

Excerpt from
YOU HAD IT COMING
by
BARBARA FRANDINO

È quello che ti meriti, published by Einaudi, 2020.
Inquiries regarding rights may be addressed to
Valeria Zito, valeria.zito@einaudi.it

English translation © 2020 by Anne Milano Appel

Here I am, as if nothing had happened, sitting with my back to the window because I like having my body block the light so that it slants in edgewise over my breakfast.

I'm eating a croissant and waiting for the cappuccino, which I asked for piping hot, to cool a little.

I leaf through the newspaper, lingering over the photos. In the margin of the first page I jot down a to-do list: a business appointment, buy cookies, meet my mother, and other banalities. The satisfaction of crossing off the things I've accomplished at the end of the day makes me feel like I haven't wasted my time. When I complete the list I tear out the page, fold it up and put it in my pocket.

The phone is on the table, I'm keeping an eye on it, turning it on and turning it off. The bar is noisy and I may have missed a call or a message; I check the volume level. I signal the waiter and order another coffee.

The chair, however, is uncomfortable. My back hurts, my shoulders are stiff. I try to shift my position, but I can't find the right spot. A sudden impatience prevents me from remaining seated. Rifling through the inner pocket of my handbag, I gather up the coins I find and, without looking at them, leave them on the table. I leap up and head for the door, pushing it open forcefully, and causing the spring to creak as it strains on the hinge. I go out and let the door slam behind me with a deafening bang.

Then I start running.

1.

I falter along the first few yards like a drunk. There's a time lapse between my head telling me to run and my legs obeying the command. I run through the market, elbowing my way along without saying excuse me. I turn right, onto a tree-lined boulevard, and run as fast as I can. Each step is followed by a moment of confusion, as if the internal organs each had to find their place again. As I turn left, running blindly, a car jams on the brakes: the driver yells at me, calling me an idiot. I feel like shouting, Fuck you. You're a hundred yards away, fuck you. But I have no time or breath to waste.

Come back later, mutters a man in uniform inside a glass booth. But the blood is throbbing in my ears so loudly that I can't hear him and I ask him to repeat it.

It's not visiting time, he says.

Then I tell him who I am. My shirt is glued to my skin, I'm sweating so hard, and my arms have pins and needles as if I'd slept on them. My palm left a handprint on the glass.

The uniformed man comes out of the porter's booth and tells me the way: I have to follow the arrows for intensive care, take a corridor, go up and down stairs, go through the courtyard, come to another wing.

I'll get lost for sure, I tell him.

Instead I make it to the ward without getting lost. A nurse helps me put on a green gown, a cap and booties. She shows me into a large room with lowered shutters and dim neon light: I count four beds separated by movable partitions, but only two are occupied.

He's in here. I'll go call the doctor now, she tells me.

Antonio is lying on top of the sheet. His closed eyes are ringed with dark circles. The skin on his face is also bruised, but maybe it's just the effect of the neon light. He's wearing a white hospital gown with a small blue pattern that leaves his practically hairless legs uncovered. He has a tube, connected to a respirator, coming out of one corner of his mouth, and a tangle of tubing and wiring for monitoring. There's a chair, placed next to the bed. I would like to cry but it's as though my body is drained: I have no tears or saliva, I can't even swallow.

2.

This silence broken only by respirators and monitoring devices doesn't bother me. If he were conscious, however, it would drive him crazy.

Silence is so precise. There are days I let go by without hardly opening my mouth.

Thoughts generally accumulate in my head and pass through my lips only after making sure that the words won't create a disturbance.

There was an accident. The ladder was propped against a tree, my husband was on the top rung. At a certain point I see him sway unsteadily as he gropes for a handhold among the branches, and the branches break. His spine bends backwards, an arm circles in the air. He looks ungainly, his mouth wide open in a scream that makes no sound. I observe the dry skin and the web of blue veins on his calves and for the first time I notice that he has the legs of an old man. His movements seem like the bungling exertions of an old man.

The ladder wasn't high, he might have come out of it with a few scratches or a broken arm. Instead, Antonio remains on the ground and doesn't regain consciousness.

The medical responders secured him to the stretcher, loaded him into the ambulance and asked me to get in. I did not get in.

I went back inside, took off my sweater and started straightening up. It's incredible the mess that man manages to make in the few hours he spends at home. Shoes, clothes, coffee cups, newspapers tossed all over the place. Every available space is filled by his presence.

I tidied everything up, ran the vacuum cleaner, changed the sheets and went to the café.

I hear the sound of footsteps: the squeak of rubber soles on the linoleum floor. Someone puts a hand on my shoulder and gently squeezes my hand. The doctor asks me to follow him to his office.

Mrs. Pichler, sit down, he says.

Thank you, I'm fine.

Please, he insists. Sit down.

He tells me that my husband had a heart attack, and that they performed angioplasty surgery on him.

The desk starts to vibrate. His phone is ringing, but the doctor doesn't take the call.

He explains that they inserted a tiny balloon and reopened the artery that had become blocked, that the stenosis was advanced, that some of the cells had already necrotized. But these are words I don't understand: I don't know what he's talking about. I interrupt him and ask him if he's going to come through.

The operation was successful, but a piece of his heart will no longer function.

