

ADRIANA STROPFEL

By Alain Elkann

Morlupo thought back to his days in Turin when he was sixteen and in high school. He remembered how he used to hide out at the Poli's house in the mornings instead of going to school. Luisa and Marcello Poli lived in a building from the early twentieth century in Corso Galileo Ferrari. The Poli family had a large flat on the ground floor with a garden. Their father had died suddenly so they lived alone with their mother. There was a Venetian housekeeper named Maria Ida who always wore a white apron.

Marcello Poli was tall, robust, and had a high forehead. He was studying the classics at Gioberti high school, while Luisa had also just begun to study the classics, but at Alfieri. Luisa was cute, with dark hair, light skin, and green eyes. She was intelligent but lazy.

The apartment was always empty. There was a large sitting room and a dining room, but the Polis were almost always in their bedrooms or a sort of library with a sofa and very comfortable armchairs where they also ate their meals. Maria Ida came around with food on a cart, and you could eat sitting on a sofa or armchair, kind of like a picnic.

The Poli's mother, Adriana Stropfel, was from Austria, but she'd moved to Turin after her marriage to Augusto Poli. Poli was a brilliant man, a successful, esteemed lawyer who was part of the Turin social scene. During their marriage Adriana had adapted to Augusto's life, but she always felt like an outsider on Turin's society scene, and she continued to go

back to Zurich, where her parents lived and where she'd done university and had many friends. Adriana was tall and blonde with the same light skin as her Luisa, and large blue, slightly cloudy eyes that she hid behind sunglasses with heavy gold or tortoise-shaped frames.

Adriana occasionally went into the library, but she was almost always in her bedroom – Morlupo had never actually crossed the threshold – with the shades drawn because she suffered from horrible migraines. The bedroom next to hers was used by Saverio who visited occasionally, especially at the weekend. He was presumably Adriana's lover, but it wasn't something that was discussed and Saverio rarely came into the library. He was a stout, bald man with a northern accent that couldn't quite be placed, but Morlupo didn't know anything about him because nobody – Marcello, Luisa, or even Adriana – spoke of him. They realised Saverio was coming when Adriana would leave home in the early afternoon to go to the hairdresser, a man named Angelo who would give her a perm. She'd come home with curly hair, smelling nice.

Morlupo could no longer remember what Luisa or Marcello's voices sounded like because he hadn't seen them in fifty years, but he did have memories of Adriana's voice because she'd raise her voice in rare moments. He did remember that she spoke Italian very well, but with a slight German accent.

Morlupo would go to the Poli's house in the morning instead of going to school. Maria Ida would make him coffee with milk served with Plasmon biscuits; then he'd go and hide out in Luisa or Marcello's rooms. If they had also skipped school, they'd spend the mornings

together, or they'd lie down and sleep until lunchtime. Then he'd return home as if he'd gone to school.

At the weekend, if he didn't go skiing, he'd spend all of his time at the Poli's house. The curious thing was that Maria Ida covered for him. The curt, middle-aged Venetian woman never said or asked for a thing. Morlupo never knew if Adriana was aware that he spent his mornings at their house.

In their down time, in the evening around 6 p.m. or at the weekend, they'd sit in the library and talk about this and that. Most of all, they spoke of how they imagined the future would be. Adriana encouraged them to leave Turin to experience the world. Her plan was to return to Zurich when Luisa and Marcello went off to university.

What Morlupo remembered most was the atmosphere of that house. It was a place where you could say whatever you wanted. He didn't remember exactly what he talked about with Luisa and Marcello, but there was a sense of freedom in that home that was unusual for Turin. Marcello was the only one who was more Torinese, more of a conformist. Those mornings when Luisa didn't go to school, Morlupo and Luisa would sometimes kiss, but she had other boyfriends even if she was very young. The Poli home in Turin was a bit like something out of a Françoise Sagan novel or a Bertolucci film. There was such a feeling of being free, unaffected by time.

