

Renato After Alba

ALSO BY EUGENE MIRABELLI

Renato, the Painter

The Goddess in Love with a Horse

The Passion of Terri Heart

The Language Nobody Speaks

The World at Noon

No Resting Place

The Way In

The Burning Air

Renato After Alba

*His Rage Against Life,
Love & Loss
in his own Words*



Eugene Mirabelli



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for Margaret
& the children
& the children's children

I WENT TO THE DAILY GRIND CAFÉ AND HAD A CUP of coffee at the little table where we often sat, but Alba didn't turn up, smiling and saying "I thought I'd find you here."

Because she is dead — I know, I know. What I don't know is where she went and why she hasn't come back and is she someplace I can get to without dying, because though I wanted to die and told myself over and over to die, it became clear it wasn't going to happen right away. I don't understand why we're born or why we love or why we bring children into the world if we and everyone we love are going to die.



I was born at my grandfather's house in Lexington, Massachusetts, in the evening of the last snowfall of March, eighty-three years ago. You could say I was born a few days earlier, but on that snowy evening I was found in a laundry basket on my grandfather's doorstep, so that's my true birthday. My grandfather's big

square house was on one side of St. Brigid's Church, and the small narrow parish house was on the other side. Everyone said I had been brought to the wrong door, but maybe my guardian angel directed the delivery to this address so that a newly married couple at the table that evening could adopt me and be my true parents, as did happen.

My grandfather's name was Pacifico Cavallù and there were fifteen people in the house that night. He was at the head of the table, a sturdy man with a short, iron-colored beard, and his wife Marianna sat opposite him, a glorious woman such as you find carved on the prow of an old sailing ship. Their children, handsome and headstrong, were seated on both sides of the long table — Lucia and Marissa and Bianca and Candida and Dante and Sandro and Silvio and Mercurio and Regina, along with Marissa's husband Nicolo, an aeronautical engineer, and Bianca's husband Fidèle, a stonecutter. And, of course, there was Carmela the cook and Nora the housemaid. That's two in the kitchen, thirteen at the table, and me in a laundry basket being set down quietly on the piazza.

Then came that KNOCK, KNOCK, KNOCK, so Pacifico got up from the table, his linen napkin still tucked into the top of his vest, and strolled through the grand front hall and into the vestibule to open the front door. *Good God!* he cries. At the table they drop their silverware and knock over chairs to come running and I am born.



Four years later, here's my grandfather, my nonno, kneeling down to crush me against his scratchy vest and gold watch chain, kissing the top of my head, the air scented with bay rum cologne and Parodi cigars and filled with his *ho-ho-ho* when he lifted me up, up, too far up to the ceiling, then caught and lowered me and set me on my feet, and I ran to my mother. Nonno kept big barrels of wine sleeping on their stomachs in the dark cobweb cellar, which was two steps down from the big cellar, and the floor in the little cellar was dirt like outside.

Later, when I was six or seven, Floria led me and our cousin Nick over the low stone wall into the old burying ground and Floria said, "Look, you can lift up the slates," and she lifted a gravestone straight up so you could see the bottom edge, damp and sharp like a spade covered with dirt. "See?" she said. "We can switch them around." She switched two gravestones, then switched them back. In those days nobody died except the people from long ago who were already dead, like the people in that old graveyard, like Isaac Stone from 1690. Then we heard aunt Lucia, Floria's mother, calling, "Floria, vieni, vieni qui, Floria, andiamo! Andiamo!" So we climbed over the little stone wall and into Nonno's backyard where my father and uncle Nicolo and uncle Zitti were playing bocce in the big afternoon sunshine seventy-seven years ago.



