

**Carla Maria Russo**

**Waiting for Lola**



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Carla Maria Russo

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*Against a background of the toughest years of the Second World War in a grey and desolate Milan, despite the bombings, the massacres, the dead bodies left to rot in the streets, a miraculous and tenacious love affair is born, destined to bring its two young protagonists, Mara Bonfanti, beautiful, elegant and well-born, and Mario Canevari, a steel worker, moments of incredible joy and moments of excruciating sadness.*

*Their daughter is abandoned to her fate the minute she is born and Mara's mother, not to mention social convention, will force her to marry General Pepe, a much older man and a high-ranking official in the Ettore Muti Fascist Brigade.*

*When General Pepe is found dead at home one morning, Mara confesses to being guilty of his murder and is condemned to a life sentence in prison.*

*Eighteen years later, an anonymous letter causes a forgotten past to resurface, throwing a new and totally unexpected light on those long-ago events.*

*A heart-warming and thrilling novel that minutely and accurately reconstructs a city, an era and the psychological make-up of its characters, all of differing social extraction yet all of the same tragic stature.*

*A novel in which everybody pays the price of the historic time in which their lives have been destined to play out and the self-centredness that every war generates, making victims and executioners of its protagonists.*

*Carla Maria Russo was born in Campobasso, in the Molise region, but moved to Milan, her adopted city, when she was thirteen. She holds a degree in Literature and has taught Italian Literature at secondary school level. She has devoted herself to writing for the last few years. She published *La Sposa Normanna with Piemme* (2005) to huge public acclaim, which won the literary *Città di Cuneo Prize for a First Novel* and the *Feudo di Maida Prize*, followed by *Il Cavaliere del Giglio* (2007) and *L'Amante del Doge* (2008). *Waiting for Lola* won the literary *Fenice-Europa Prize*.*

*Her books have been translated into several European languages.*

For my father

I've been laid out in a sumptuous dark mahogany coffin, with shiny brass rings on all four sides.

There is a profusion of wreaths, floral tributes filling the air with the sickly, rotten stench of funerals. Even il Duce himself has sent one from his stronghold at Salò: gerbera and roses.

I'm in dress uniform, with my stripes and medals, showing that I have risen to the ranks of General with the rewards to prove it.

I'm bare-headed, my hair carefully combed, each strand plastered to the next with a slick of brilliantine. My cap has been placed at my feet.

Although it doesn't show, my uniform shirt has been buttoned up in such a way as to cover my neck completely and fastened with a hidden safety pin at the back, giving the impression that my head is directly attached to the rest of my body, making my mortal remains look chunky and squat.

There is a very good reason for all this, as there is for the layer of wax they've slapped over my face and the equally thick black veil laid right over the coffin, fluttering in soft folds to the ground: not a delicate move by the grieving widow to save her loved-one's remains from being polluted by hovering mourners paying their final homage, however.

Nor is it a sign of respect for my body, which has already begun to decompose, lest the public should catch a glimpse and allow it to tarnish the image of power and virility I projected in life.

This whole *mise en scène* has been designed to cover the few bruises left by my clumsy assassin in the haste of the moment, which might muddy the waters as to how I had actually died: murder, not – as my wife is at pains to explain – a sudden heart attack.

She must have accomplices in high places to be able to bury me quite so quickly, literally drawing a veil over suspicions of any kind.

Or, better still, she's managed to get my indefatigable mother-in-law, the queen of string-pulling and scheming to help.

The minute I married her daughter, she stripped me of all the authority it had taken me thirty years of honorable service to earn, using what had once been my power and my exclusive privilege against me, and employing it for her own devious ends.

The peak, the apex of her career as a mistress of deception.

I can see her now – haughty, disparaging and devious, capable of greasing any wheel and flattening any resistance with her incomparable powers of rhetoric, her scattered blandishments, feigned amazement and veiled threats – as she does the rounds of the people who matter: the Commissioner of Police, the Podestà and especially Francesco Colombo, the

head of the Ettore Muti Fascist Brigade. He was my immediate underling until a couple of days ago - call him *my underling* at your peril, mind you; he passed himself off as the supreme head of the Muti, whereas I, General Gianluigi Pepe, chief of the Political Office of the National Republican Guard, built my career on my own merits, while he languished in jail for grubby trafficking and regarded me as his subaltern. God knows who will round up the Jews and Communists for him and his pals to torture now.

