fed up, she shifted from gardening mode to chop-shop mode: chapters and scenes and characters and turns of phrase hacked apart and melted down and molded afresh and soldered together into several short stories and a scatter of poems that, so far, by luck, have speed-bumped into print. At which point, in each case, the pruning was forced to stop, the author forced to gasp out a “When.”

The hard part? It’s all hard. Unless one can summon the focus to slip into the Zone: then time flows, pages fill, and the “hard part” is putting that pen (or red pencil) down. But beware: the more sterling and brilliant and lush this Zone-forged prose may at first seem, the longer the cool-off this prose will require before any intelligent editing—any objective pruning—can begin.

Resolving challenges? Shake it up! Write the last paragraph first and use it for target practice as you sweat out the rest. If you’re an outliner, don’t outline; if you aren’t, do. Try longhand. Try dictation. Try reading something “bad.” Leave the work and step outdoors and open your senses and walk until you see or hear or smell or taste something that reconnects you to your plot and characters—and then walk back to the work free-associating: you’ll arrive revved up with insights. Above all, cultivate your own method that is natural to YOU, that gets what YOU feel-is-worth-writing written. That done, the big challenge may well turn out to be restraint: the challenge of not showing the work until it’s ready, until it has been suitably pruned.

Craft? Charm versus thrust. Any writer is lucky to have any readers at all. Great care must be taken not to outstay our tenuous welcome in those readers’ minds. We don’t bore with blather; we don’t shock just to shock; we make a point. It’s all in the pruning.

“When.”
Jeannie Galeazzi on the Web

www.perigee-art.com/7389/popups/0109/fiction3.php

www.snreview.org/0109Galeazzi.html

snorkel.org.au/008/galeazzi.html

www.bloodorangereview.com/v5-1/galeazzi_raqs.htm

superstitionreview.asu.edu/n2/bio.php?author=jeanniegaleazzi&bio=fiction