Now people die every day. Alba died on the first day of spring. She had caught a slight cold, we thought, but in the third night her cries woke me and I called 911 and the emergency team came. They took her blood pressure. “How often do you have atrial fibrillation?” someone asked her. She could barely sit in the chair without falling off. They put her on the gurney, maneuvered her down the stairway and into the EMS truck and we drove to the hospital emergency entrance. Then hours of agony and panic — her heart racing, blood pressure collapsing, kidneys failing, her gut in agonizing knots, blood turning to acid in her veins — they gave me a tiny sponge on a stick to wet her lips and mouth. “I can’t stand pain the way you can,” she gasped to me, then her tongue failed to obey her will she couldn’t speak her eyes filled with terror, so that

and torture for twenty hours and her heart stopped. They pounded and heaved on her chest, trying to restart it, then backed off and used voltage, again and again and again and again and again, until the doctor said it was over and I rushed to grab her — “Oh, my beautiful Alba!” — got my arms around her to help her, to help her lift, help her get up from that bed, my cheek pressed to her warm breast, her sweet warm breast. Perspiration had suffused her face but, oh, she was so heavy as never in this life. Our children

gathered drifted gathered here there, our children, our kids. I stroked her hair the way she always liked and I peeled away the bloody tapes and began to pull the tube from her mouth, when some busybody bitch rushed at me, saying, "No, no, not until the coroner comes!" The doctor was sitting on a small metal chair outside the glass room, writing on a long pad he held on his knees. He looked tired. He said Alba had succumbed to a bacterial infection. "You don't have to go," he told me. "You can stay with her as long, as long as you want." But it was no use, so I told him, "No. Her spirit is gone." Our kids took me home.



That was my cousin Floria, leading us on adventures over the little stone wall to the old burying ground or up to the attic and beneath the slanting roof where the steamer trunks were stored, decorated with stickers from the White Star Line and the Cunard. A year or two later she gave me her writing desk, because she was going to the villa in Sicily with her mother Lucia and Nonno. The desk had ink stains on it, but when I lifted the lid it was clean inside and smelled fresh and I could keep drawing paper and pencils there. Everyone was calling to aunt Lucia, saying, "Hurry, hurry up, Lucia. We'll miss the boat! Andiamo!" But Lucia had stopped to light her cigarette. "The boat will wait!" she said, coming into the car, an airy scarf of smoke trailing over her shoulder. Dante and Regina were in

the car ahead of us, and Nonno was the car ahead of them, and we all drove to Boston and walked up the gangway onto the ship to say goodbye. It was a bright sunny day. I don't recall if our cousin Veronica was with us, but Nick and I had a great time.



Now Nonno and aunt Lucia and Floria were at the villa in Palermo, but the rest of us still gathered every Sunday at the big house in Lexington, the same as ever, because Nanna was still there. After the long midday dinner, my father and uncle Nicolo and uncle Zitti would remain at the table with their wine and coffee and the adult aroma of tobacco smoke. Zitti and Nicolo were professors and whenever they disagreed about something they would turn to Fidèle, my father, and ask him to referee. The young uncles had no wives yet and were up on the third floor, trying to put together a bamboo fishing pole, or they were cleaning the guns — something like that. But then we heard them clattering down the stairs. Uncle Zitti and Uncle Nicolo were talking about politics or religion when Silvio and Mercurio came through the dining room, their riding boots booming on the floor. "We're going out to watch Sandro's hawk," Silvio said. "Anybody coming with us?"

"No," Mercurio told him. "They're going to sit there all day and discuss Roosevelt and Norman Thomas. Or Mussolini. Let's go."

“Tell Sandro to be careful,” uncle Nicolo called after them. “That hawk is still wild.”

“One of the neighbors is going to take a shot at that bird,” my father murmured.

I had watched Sandro’s hawk before and there wasn’t much to watch; it had yellow eyes and it just flew up and around in circles, and then after a while it swooped down and landed on Sandro’s arm, on his big leather glove, where he fed it. My cousin Nick said Come on, let’s go outside, and I said Veronica wants to come, too. Nick went out and I would have gone with him, but now Uncle Nicolo asked Uncle Zitti what had God been doing before he created the universe — a funny kind of question and I wanted to hear the answer.

“Ah,” Zitti said. He smiled and pressed the end of his silver cigarette case so it sprang open like a little book. “Saint Augustine has the answer to that one.”

“And what does your Saint Augustine say?” Nicolo asked.

My father had rolled up his sleeve and tucked two walnuts into the crook of his arm, but now he paused, waiting for the answer.

“He says God was preparing hell for those who pry too deep.”

My father gave a brief laugh and closed his arm, cracking the walnuts.

“Let me correct myself,” Zitti said, tapping the end of his cigarette against the silver case. “Saint Augus-

tine didn't say that, but he talks about somebody else who said that. Augustine himself takes the question seriously."

