

SARAH  
WINMAN



STILL  
LIFE

# STILL LIFE

Sarah Winman

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## Dedication

For Mum  
For Patsy  
For Stella Rudolph (1942-2020)

## Epigraph

‘Two people pulling each other into Salvation is the only theme I find worthwhile.’

E. M. Forster, *Commonplace Book*

‘One of the primary objects of the enlightened traveller in Italy is usually to form some acquaintance with its treasures of art. Even those whose usual avocations are of the most prosaic nature unconsciously become admirers of poetry and art in Italy. The traveller here finds them so interwoven with scenes of everyday life, that he encounters their influence at every step, and involuntarily becomes susceptible to their power.’

Karl Baedeker, *ITALY: Handbook for Travellers*, 1899

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Man as the Measure of All Things

1944

Somewhere in the Tuscan hills, two English spinsters, Evelyn Skinner and a Margaret someone, were eating a late lunch on the terrace of a modest *albergo*. It was the second of August. A beautiful summer's day, if only you could forget there was a war on. One sat in shade, the other in light, due to the angle of the sun and the vine-strewn trellis overhead. They were served a reduced menu but celebrated the Allied advance with large glasses of Chianti. Overhead, a low-flying bomber cast them momentarily in shadow. They picked up their binoculars and studied the markings. Ours, they said, and waved.

This rabbit's delicious, said Evelyn and she caught the eye of the proprietor, who was smoking by the doorway. She said, *Coniglio buonissimo, signore!*

The signore put his cigarette in his mouth and raised his arm – part salute, part wave, one couldn't be sure.

Do you think he's a Fascist? said Margaret quietly.

No, I don't think so, said Evelyn. Although Italians are quite indecisive politically. Always have been.

I heard they're shooting them now, the Fascists.

Everyone's shooting everyone, said Evelyn.

A shell screamed to their right and exploded on a distant hill, uprooting a cluster of small cypress trees.

One of theirs, said Margaret and she held on to the table to protect her camera and wine glass from the shock waves.

I heard they found the Botticelli, said Evelyn.

Which one? said Margaret.

*Primavera*.

Oh, thank God, said Margaret.

And Giotto's *Madonna* from the Uffizi. Rubens' *Nymphs and Satyrs* and one more – Evelyn thought hard – Ah, yes, she said. *Supper at Emmaus*.

The Pontormo! Any news about his *Deposition*?

No, not yet, said Evelyn, pulling a small bone from her mouth.

In the distance, the sky suddenly flared with artillery fire. Evelyn looked up and said, I never thought I'd see this again at my age.

Aren't we the same age?

No. Older.

You are?

Yes. Eight years. Approaching sixty-four.

Are you *really*?

Yes, she said and poured out more wine. I pity the swallows, though, she added.

They're swifts, said Margaret.

Are you sure?

Yes, said Margaret. The squealers are swifts, and she sat back and made an awful sound which was nothing like a swift.

*Swift*, said Margaret, emphasising her point. The swallow is, of course, the Florentine bird, she said. It's a Passeriform, a perching bird, but the swift is not. Because of its legs. Weak feet, long wingspan. It belongs to the order of Apodiformes. Apodiformes meaning 'footless' in Greek. The house martin, however, *is* a Passeriform.

Dear God, thought Evelyn. Will this not end?

Swallows, continued Margaret, have a forked tail and a red head. And about an eight-year life expectancy.

That's depressing. Not even double digits. Do you think swallow years are like dog years? said Evelyn.

No, I don't think so. Never heard as much. Swifts are dark brown but appear blackish in flight. There they are again! screamed Margaret. Over there!

Where?

There! You have to keep up, they're very nippy. They do everything on the wing!

Suddenly, out from the clouds, two falcons swooped in and ripped the swift violently in half.

Margaret gasped.

*Did* everything on the wing, said Evelyn as she watched the falcons disappear behind the trees. This is a lovely drop of *classico*, she said. Have I said that already?

You have actually, said Margaret tersely.

Oh. Well I'm saying it again. A year of occupation has *not* diminished the quality, and she caught the proprietor's eye and pointed to her glass. *Buonissimo, signore!*