The phone rings again. The doctor hesitates, then apologizes and decides to answer. He stands up from his desk and paces around looking at the tip of his shoes, stroking his beard with his free hand.

On the phone he says: All right sweetheart, you'll tell me about it later.

I don't remember his name. I forget people's names a moment after they've introduced themselves and now I don't know the name of the man who saved Antonio.

He ends the call and sits down again.

Forgive me, it was my son. He's home alone. I wasn't scheduled to be on duty this afternoon.

I'm sorry.

It's my job, you shouldn't be sorry.

I look out the window at the milky sky. The room is bare and spotless, except for the paper sheet on the cot, which has already been used.

The doctor is sitting on the edge of his chair, his hands crossed on the empty desk. I think about my desk, cluttered with books, flyers, old newspapers. I relax, leaning against the chair back. I wait for him to mention Antonio's celebrity, the successful television show he's been hosting for three years, as everyone usually does. Instead he asks me if I can explain what happened.

He had a heart attack, I say, you yourself told me so. I was in the house, I was working, I explain.

So you didn't immediately notice that your husband had fallen.

I heard the sound of the branches breaking and then the thud of his body on the ground. I ran outside.

Was he conscious?

No.

He never regained consciousness?

No.

Mrs. Pichler, there was a problem.

What problem?

The medics arrived late.

I'd like to tell him it's not true, that wasn't what happened, there was no delay. But I'm too tired. I remain silent: let him think what he likes. Then I ask him again:

Are you sure he's going to come through?

He unknots his fingers and leans forward.

I'm sure, he says.

When I leave that room, I try to call Antonio's secretary, but there's no answer. So I send her a text. I write: Maria, there's been an accident. Antonio is in the hospital. I'll keep you informed.

Then I turn off my phone.

3.

Her name is Anna and she works at a newspaper. I met her at a party, in Milan, about a year ago: before Antonio decided that parties bored him to death and we stopped going to them.

She was drinking wine, sitting on a purple couch. She wore bracelets that jangled every time she moved her hand, and a short, gauzy skirt, which opened at the front and left her lean legs bare.

The house was cramped and jam-packed with people. A wallpaper with black pelicans covered the walls, and everywhere you looked there were books and bottles and glasses; we didn't know where to put the huge bouquet of flowers we brought as a gift.

The hostess greeted us hurriedly then ran into the kitchen to give instructions for dinner. The windows were open but there wasn't much air. From time to time, someone would shout out at the sound of the bell, offering to go and get the door.

Anna and Antonio already knew each other. I have a precise recollection of that evening: he greets her from a distance, with a wave of his hand, she looks away. I study her and think she must be about my age, but that she carries her years differently. With insolence, I'd say.

She has long hair, with amber reflections under the light, and disciplined waves that spill over her breast. The man sitting next to her touches her hair lightly and whispers something to her, sinking his face into her neck; she bursts out laughing, too loudly, throwing her head back. Her laughter has the sound of a sudden burst of water.

Soon afterwards, Antonio suggests that we leave. What do you say we get out of here? he proposes, coming up behind me. But a colleague grips his arm and drags him across the room, while I find myself arguing with a skinny, black-clad screenwriter, who asks my opinion on the cocktail we're drinking, a zen vodka: it's the highlight of the evening, but to the pale screenwriter it feels like sucking a fizzy ginger candy. He prefers the vermouth version. I shrug: as far as I'm concerned, it makes no difference. Then he wants to know something about me. What work do you do, he asks me. And I tell him that I'd rather not talk about it, because I write books that other people sign, and in the publishing contracts I enter into the clause that provides for my invisibility is much longer than the one that establishes my rights.

I look around for my husband. His back is to me, I see him talking and mussing up his hair with one hand: since his hair has started thinning, it hangs flat, smoothed over his forehead, and gives him a clean-cut look. He doesn't want to look *clean-cut*: he's someone who wears thousand-dollar suits and then refuses to polish his shoes. That's what his audience likes: insouciant sophistication. You have to pay attention to a myriad of details, when you live constantly on stage.

He's drinking something transparent, maybe a gin and tonic. I recognize the people who are with him: a writer, a comedian, a literary agent, and finally Anna.

They're all hanging on Antonio's every word. I bet they want to hear something sensational. Who will win the elections or where the terrorists will strike: they question him as if he were an oracle. They want a juicy news tidbit that they can recycle in some other living room.

I approach, as Antonio takes Anna's glass to pour her some wine. She touches his back: her hand lingers lightly between my husband's shoulder blades then trails slowly down to the last vertebrae. But he doesn't seem disturbed or even surprised. As if the warmth of that caress were something familiar.

Anna takes the full glass then suddenly turns around and sees me. Her hand slides off my husband's back and she lowers her eyes to the contents of the glass.

I join the group and force myself to smile.

I didn't yet know who that woman was, but I knew I had to be wary of her.

At two am, when the booze had run out and we found ourselves drinking coke in plastic cups, someone said it was late, time to go.

At the door we exchanged kisses, brushing cheeks. I could hear Anna's footsteps moving away on the pavement, on heels that needed to be resoled: elegant women don't make so much noise when they walk.

I never saw Anna again after the party. But I learned that she had gotten pregnant and that, a week ago, her baby was born. Antonio told me.

Antonio is the father of that child.