"Does he say who God is?" Nicolo asked. He had unfolded a dazzling white handkerchief and was polishing his glasses, a pair of small octogons, like Ben Franklin's bifocals.

Zitti turned to me. "Tell your Uncle Nicolo who God is," he said.

"God is the creator of heaven and earth and all things," I recited.

My father didn't say anything, but resettled himself comfortably in his chair, satisfied with my answer. He didn't go to church, nor did any of my uncles, but it was understood that I would learn the catechism and go to church every Sunday with my mother and my little brother Bart for a while longer.

"Did the universe create itself out of nothing?" Zitti asked Nicolo.

Nicolo had started to reply, but then caught himself and nodded in my direction — bringing me into the discussion, I thought. He put his glasses back on. "I don't know," he told Zitti.

"Exactly. Nothing can create itself out of nothing!" Zitti said, slapping the table in delight. "Thus, we have God. Q.E.D."

"Renato's a big boy," my father told uncle Nicolo. "You can talk in front of him."

"I'm not a philosopher," Nicolo said, sweeping his

hand here and there on the tablecloth as if to iron out the wrinkles, or maybe brush something away. “I’m an engineer, a believer in the scientific method. Science finds out the way the world is made and how it works. The more science explains, the less mysterious the world is, and the less mysterious it is, the less we use God to explain how or why things happen. I don’t see evidence of God anywhere.” He glanced at me and added, “But that’s just my opinion.”

“I see God everywhere I look,” Zitti countered, flinging his arms out. “This world, the stars, the gravity that holds everything together — it didn’t create itself. God created it.”

“And who created God?” Nicolo asked him.

“Michelangelo created God!” my father announced. He drained his wineglass and banged it down on the table. “Sistine Chapel. Fantastic work. Genius!”

I ran out and climbed over the little stone wall into the old graveyard, but by then Nick and Veronica were already going out the other side, down into the big meadow. In the field the air was extra warm and sweet with the scent of freshly mown hay, and when you looked up it was all sky and Sandro’s hawk making circles higher and higher toward the sun.



I couldn’t endure the thought of Alba shut in a narrow coffin, and that coffin in a concrete box lowered into a hole in the ground and then dirt shoveled on it.

turned up the collar of my barn jacket, buttoned everything and jammed my hands in the pockets, because I knew how to do that. My legs walked and I got a little way down the road and already I was tired and when I looked around I discovered that everything was actually fake — the flat housefronts standing beside the road had nothing behind them, the empty trees, the papery cutout clouds against the fake blue sky — all rigged up like a cheap stage set. I stopped and told him, “Everything’s fake. Look at it! It’s bogus, all of it.” Scott said, “Where? What do you mean?” I said, “All this. See?” And I pointed to the houses and the black trees. “It’s all made to look real, but it’s all pretend and make-believe.” He looked at me, then he said, “Let’s keep walking. Where do you want to walk to?” I said I didn’t know, so he said, “Let’s go this way,” and we turned down some other road. The road was level but it felt like it was uphill and I was getting more and more tired. We kept walking and walking. I told him, “It’s not right. It’s not right. Her dying, it’s not right.” Scott didn’t say anything and we kept walking. It was a hard walk. I said, “If there’s no God, who tortured her to death?” Finally he said we could go back to the house, so we turned around and headed to the house. I said, “It’s not right, her dying. It’s not right, Scott,” and Scott didn’t say anything until he said, “I know. It’s not right.”

Another day it was Fletcher who came to take me for a walk. It must have been windy because he said,

“Let’s go this way and when we come back to the house the wind will be behind us.” You could see how the trees and houses were fake and I was about to say it was weird how people could live in them, because they were no thicker than cardboard cutouts, but I decided not to because he’d think I was crazy. We walked along and I told him it wasn’t right, Alba’s dying. Fletch gave up a long sigh and cleared his throat and said, “Yes, it was terrible.” “It wasn’t right,” I said. “God tortured her for twenty hours until she died,” I told him. Fletch hung his head and walked along looking mostly at his boots and after a while he said, “I could help you fix that chair in the living room, the one with the loose leg.” I said that was good. Yes, I wanted to do that. “I’ll bring my clamps the next time I come,” he said, straightening up. We agreed on that.

