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*Uccellacci*

The people all look the same today from where I sit high above the street: big coats, heavy boots, and hands firmly kept in pockets despite this winter's unusual warmth. I don't typically mind the cold, but the people seem to. February has proven to be a bit of a challenge for me; The colder it gets, the fewer people are outside on the street, in the piazzas, and in lines outside of sandwich shops. My only real opportunity is the noon lunch rush when the streets are filled with tourists, locals, and everyone in between.

Here, on the street by the river and the big piazza, there is a sandwich shop that is always busy. People with staccato languages and those with melodic languages speak to each other in front of the shop, presumably about the sandwiches because, how could they not? They never take them too far. Most just sit somewhere on the street to eat their big sandwiches, congregating for the first tastes of their long-awaited treats. Then, it's only a matter of time until they find their big sandwiches to be entirely too big and drop us a bite. Some do it to keep us at bay out of some misguided notion that we would take their sandwiches straight out of their hands if they let us, and others do it to see us scramble for the crumbs they drop us.

There are some *piccioni* that are unwilling to play this waiting game and go into the shop themselves. Not just the front where the people order their sandwiches and watch them be made, but all the way into the back behind the counter and the sandwich makers. Those who have gone to the back speak of an unheard-of bounty. Bread stacked so high it holds up the ceiling and fruits and vegetables left in the open crates they're delivered in, perfect for a little taste of freshness. I have never gone back there, few have, though in truth I haven't even tried going into the shop.

The sound of metallic scraping rumbles through the air as the first of the sandwich shops opens for the day, eliciting a brief shriek of excitement from the already-forming crowd. Soon the street will be full of people, half carrying sandwiches, and the other half trying to get around those carrying sandwiches. And then there will be us *piccioni* in the middle of it all. I land on the ground outside the shop as inconspicuously as I can. The first to notice me is, of course, a small child. She smiles, pulls on her father's coat, and then points at me. The father then, of course, takes a big, heavy step in my direction and waves his arms as if in the middle of some performance. I don't startle. I've grown accustomed to this. The small child tugs on her father's coat again saying "Picciona, picciona!" but the father steps forward and waves his arms again. This time I do step back, not because I'm scared of him, but simply to put an end to this charade. He doesn't even have his sandwich yet; what could he possibly think I would want from him?

Tall people with big white shoes and too-light jackets come stumbling out of the shop with their sandwiches wrapped up halfway in the "I'll be eating this soon" style. I follow them over to the bench where they sit and speak their thick, aimless language. "One Panini", "the Duwomo", "Gelado". I watch from down the street as they pull the wrapper back and eat, hoping that eventually there would be a piece for me. No one ever wants to share the first bite; The last, however, is much easier to give up. Just then I see that one of the other *piccioni* jumps the gun and lands too close to the people. The tallest of them spots him and, not having had his fill yet, waves his non-sandwich-holding arm toward the bird. The smallest of them follows suit and waves her little arms towards the *piccione*, and then towards me. My window of opportunity is now firmly shut, so I let them be. The lunch rush is too fruitful to waste time on people who have already made up their minds about me.

On my second try, a shorter woman with a black coat and clicky shoes eats every bite without so much as a glance in my direction. The third and fourth are much the same: complete indifference towards the *piccioni* who gather in hopes of a boon. We have a way of doing that, knowing when we have an abundance and gathering to share in it. Like how we seemingly come from nowhere and everywhere, all at once, to share in the bread the children and tired old men toss us in the evenings. This is less of a scramble for scraps and more of an offering, a bid at togetherness. Sometimes I can't help but think that these people are flightless, featherless *piccioni*.

Now, my patience wears thin as every bench and curb on this street and the next are occupied by happy people crunching away at their sandwiches. Waiting for lunch rush scraps pales in comparison to the feast I could be having. With more and more people crowding the front of the shop, I could slip by unnoticed. Few have tried, and far fewer have succeeded. Creeping toward the crowd where I am faced with a pack of restless feet, I plot my path to the shimmering pool of white light pouring out of the narrow entrance to the back, to the feast, just behind the counter. It's guarded by sandwich makers and customers alike, and the only way to get there is to do it without being seen.

The noon bells toll in the distance like an omen distracting the crowd long enough for me to make myself as small as possible and creep forward out of the protective shadow of the forest of legs. But, out in the open, I am spotted. Big white shoes and clicky-clacky boots lift and fall as a sandwich maker moves to sweep me out of the shop. "Uccellaccio! Uccellaccio!" he says as he pushes me away like yesterday's trash. I hit the rough pavement outside to a chorus of oohs and ahhs, some chuckles, and a few solemn frowns from the people still in line. What a scene this must be to them, a silly little bird up to the no-good antic of looking for something to eat.

But I've made up my mind: I want that feast, even if it means being seen. I will fly over the crowd, the counter, and the sandwich makers into the back. There is nowhere to hide in the air. Everyone, people and *piccioni* alike, will see my triumph or my failure. The sandwich makers fall back into their rhythm and the crowd marches forward forgetting the *uccellaccio* from a few moments ago. There is no waiting now. I take a breath and soar over the hum of the well-oiled machine that is the sandwich shop. The crowd looks up at me, half amazed and half startled, but no one motions towards me or the door to the back. As I draw nearer, I strain against the bright white fluorescence of what used to be a soft pool of light, until I make it over the counter and cross the threshold.

This is it: the bounty, the feast, and it's better than how the *piccioni* had described it. Instead of pillars of bread, it's half-slices and chunks too small to be used but just right for an avian appetite. And instead of whole fruits and vegetables, they're chopped and sliced and left in open containers like a sampling platter. I start with the bread, pecking at it until I get bored and then move on to bits of lettuce relishing in the freshness of it. I try the spicy red pepper and the potato sauce because no one ever drops this part of the sandwich. I have a taste of everything I can get my beak into as fast as I can until I've gotten my fill. I return to the bread in search of a relic. I find the perfect piece and carry it through the door and over the counter where suddenly, I am confronted by a broom swinging through the air. I drop my bread and watch it disappear into the forest of legs. I want to chase after my hard-earned reward, but I know better than to overstay my welcome. I fly back over the crowd and out of the shop, back to my watch-post high above the street. I tell the other *piccioni* about my journey to the back and the feast that awaits them if they would just try it for themselves. But they don't believe me, seeing as I have nothing to show for it.