Subject my son-in-law, the much-decorated General Pepe, to an autopsy? You can't be serious? It would be an insult to the entire family. I will not allow it... Yes, of course I realise that justice has its own laws, that the pathologist has his own duties, but really, where people like us are concerned, the regulations can always be tweaked and a petulant doctor put in his place. Tell me this, Colombo, are you or are you not in charge here? Would you honestly allow the body of your superior... yes, *your superior*, Francesco! Don't raise your eyebrow at me like that, please. I am well aware of how things stand, you know? Don't try and fool me, young man... if you are really as important as you seem to think you are, then prove it. Are you really prepared to allow the General's mortal remains to be dissected on a butcher's slab? And to what end? If my daughter tells you that he died of a heart attack in her arms, then that is what happened. Unless, of course, you doubt Signora Pepe's word for it. If you persist with this, be it on your own head. I should tell you, dear Colombo, that I will take this to Mussolini himself. I will go to Salò and you can be sure that he'll see me. Don't imagine that I will bow my head without unsheathing my talons... Oh! That's better! Bury him straight away with full honours: now you're getting it. It needs to be done, due honour must be paid to his career. I am counting on you Francesco, as a true leader of men. Earn people's respect. And be sure to go the whole hog: carriage, horses, the Fascist black flags and a full military salute from the Muti troops... Most of them are fighting the rebels in the mountains? Someone from the Political Office, one of my son-in-law's immediate members of staff must have stayed on in the city, surely? Well then! Let's show Milan we're not afraid of anyone and that we're still in command!

See just how clever my mother-in-law is?

She gets her claws into everyone, not least the undersigned, I fell into her trap like an imbecile. A cretin. My friend was absolutely right.

But I wanted Mara, I was positively drooling for Mara.

And now, of course, she's free to console herself.

With whom?

There's certainly no lack of takers. The official perhaps, or the workman: they're top of her list at the moment.

The former came and paid his respects. In full military rig.

He signed the register, spoke to the widow and, after a formal bow, clasped her arm much more firmly than the occasion demanded.

Don't think you can wriggle out of a showdown with me, he whispered. I know everything. I will expect you tomorrow. Same time, same place. There will be trouble if you don't show up.

She and I were the only people who heard him: now that I'm a spirit, this is one of my privileges.

I wonder what he meant by *I know everything*?

*Everything* about what? About my killer? What did he mean by *same place*? Was my wife in the habit of meeting him in some particular place?

The latter - the workman - arrived by stealth. He sneaked into the crowd with his cap pulled firmly down above his eyes and whispered furtively in her ear, before she even realised he was there: Tomorrow, same time, same place.

He then slipped away, apparently without noticing Mara's deathly pallor, as she stood with her back to him.

So he too, like the official, was in the habit of meeting my wife in a particular place, or so it would seem.

What an eventful life my adorable little widow must lead.

Where do I fit in?

Twice cuckolded, yet without realising it. I, who have been the chief of the Political Police, with the most artful spies, capable of flushing out even the craftiest of traitors working under me.

It would be funny if it wasn't so awful.

Did one of them kill me?

I'm practically certain, even though I couldn't see his face: I was attacked from behind, and in any case I didn't really grasp the dynamics of the situation because – I freely admit – I was completely sloshed after an evening on the tiles.

I am also quite sure that, if either of those two were guilty – and I can't see it being any other way – he must have been in cahoots with my wife. She would have collaborated and provided the necessary logistical and strategic support to ensure it could all be pulled off.

I will keep roaming around the ruins of Milan, my adopted city, now in a sorry state after the devastating Allied bombings – until my questions have been answered and the perpetrator unmasked.

I first met her somewhere near Via Conservatorio.

It was 26<sup>th</sup> October 1943, a warm day, despite being well into autumn.

I remember that, like everybody else in Milan, I was looking up at the clear sky and, instead of feeling pleased, all I could think was: perfect weather for a second Allied air raid.

Two days early, Saturday 24<sup>th</sup>, we had been subjected to a massive air raid, the most devastating of the war yet, causing huge damage to people and property. One hundred and fifty people were killed, according to Monday's papers, leaving the hospitals bursting with injured people.

Panic and tension were running high in the city, not least because of the circumstances of the attack.

The sirens had gone off at three minutes to six, taking everyone by surprise. The previous, much lighter raids, had always taken place at night, never at a time like six o'clock in the evening, with the streets full of people. Also, the air raid sirens had always sounded twice so far, giving a decent warning: the *short alert* warning of an attack within half an hour or so, and the *long alert* just a few minutes before the bombs began to fall.