Adriana and Saverio occasionally went out to a restaurant in the evenings when Adriana didn't have a migraine. He came to Turin by train, so they went in Adriana's Lancia Fulvia Coupé. When Morlupo was at their house Maria Ida would come in and out, bringing him

food and drink as if he was part of the family. Morlupo's own family didn't worry because they thought he went to study with Marcello Poli as, even though they didn't go to the same school – Morlupo went to Galileo Ferrari, a math and science high school in Corso Montevecchio – they worked on certain subjects together. Morlupo's mother Sandra was on her second marriage, to a man from Puglia who worked in Turin. Her husband, Giorgio De Fonseca, was an engineer. De Fonseca had been very well acquainted with the Poli's father, Augusto, because, during the war, they'd been at Cadet Officer School in Pesaro together. Sandra actually knew Adriana Stropfel quite well, because they'd attended the same boarding school in Switzerland before the war when Sandra had been forced to leave her local high school and go study in Switzerland due to the Italian racial laws. They'd crossed paths in Turin after the war by chance. They played bridge, and Adriana played many other games as well. Actually, people said that Saverio was a professional gambler. They'd met at the casino in Campione one evening, and that's how they became lovers. Adriana had stopped gambling during her marriage to Augusto Poli, but once she was widowed she began drinking white wine with ice and playing bridge, and then poker, and she later went back to frequenting casinos.

In the summer, Adriana Stropfel took the children to the seaside near Bordighera where they had a family home, and she'd get to the casino in San Remo or Monte Carlo just as soon as she could. In the winter, she would play at the casinos in Saint Vincent or Campione. She typically left on Saturday afternoon, when the children were in the mountains, and she would return on Sunday night or Monday morning. She smoked

Muratti Ambassadors, and she always had a carton of cigarettes with her. She started playing Chemin de Fer or blackjack and she'd play all night. She got lucky at the casino and often won, but if she lost too much she'd become anxious, and this almost always led to a serious bout of migraines.

Saverio worked in a bank in Milan. He was the vice-director of a branch in Corso Buenos Aires, and during the week he lived a normal life. He had a wife who taught dance, and two young daughters still in middle school. His wife usually wanted to go to the countryside on Saturdays, and he'd refuse, preferring to go to Campione and play roulette. One time he lost quite a bit and Adrianna helped him pay off his debts, and he apparently paid her back later. This wasn't much discussed. The Poli children hated that their mother gambled because it made them feel unstable, even though they knew that their Stropfel grandparents were able to pay their mother's gambling debts if necessary. Morlupo once told Adriana how his grandmother gambled and had taught him Chemin de Fer and gin rummy, so he had played gin rummy with Adriana for a while for fun.

Actually, Morlupo and Marcello often played chess. They enjoyed it, but it was also a way for them to put on airs and feel a bit intellectual. The house smelled like smoke. Everyone smoked, even in bed, and they all had Dupont lighters. Morlupo rarely smoked.

Occasionally, Luisa would have parties on Saturday afternoons when Adriana was in Zurich or had gone to the casino or to a spa to lose weight. Adriana was terrified of putting on weight, which she did quite easily, because she knew Saverio liked thin women. She worried that Saverio would leave her or would get bored on those Saturday afternoons or

Sundays when she had migraines. When this happened, he'd stay in his bedroom, which had been Adriana's husband's room, and this irritated Luisa a lot.

Saverio only came into the library to watch the matches on Sunday afternoons. He was a diehard Inter fan and boasted about being friends with the Moratti family, which owned the Inter team. But Morlupo and the Polis didn't really know much about Saverio. Marcello especially hated the smell of the lavender aftershave he used. That lavender smell permeated the rooms of the flat and even bothered Maria Ida, who would throw the windows wide open.

Adriana loved listening to opera, and when she was in her bedroom she turned up the volume as loud as it would go, not caring about who else was in the house. She adored Callas, especially her *La Bohème* and *La Traviata*. Opera music irritated Saverio because jazz was his one and only love, while Morlupo and the Poli children went wild for the Beatles. Luisa and Marcello's friends came and went at all hours up until 10 o'clock at night. They ate and spoke about anything and everything, while the television stayed on in the background even if nobody was watching it.

The student protests of 1968 started the last year that Morlupo frequented the Poli household. At that point he and Marcello were eighteen years old and had their driving licenses and cars. Marcello's was a dark blue Mini Cooper with a black roof, and Morlupo had a light blue Seicento that had belonged to his mother. They were preparing for their final exams; Luisa had begun having more serious romantic relationships and often didn't sleep at home.