Zoe came over to take me for a walk and when we were walking I showed her the houses and the trees and the sky, showing her how it was all made-up fake. “See. It’s not real. It’s a scam.” Zoe looked older than usual and said, “Yes.” I knew that if you go to the side of a house the front disappears from view, and then it’s the side that’s only as thick as a sheet of cardboard, so everything is still fake, but I knew better than to talk about it. We walked along and everything was crazy because Zoe is the mother of my third child, Astrid, but it was Alba who brought her up, and here I was walking with Zoe, and Alba was gone and everything was wrong, like Zoe wearing high-heel shoes while we were walking

on this rural road with its crumbling tar, pebbles and sand. A gusty wind blew through with a spatter of rain-drops, making Zoe hunch her shoulders; she looked to be freezing but she kept walking beside me. Long ago, Zoe and Alba and I were young and foolish and fooling around, the three of us together one summer, and that's how Astrid got born, but nothing makes any sense now.

Zoe and Scott and Fletcher came over every so often, each alone, to take me for a walk. I marveled how they knew to take me for a walk.

I don't know what I did the first month. My daughters Skye and Astrid came, and my son Brizio, too, of course; sometimes they were all here together, sometimes only my son or one of my daughters, then they were gone and only my oldest daughter, Skye, was here. She was here for two weeks, of which I can recall nothing; then she left and Astrid came and I don't remember anything of those two weeks, either. I'm amazed they didn't go crazy, dwelling with their living-dead father. I do recall the memorial service. And I remember after the service, when all who had come were together around me, and grief had loosened their hearts and they shared this love, all of them, and as long as they talked and ate and drank and talked, just that long would Alba be here among us, but they had lives to get back to, and one by one they went and the spaces grew larger and finally they had all gone and there was only empty space. That evening Brizio returned to his home and I was by myself.



One day I carefully opened the drawers in the nightstand and scooped out the shimmering black satins, airy silks, straps and hooks and collars, crammed everything into a small white trash bag, leaving a breath of warm perfume in the air, and then I took down the shoebox from the closet shelf and poured a quiet jingling tumble of soft leather, silvery buckles, chains and rings into the trash bag. I closed the bag with two ties and carried it down to the garage where the trash barrels stood waiting. Next, I brought a larger trash bag upstairs and opened her closet and gathered all the shoes and put them carefully, two by two — and those precious gold sandals with the imprint of her slender foot — put them into the bag and closed it with two ties and shut the closet door. I couldn't touch the dresses. I carried the bag down to the garage and lowered it carefully into the barrel beside the other one. Then I went to her desk where she had idly set her purse, which no one had touched since. I gently emptied it onto the writing surface and tenderly separated out her lipsticks, the door keys and the car key, an eyebrow pencil, a mirror, crumpled paper tissues, her miniature address book, two pens, a nail file, magnifying glass, a small Florentine leather purse with change inside, a small pad of notepaper, three postage stamps, a few safety pins, and all her little private things. Afterward, there was plenty of time to sit on the foot of the bed to howl and sob.



I made a list of my friends and jotted down the date whenever I phoned them, so I wouldn't call anyone too often. Almost nobody phoned me. But Susan Salter called and suggested dinner at a restaurant, said she'd pick me up, drive us there and back. She was a friend of Alba's from Art New England (good-looking, witty, many lovers, never married and slightly crazy), she arrived wearing what she knew Alba would have worn — a white summer dress and a splash of color — but with more jingling jewelry on her arm than Alba wore in a lifetime. We weren't really friends and didn't have much to talk about, but I appreciated how she was trying to help me get through the day. Al Levine phoned and we went to lunch, though we knew each other only slightly and had never had lunch or even a coffee together. John Duffy phoned from Philadelphia. He and David had been living together almost as long as Alba and I, so he understood and we had a good talk. I went to lunch in Cambridge with George Agathos. We've enjoyed boisterous dinners with George and Io — quantum mechanics and Greek cooking — but now George was so concerned about me he looked ten years older. Zocco and his wife invited me to Sunday brunch with mutual friends, but it would have been too many people for me to deal with. I had dinner with Zoe and Emerson every so often, because after me and our children, no one missed Alba more

than Zoe. When she learned about Alba, she came to the house, frightened and white-faced, and when she hugged me it was as if she were clinging for support. Now it was just me and Zoe and Emerson at their table, which was friendly and calm. Avalon and Sebastian had me over for dinner, too. Avalon, whose story with me is too complicated to tell right now, seated me at the head of the table and made pasta puttanesca the way I had taught her. Their kitchen is always full of Sebastian's bright cut-paper art and I like being distracted that way. Nils Petersen was good to be with but he had received a grant and was off with his wife Hanna doing avant-garde computer art, or whatever they call it, in the Netherlands. Every so often, Fletcher or Scott would phone and say let's have lunch, so I saw them from time to time.

