

The First Two Pages: “Italian Alzheimer’s” by Kevin Egan

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An Essay by Kevin Egan

The idea for “Italian Alzheimer’s” came from a short, cryptic entry in my writing journal dated August 14, 1997. The subjects were two women, each long deceased, who were connected by a tragedy deep in the past. My journal entry, sketchy as it was, involved a love triangle, a pregnancy, a taxi driver, and a murder. In other words, the raw materials of a story.

“Italian Alzheimer’s”¹ opens with Antonella Arcuri, a live-in nanny, heading to a new assignment and reflecting on how she has managed to adapt her solidly analog habits to the changing demands of a digital world. Some of the changes are obvious, like the absence of printed resumes or hard-copy letters of recommendation from former clients. Another change, specifically the scarcity of the yellow taxis she so fondly remembers, is meant as foreshadowing.

Antonella never felt entirely comfortable with the black cars that appeared after a few taps on her phone. For her, taxis always

¹ The title is the punchline of an old joke. People afflicted with Italian Alzheimer’s forget everything but their grudges.

would be yellow, hailed by a raised arm, and equipped with dashboard meters that displayed the fare in angular red numbers. But life, especially a long life, required adaptation, and she gradually warmed to the idea that the world worked mysteriously nowadays. Even the agency operated invisibly: no more printed resumes, no more neatly signed recommendation letters, rarely even a phone call. She would receive an e-mail, mouse-click some check boxes, and then head off to her next family.

Antonella caters to a specialized clientele, working only for the families of professional athletes. The conversation with her driver shows her pride in this late-life career and her confidence in her abilities.

“Dick Martindale was my first,” she said, leaning forward so the narrow gap between the two front seats would amplify her raspy whisper. “Ever hear of him?”

The driver caught her eye in the rearview mirror and shook his head.

“He was a big name on the PGA Tour in the eighties,” said Antonella. “I took care of his children. Since then, it’s been one pro athlete’s family after another.”

“So you are a nanny?” said the driver.

“Nanny, babysitter, au pair. The names change, but the job doesn’t.”

This confidence, however, is undermined by a series of observations when she arrives at her assignment.

The driver bumped the car onto a cobblestone driveway lined with birch saplings whose waxy leaves trembled in the early morning breeze. The driveway circled a putting green, passed beneath the porte cochere of a Gothic-styled mansion, then spread into a wide apron in front of a five-car garage. On the green, a man wearing a warm-up suit dropped three golf balls onto the green. He was a tall man with an erect posture, but when he bent over to stroke a putt his shoulders slumped in a way that resurrected a vague memory from deep in

Antonella's mind. Her breath caught in her throat until the man straightened up, the memory vanished, and she slowly exhaled.

At first these observations were intended to portray the extravagance associated with the high-end lifestyle of a professional athlete. Thus, the Gothic mansion with a porte cochere, the five-car garage, and the putting green. But as the story took shape, I tweaked the details in this paragraph to imply the existence of something roiling beneath Antonella's placid, confident demeanor. Therefore: the leaves on the birch saplings *tremble*; the posture of the man on the putting green *resurrects a vague memory*; Antonella's *breath catches* in her throat and only resumes when the *memory vanishes*.

More observations follow, filtered through Antonella's sharp eye. She has worked for many families in all manner of homes. and she quickly sizes up this one, which is owned by Butch Versalli, the manager of a major league baseball team.

The car stopped beneath the porte cochere, where a young woman in a business suit paced with a clipboard under her arm. She introduced herself as Kelly, told the driver where to drop Antonella's luggage, then led Antonella into an octagonal foyer with a marble floor, marble pillars, and eight marble cherubs staring down from the ceiling. Arched doorways opened into a sitting room, a salon, and an atrium. In the sitting room, an obviously bored young woman reclined on a sofa, one hand twirling her long hair, the other swiping at her phone. In the salon, a sinewy young woman planked on an orange mat while the voice of a Pilates instructor whispered from a thin as paper television screen. The atrium was empty except for potted plants.

The presence of two twenty-something young women surprises Antonella. Her usual charges are infants or toddlers. She also realizes, when she engages with Kelly, that the agency has told her little about this new assignment.

Kelly opened a door into a small office and invited Antonella to sit at the desk.

“I’m Butch’s personal assistant,” she said. “What did the agency tell you about his situation?”

“Just that he’s the new manager of the Washington baseball team,” said Antonella.

“Nothing else?”

Antonella shook her head. The agency usually furnished her with a complete snapshot of her new family—children's names, ages, schools, sometimes even habits and hobbies. The lack of information for this assignment was unusual, and Antonella only learned about Butch's two grown daughters from a *Sports Illustrated* article she happened to skim that morning.

Kelly assures Antonella that she has not been hired as a nanny for Butch’s children, but as a live-in companion for Butch’s mother, Donna, who is suffering from early-stage Alzheimer's. Antonella is unpleasantly surprised by this curveball and disturbed by the implication that the agency has decided she is no longer capable of handling toddlers. Despite these misgivings, Antonella sticks with the assignment. She is initially pleased to discover that she and Donna have much in common. They are about the same age, they enjoy the same food, and their families each emigrated from the same region of Italy. But as the baseball season progresses, Donna’s Alzheimer's descends into a series of midnight ravings. At first, Antonella treats these ravings merely as an occupational problem that needs

to be solved. But then Donna's words unearth an incident—and a connection—Antonella can no longer keep buried in her subconscious.

As I worked through a number of drafts, I realized that I was treading a narrow narrative path suggested by my sketchy raw material: how to imply, yet still withhold, the existence of a terrible memory until late in the story. The opening pages were critical to striking a precarious balance between Antonella's present life and a past incident she has refused to acknowledge. I believe the first two pages strike that balance, and I was thrilled when Linda Landrigan accepted the story for *AHMM*.

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