On 24<sup>th</sup> October, however, the British Bomber Command torpedos started raining down on us three minutes after the first siren, scaring the Milanese witless: what was the point of all the fine talk and practice runs if the much-hyped anti-aircraft system failed to work and we didn't even have time to run for the shelters?

I was mulling all this over when, quite by chance, I found myself cycling around the historic city centre after work, curious to see whether the raid had caused any damage to the monuments, given that my own district, the Ticinese, had been extremely hard-hit and was really quite close to the Cathedral, as the crow flies.

As luck would have it, the square looked intact, but somehow I found I couldn't feel much relief: how downtrodden it looked! The street lights were out, the shop windows were dark and all the illuminated signs that had once carpeted the buildings, with their twinkling lights and multi-coloured designs, were out. Not to mention the vile dark canvas shrouding the polished statue of the Madonnina, once such a source of pride to the Milanese and now merely a perilous target.

Before the war, Piazza del Duomo had been the heart of the city: hotching with people out for a stroll, drinking apéritifs in the bars, buying things in the shops or the huge La Rinascente department store; mothers with children, couples holding hands or arm in arm, lads of all ages chattering away and winking at the beautiful girls, endeavouring to extract a smile or a greeting. Even late into the night the place was full of lights, colours, voices, masses of public cars and jam-packed trams coming and going.

Such a lot of life!

In the run-up to Italy joining the war, the euphoria and optimism actually seemed to be on the up. The newspaper stands and vendors were coining it in with the final editions of the papers, their banner headlines flagging up a *lightning war* Mussolini believed it would be only a matter of weeks before we were sitting, victorious, around the peace table.

We youngsters believed him, and how! I certainly did, despite all my father's glowering and grumbling. It all seemed like a great big adventure to us, a sporting competition, in fact we were so keen that I remember a new trend: we rooted for the different branches of the military with the same fervour as for the football teams. The Navy and the Air Force were hugely popular, the Infantry less so.

I supported the Air Force and I took great pleasure in taunting the sailors with little ditties:

*Who needs the Navy*

*As the bombs fly overhead*

*The propellor turns, the engine roars*

*Let's hear it for the aviators.*

We sang and danced into the small hours in Piazza Duomo.

A lightning war.

Just a few weeks.

We're now two years down the line and we've all changed out of all recognition.

Groups of friends have broken up, our closest friends have been called up, many of them destined never to return from the front line.

Piazza Duomo is grey, brooding and silent – no matter what time of day or night. Public cars have almost completely disappeared, replaced by a few hilarious *bicycle-taxis*, while the trams seem to limp along the platforms, squealing, unenthusiastic and sluggish. Now that most of the men have disappeared, they're being driven by women, but they did nothing to add colour or gaiety once the novelty effect wore off.

Many of the shops have shut. The increasingly few passers-by slink rapidly along the walls with a furtive air, turning their heads as if frightened of being spied on or found doing something bad. Perhaps they feel persecuted by the warnings in bold, block letters on every corner: *QUIET, THE ENEMY HAS EARS... IF YOU EAT TOO MUCH YOU'RE ROBBING THE NATION... DONATE IRON FOR YOUR COUNTRY... DONATE WOOL FOR YOUR COUNTRY.*

Persecution.

While I was cycling dejectedly home, instead of turning straight into Via Torino, as usual, I decided to go down some of the inner streets, unfamiliar byways.

Why?

Don't ask me. The upmarket areas are not my areas. I don't frequent them because they don't interest me.

Sometimes I think a mysterious force led me purposely to that particular street at that particular moment.

Some people would call it *destiny*.

I'm not a great believer in fate, but I can't find any other explanation for it.

She was with a group of school friends.

They were just coming out of the Girls' School for a walk.

They were laughing and chattering, but not the way we common people laugh and chat.

Their lips barely moved, their faces close together so that they could whisper to each other; yet they were utterly composed, losing nothing of that haughty air so characteristic of upper class girls.

She stood out from the rest because she was the tallest and the most provocative.

A potent and aggressive beauty, brazenly displayed. She was clearly quite aware of it.

She looked older than seventeen. Not for her the pigtails of her companions, but a ponytail that swung from the nape of her neck as she walked. The demure school uniform gave quite the opposite impression on her: it accentuated her grace and shape.

Her bosom jutted out provocatively, almost as if the fabric was struggling to contain it.

Her hips swayed gently as she walked, as if she were wearing perilously high heels and not flat, rubber shoes.

You couldn't not notice her.

I looked at her the same way any twenty year old man would. I may even have whistled under my breath as our paths crossed.

I hadn't been expecting anything.