I drove to the Daily Grind café once or twice a week, the way we used to, and when I'd get out of the car it felt as if Alba was here, walking beside me the same as ever. At the café I trade a few words with Garland behind the counter, or whoever is around, then I go talk with Gordon. At the memorial service it had been painful to see him not in his white apron with its smudges of coffee dust, but in a stiff black suit and black necktie, because something terrible had happened to Alba. He still talks about politics or sports or hard times in the coffee business, and how he misses his old location in Boston. Sometimes I talk about Alba, and he listens and doesn't try to change the sub-

ject. Or I sit alone at the window, when that's what I feel like doing. Once I was sitting by the window watching it rain and I felt Alba come up behind me, as she sometimes did at home, to kiss my cheek, so I leaned back and turned my cheek toward her, not that I thought she was there, but because I wanted her to know that I felt her presence and loved her. Walking back to the car I always think about Alba and I want to have died.



Sometimes it was me who had died and Alba who was living and I'd see her walking solitary in the quiet before sunset, walking slowly along the empty sidewalk in the little college town where Skye and her family have their home, or I'd see her at the table in our kitchen where she had set out two or three yellow place mats, but only one dish, eating alone in the silent kitchen, and my heart would contract in pain.



While Alba's possessions — her dresses, her little bottles of perfume and cologne, small jars of lotion, her glasses — were charged with meaning, all the other things in the house made no sense. The pewter bowls we had arranged on the fireplace mantel, the Afghan carpets we'd bought from Morgan, every worn book in the bookcase and the Italian tiles we had set into the kitchen wall, those things had no more meaning

or connection to me than items on display in a house-ware shop.



There wasn't anything to do, so I went out to the studio. The ancient barn collapsed the day we had our first picnic out here, so we'd built a new one with big windows up high all around and a studio loft at the back that faced over the fields toward the woods. Years ago I had begun some frescos — the real thing on a mix of ground-up limestone and volcanic sand. I planned to build them into the walls and the barn would become a chapel of earthly delights — or so I had thought, if you can call it thinking. A few frescos leaned against the walls, rotting like everything else. Eventually I gave up on them and returned to canvas, lots of canvas. Now the studio floor creaked underfoot because I hadn't been up there for weeks. A big flat crate still stood by the door. I had packed three paintings for a group show in Worcester, but after Alba I didn't send it. I phoned the gallery, dropped out of the show and didn't send the crate. The sketches tacked to the walls had died, and the stretchers leaning here and there, the table, the jars and brushes — everything was dead. Photographs of Alba stayed on the shelf by the table, but they weren't true anymore. I opened a window and sat for a while, but there was nothing to do, so I closed the window and left.



I had kept hoping to die but it hadn't happened and after a while I gave up trying and pretended to live, just doing the things that living people do. I got up and shaved and showered and got dressed in fresh clothes. I shopped for food every day, mostly just to leave the empty house. Nadeau's grocery was nearer, but Big Valley Farms was larger and extra-bright inside and there were lots of people to be around. When I got out of the car in the big parking lot I'd haul myself up straight to show I was Alba's husband and proud of it. It was hard to do. I kept my back straight and my face up, because she had loved me of all this whole world. Still, I would rather have been dead.



I didn't know what to do with being alive. I remembered the young woman at the Barista Coffee stand whose husband had died and I thought she could tell me what to do. She was preparing coffee for me and Alba when I noticed the snake coiling down her bare white arm to her wrist, nicely tattooed in ashen blue color. The snake had Japanese kanji on it. I told her I admired the artwork, a polite lie, and asked what the Japanese writing said. "Cancer shits," she said, pressing the plastic lids onto our coffees. "It says cancer shits."

"Oh," Alba said. "I'm so sorry!"

The young woman had already turned aside and was