Adriana was the same as always, even if she went out less, and Saverio didn't come to Turin as much. She said they'd meet outside the house, on holiday, but the truth was that they didn't see one another very often. Saverio had most likely found a younger woman. Morlupo came to the conclusion that Saverio liked younger women when he'd gone to the Poli home unexpectedly one Saturday afternoon. At that point he had his own set of keys, so he could let himself in. Maria Ida was never there after two o'clock on Saturday afternoons, returning Monday morning at eight o'clock. Marcello had gone to the mountains, and Adriana was probably closed off in her room dealing with a migraine or perhaps she'd gone to the hairdresser. The house was quiet, though there were whispers, giggles, and murmurs coming from Luisa's room, along with the sound of an unrecognizable man's voice. Morlupo thought it was strange that Adriana's car was not outside but there was a large red Alfa Romeo parked in front of the house. It could have been the car of a boy or a man, but it most likely to a man given the tone of voice that Morlupo had heard coming from Luisa's room.

Morlupo was sitting in the library, which had a wide door that opened up to the L-shaped main corridor of the house, and a large glass door that overlooked the garden. He turned on the television, thinking that Luisa would come and introduce him to her lover, quite obviously the owner of the red Alfa Romeo parked outside. After half an hour, Morlupo heard a door open and close, and saw the outline of a man quickly make his way down the corridor and stop outside what was normally Saverio's room. He entered and closed the door.

A few minutes later Morlupo heard Adriana's voice, saying, "Where were you? I was looking for you."

"I was over there reading because I thought you were resting."

"Yes, I was resting. You are always so sweet and considerate."

"Oh, but of course. How do you feel now?"

"Better. Wait for me in the library, and I'll be right there."

"I'm going to take a shower, and I'll wait for you there."

In the meantime Luisa had entered the library looking a bit sleepy and wan, wearing a robe. She said hello to Morlupo as if it were absolutely normal to find him there.

"It's raining again. What a drag," she said. "It's been raining all spring. I can't take it another second. Who could think about going out or to the seaside with this kind of weather?"

"You have a point."

"I'm going to the kitchen to make a sandwich. I'm absolutely famished. Would you like something?"

"No, thank you. I've just eaten."

After a while, Saverio came into the library and sat down with a confident air. "Well, hello there, young man. Are you all set then? What will you do after your final exams?"

"Make a long trip."

"And then on to university?"

"Yes. I'm going to study geography."

“Geography? Why in the world?”

“Because I find it interesting.”

Luisa had returned, and Saverio suddenly turned to her, saying, “Listen to this, Luisa. Did you know our friend here is going to study geography?”

“Yes, I did. Actually, I think I may study geography,” she said with a playful yet firm tone.

“Why is everyone in this house so interested in geography?” asked Saverio.

“Because it’s interesting to think about how the world changes; the climate, boundaries, and geographic conditions change, as do the names of countries and many other things,” said Morlupo earnestly.

As he spoke, Adriana Stropfel came into the library wearing a dark blue pantsuit and a white silk shirt, slightly bejewelled and carrying a Chanel handbag. “Shall we go try out Saverio’s new car?” she asked.

“The red Alfa Romeo?” asked Morlupo.

“Yes, Adriana has just given it to me as a birthday present,” responded Saverio.

“That is quite a gift, it must be a very expensive car and obviously you accepted it as if it was deserved! Good luck anyway!” said Luisa, seemingly a bit irritated because her mother gave her lover wonderful presents with her husband’s money; or in other words, Luisa and Marcello’s money. Luisa had some resentment toward her mother, and also pitied her as a woman whose youth and dignity were fading, struggling to hang on to her lover with ever larger and more expensive presents. Luisa said she had things to do, and

Morlupo said he had to study, so only Adriana and Saverio went to try out the new red Alfa Romeo.

Morlupo desperately wanted to tell Luisa that he knew what was happening between her and Saverio, but he never said a word. The complicated dynamic involving Saverio, the mother, and the daughter was none of his business. Morlupo liked Luisa, but nothing could ever happen between. They were good friends, but as the years passed they were not as close. He and Marcello were about to take final exams and leave Turin for university. Morlupo was heading to England, while Marcello was off to Milan.

As they went their separate ways in September, only Luisa would stay in Turin. Would she become Saverio's lover? Would Adriana Stropfel grow old alone in that large flat or would she return to Zurich?

Morlupo went off to England, leaving Turin and the Poli home behind. He called Marcello a few times, but then they lost touch and he never knew what happened to the Polis. He didn't know if Adriana Stropfel was dead, what had happened to Luisa, or where Marcello lived.

That afternoon, as he drove along the motorway, he thought back to Turin and the Poli home, to the tall blonde and her life of suffering in Italy. The name Adriana Stropfel ran through his mind over and over again. She was like a character out of a novel, a mysterious woman, so warm yet distant. Her children may not have even known much about her, except that they disliked her passion for gambling. She was probably very much a sexual being, perhaps excessively so, but Adriana Stropfel hid it behind a somewhat

matronly appearance. And Saverio? What had become of Saverio? Was he dead? Had he left Adriana? Had she found out about his relationship with Luisa? With whom would she have been more upset? Would she have thrown them out of the house?