Rich girls aren't even aware that people like me exist.

But she, however, threw me a glance as she went past and then, as if wondering what to do next, she smiled at me.

I simply went on gazing at her.

Captivated.

It didn't even cross my mind that such a banal gesture might change my life forever.

I had plenty of time later to wonder when my madness first took hold.

And the conclusion I always came to was that it began right then, from that fragile, intimate moment – a glance, a smile – received and not repulsed.

I was not myself from that moment on.

The next day I went back to the same place at the same time.

And the next day. And every afternoon after that, until I chanced to see her again.

She was out for a walk with her friends again.

At just that moment, a carriage came along.

Make way, *my pretties!* yelled the cab-driver.

They moved to the side of the road to let him pass, which meant that she and I found ourselves in close proximity and we went on gazing into each other's eyes.

A bit later, when they had set off again, she was walking past me arm in arm with her friend, when she suddenly detached herself, whispered something in her friend's ear with a conspiratorial look and dropped a screwed-up piece of paper at my feet.

She smiled boldly.

She sent me a look charged with significance and hidden meaning.

I picked up the piece of paper and opened it with trembling hands.

What was in the note? It gave a day and a time.

A date, in other words.

I was making a date with him.

Annalisa, my room-mate, who is frightened even of her own shadow, begged me: «Mara, don't be so headstrong! The nuns will find you out and you'll be expelled!»

The ultimate bourgeois young lady, totally lacking in imagination or passion, like all my high society friends.

The blood crawls sluggishly and tortuously through their veins, like runnels striving desperately to find a way through the lime and canes of marshland.

It charges through my veins, though, like a mountain torrent, flowing unhindered and relentlessly.

I see danger as a thrilling challenge.

What do these insipid girls know apart from home, church, top schools, good manners and the certainty that a husband has been pre-selected and waiting for them since they were in their cradles? Every last detail plotted and planned by their marvellously efficient families?

All we have in common is our age and our social milieu.

Full stop.

Mara, how could you make a date with him? You don't even know him. And what's more, he's obviously common, working class. That lot can't be trusted. What if you get caught?

*Cluck, cluck, cluck...*

Even my mother tries desperately to run my life.

She's enormously proud of Manlio Melli's assiduous courtship of me; he's a typical fop, mothers like him because he has all the qualities they find important.

In the following order:

wealth;

impeccable breeding;

excellent social standing;

just sufficiently older than his future wife,

because everyone knows women age faster;

the sort of charisma that, while not crucial, undoubtedly adds prestige in the eyes of the world.

I am flattered by Manlio Melli's attentions too, I won't deny it.

He is hugely sought-after in society and is said to have had several affairs.

The fact that he is pursuing me so determinedly, despite the fact that there are nine years between us and that he regularly writes to me from the front – I think he's fighting far away in Africa – makes me look special in the eyes of my friends.

I like showing off his letters and pretending that we are already betrothed.

But I deeply resent the fact that a pleasant *passé-temps* – that's all it is to me: I am by no means certain that I will marry Manlio Melli one day! – has to mean that my life is already set in stone, as my mother would have it.

She's even dictated that I wear black, as if I were a young widow, because he is *fighting for Italy, fighting on our behalf!*

Speak for yourself, mother dearest. I couldn't care less about all this war mumbo jumbo, and well you know it.

Mara! I'll have none of that negative nonsense in my house! Manlio is by no means malleable, as well you know. He's extremely jealous and used to being obeyed. What's more, he's banned you from going to any parties or entertainments alone while he's at the front.

I loathe my mother when she reels off this sort of tosh so piously.

He is not my fiancé yet, mother.

Not officially, anyway. But he is. He thinks he is and you would be the stupidest girl in the world if you let such a terrific catch slip through your hands. You'd do well to cosy up to him, in fact.

And, more to the point, he can't run my life.

I think you'll find he can.

Two totally opposing points of view.

My workman is fantastic.

I was struck by him the minute I saw him; he's got amazing blue eyes, he's so good-looking.

Nobody's ever made such an impression on me till now. An electric shock runs through you, an all-engulfing fire and you're not even sure what's sparked it off.

I'd been longing to feel something so powerful!

Why should I renounce it?

Because someone my mother approves of, who's used to lording it above everyone, deigns to grace me with his favours?

Manlio Melli is far away and who knows whether or not he'll come back from the war.

My mother lives in her imagination and really hasn't a clue.

Gabriella might understand me.

She'd be able to explain why someone I know nothing about, have only seen twice in fact, has kindled a fire inside me that I simply cannot quench.