

# **The Signora**

A personal tribute to Oriana Fallaci

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1.

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The day was off to an auspicious start. The early autumn air, coming at the end of a hot summer, showed puffs of fuzzy clouds and a crystalline sky that appeared purple from behind the dark windows.

I was about to get out of the limousine when Agnés grabbed my arm and pulled me back in. She's changed her mind, I thought. I'm not qualified for this job. I shouldn't have kidded myself.

"Wait," she said.

I had no choice but to get back in the car. Agnés had been silent during the entire ride, as if she suddenly had regretted choosing me.

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

I peered at her, while she continued squeezing my arm. The driver turned to us, the door stood open.

"Listen," she whispered staring into my eyes, "you can do it, understand?"

We had met just two days earlier, but not even a mother escorting her daughter to her first day of school would have taken so much care. I felt ready to either cry or run away. Instead, I stood still, staring at the townhouses on that street – clean and perfect, they looked like new. I tried to convince myself that what Agnés had just said was true, with her same conviction.

The night before, I hadn't slept a wink. In my mind, the notes of Beethoven's *The Heroic* had been pulsing. I don't know why it was that symphony in particular, so majestic and solemn. The more I tried to put it out of my mind, the more it came back, evoking alternating images of disgrace and joy. I tried to overpower it by singing a reggae Bertè song, but the symphony always returned. I

was nervous and excited. The writer I was about to meet was an idol not only to me but to generations of Italians, as well as to women all around the world, journalists and authors who had been worshiping Her for decades.

I climbed the stairs, but before ringing the bell, I took another look around. I was in the Upper East Side of Manhattan. There were small tree-lined streets with no traffic and bonsai gardens where tulips and violets were sprouting. It was as if I had arrived in another country. I had left my downtown apartment and entered a tunnel to take a train they called the ‘subway’, and within ten minutes it was as if I had passed over 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 East Village streets were already mine. They were crowded with students in baggy jeans; pop-up shops that were built and disassembled each day; and alleyways where knick-knacks, old vinyl records and used books were peddled. Those streets were studded with graffiti, by women imploring you to adopt a cat, to aid the homeless or help protect monk seals. Closer to NYU, you could find grown men who ranted about your ‘damaged’ hair just to convince you to switch to a new shampoo. If that wasn’t your cup of tea, you could always sign a petition against abortion.

Here, the tranquility where the *Signora*, as Agnes told me to call her, was living was not the New York I knew. Even among the midtown skyscrapers, the impeccable Wall Street offices, the luxurious Fifth Avenue stores, there was disorder, untidiness, noise. It was a stage of perfect chaos, of *schmutz*. New York is the only place in America where if you are from out of town, there’ll always be someone ready to insult you or drag you across the street if you stop to wait for the walk signal. However, these Upper East Side blocks had nothing to do with the soul of the city that over the past few months I had been soaking up, absorbing and digesting.

I stood at the top of the stairs. I looked at the sterile, muffled street one last time - so silent that you almost suspected that a bomb would detonate any minute. My apprehension was rising, paralyzing me.

“What are you doing? Why don’t you ring the bell?”

Agnés got out of the car and joined me. She rang the bell.

*Signora* opened the door, greeted Agnés, but didn’t greet me. In the entrance, a scared looking girl was clutching her purse. She also said hello to Agnés, while *Signora* disappeared behind another door. After a few minutes, a shabby looking man entered, then two more young, elegant and insignificant people arrived.

Agnés was responsible for all of us being 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 quickly excused herself.

I was the last one to enter.