Actually, the home belonged to her children so she didn't have the right to throw anyone out! Would the mother and daughter have understood one another? Morlupo had found out that there was something going on between Luisa and Saverio the day that Adriana had given him the red Alfa Romeo, but how had Saverio and Luisa become intimate? Had he made the first move, perhaps playing footsie under the table?

Morlupo thought that, given her cat-like temperament, Luisa most likely seduced Saverio. She probably did it unwittingly as a way of taking revenge on her mother, as they'd never got on, and her mother had never hidden the fact that Marcello was her favourite. Luisa was too much like her father, and Adriana Stropfel had never fully trusted that handsome husband of hers who was so extroverted, and charming. She knew that he wasn't faithful and that their marriage was not based on love. She knew he hated that she was a bit frigid in bed and could never reach orgasm. Adriana hurt his pride as a Latin male in a certain sense, but physically he wasn't her type. She saw that Luisa and her father were thick as thieves and quite affectionate with one another, and this made Adriana jealous at times. When Augusto Poli died suddenly, Adriana grieved for a bit and then got back at Luisa by showing more love to Marcello, who was a normal, quiet chap with normal desires who didn't even realise how much his mother spoilt him.

Marcello was spoilt but simple. He had a motorbike, a silver lighter, and he smoked the Benson & Hedges in the gold pack. He had his father's tailor make him two suits per year, and his shirts, which were typically white, were made by a shirt maker. He also had light blue, poplin pyjamas made. In the summer he wore Saxon loafers, and in the winter he wore Church lace-ups in dark brown or suede. He had a green Loden coat. Marcello was good at chess and bridge, but Luisa would spend hours in bed like her mother, reading Russian novels, especially Dostoevsky, and books by Stendhal and Moravia as well.

Luisa was a bit of a trendy dresser, wearing miniskirts, flared blue jeans, and high heels. She wore heavy eye make-up and cherry-red lipstick. She liked Fracas tuberose perfume, while Adriana Stropfel preferred Joy by Jean Patou and wore pant suits or walked around the house in black nightgown and white robe. She also wore heels, which made her even taller, while Luisa was more petite and had fuller lips.

Marcello and Luisa didn't talk much. They led separate lives and Marcello never commented on his mother or sister, ignoring the presence of Saverio entirely but in an understated, polite way. There were no flowers or chocolates in the home, no photographs and very few paintings. The house was furnished with antiques of moderate significance.

Morlupo thought back fondly to those years in Turin of the era before and during the student revolution. They were the last years of tenured professors and students in coats and ties. They were years of no rules, when drugs started circulating and the bourgeoisie began changing its attitude. The soundtrack of those days included the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Lucio Battisti, De André, and Gino Paoli. He and Marcello dreamed of their

future lives, thinking a lot about girls, about women. They didn't study much, but felt obliged to read books by Herbert Marcuse and stay abreast of the Frankfurt School in general. Benjamin was required reading, along with Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag.

Sometimes they took part in protests, and even if Luisa was the youngest in their group she was the most committed, the most intellectual, the most critical. It was likely that she was dating one of the young leaders of the student movement. Morlupo and Marcello were less involved. They had to study for their final exams and prepare to leave Turin. Morlupo perhaps could have been more involved, but he preferred watching to taking part actively. He thought about literature, about the lives of writers, and girls. The truth was he didn't have the temperament to be a leader, but he also wasn't a follower. His lack of political involvement might have been an obstacle to winning over the most beautiful girls.

Many years had passed since those days in Turin, where so much had happened. Adriana Stropfel and Saverio continued to go to the casino in the Alfa Romeo that she had bought for him and which he left in her garage in Turin because he wouldn't be able to explain where it came from to his wife. If Luisa was so involved in the student movement and was dating one of the leaders, perhaps her relationship with Saverio was more fling than relationship. Could Saverio have been in love with her, so lively and full of youth?

Morlupo had left, and the rare times he returned to Turin to see his mother he never went to the Poli's. It was as if that period had faded away, and it only returned to his memory clearly forty years later, flooding his mind with the sound of each of their voices, their expressions, their discussions, and, most of all, Maria Ida, that silent Venetian

housekeeper who saw everything, knew everything, listened to everything, but never said a word.

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