

The secretary of the “Signora”

an unpublished tribute to my own Oriana Fallaci

by Elena Attala-Perazzini

1.

The day could be interpreted as auspicious. At the tail end of a hot summer, the early autumn air held shy and fuzzy clouds in a crystalline sky, appearing purple instead of blue from behind dark glasses.

I was getting out of the limousine, when Agnés grabbed my arm and pulled me back in. She's changed her mind, I thought. I don't have a good resume for this job anyway; I shouldn't have fooled myself.

"Wait!" she said.

Without a choice, I got back in the car. Agnés had been silent during the entire ride as if she regretted having chosen me.

"Remember," she began "you have the right personality for her."

I stared at her, while she kept squeezing my arm. The driver turned to look at us. The door was open.

"Listen!" she whispered, her eyes piercing mine. "You can do it, understand?" Even a mother escorting her daughter to her first day of school would not have shown that much care. We had met only two days earlier.

I felt like crying or running away. Instead I stood still staring at the townhouses on the street. They were perfect, spotless. They looked as if they had just been built. I tried to convince myself with equal vehemence, that what Agnés had just said to me was true.

During the night I hadn't been able to close my eyes. The notes of Beethoven's *Eroica* were clawing at my mind. Who knows why it was that symphony, majestic and solemn? I tried to overpower it by singing a Bertè reggae song, but the symphony kept returning. As soon as I got rid of it, it would come back again evoking images of disgrace or of joy. I was nervous and excited. The writer I was going to meet was one of my idols.

I went up the stairs but before ringing the bell I looked around again. The Upper East Side of Manhattan, small, tree-lined streets, no traffic, bonsai gardens sprouting tulips and violets, it seemed I had ended up in another country. After leaving my place I had entered a tunnel, taken a subway train, and within ten minutes it was as if I had crossed a border, popping up on the other side of the world or at least in a city that was not my New York.

In just a few short months The Village streets had already become mine. Crowded with too-big-blue-jeans students, with stores built and disassembled daily, with alleys where knick-knacks, old vinyl discs, and used books were sold, those streets were studded with graffiti, with women imploring you to adopt a cat, to aid the homeless, to protect baby seals. Closer to the university area possessed guys would denigrate your damaged hair, determined to convince you to switch to a new shampoo. If you didn't want that, you could always sign a petition against abortion.

The quietness where the Signora was living was not the New York I knew. Even with its midtown skyscrapers, its impeccable Wall Street offices, its luxurious Fifth Avenue stores, the city was disorder, untidiness, noise. It was a stage of impeccable inaccuracy, of dirt. It was the only place in America where someone from California or England could be insulted for their origins or for respecting street signals. Those Upper East Side blocks had nothing to do with the soul of the city that I had been breathing, swallowing, and digesting during the previous few months.

I was almost at the end of the stairs. I looked at the street one last time: antiseptic, muffled, too silent to suspect that within minutes a detonator could explode. My tension was rising, paralyzing me.

“What are you doing? You don't ring?”

Agnés got out of the car and climbed the stairs. She rang the bell. Madam opened the door, greeted Agnés but didn't greet me. In the entrance, a scared-looking girl was squeezing her purse. She said hello to Agnés as Signora disappeared behind a door. A few moments later a

shabby-looking man entered. Then two more people arrived, young, elegant, and insignificant.

Agnés had gathered us all there. When Signora looked for an assistant, she explained, she wanted to see at least four people. That afternoon we were five. She wished everybody good luck and slipped out. I was the last one she had chosen.