

A String of Beans

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‘Where to tonight?’ Fred asked one evening. My husband and I had been staying for a couple of months in the town of Cernobbio in Northern Italy and had gotten into the habit of a nightly walk near Lake Como.

An image of our walk the evening before flickered immediately to mind. We’d decided to deviate from our normal lake walk to further explore the town. Taking a short cut through one of Cernobbio’s old churches, we had noticed a half-hidden pathway tucked away at the side of the church and had decided to investigate.

Immediately, I had smelled a wonderful fragrance reminiscent of cinnamon in the air – a mix of jasmine, roses and recent rain. The path led to a verdant garden full of early summer blooms. A lamp unobtrusively glowed in the flickering shadows, transforming trees and shrubs into golden lace.

Strategically placed to one side was a sheltered altar, obviously pivotal to the garden; the reason it existed. A large candle was lit on the side and a myriad of electric candles illuminated its surface. There were cosy places to kneel, the odd garden chair and mossy stone crosses tucked discreetly amongst the flowers. It was apparent that we had stumbled upon a special garden – a place for people to pray for their departed loved ones and to contemplate their cherished memories. *What a beautiful idea*, I’d thought and for some reason in that place of prayers, I felt an intense sense of peace.

‘Let’s go back to that memory garden,’ I found myself suggesting now. ‘We can say a little prayer for your mum – and Nan.’ Let me reassure you, this was not a normal sort of walk request from me. It was just that the little garden had made me fondly reminisce about them the night before. I still dearly miss my grandmother who died when I was fourteen years old and many years later my husband was devastated when his beloved Italian mother had passed away.

We had almost reached the path when the ancient sleepy church suddenly burst into life. The bells started tolling – over and over. They actually sounded like they were never going to stop. To my guilty conscience it was like some sort of alarm alerting the parishioners of their trespassers out the back – us!

‘Looks like church is about to start,’ I whispered to Fred. ‘We’d better come back another time.’

Curious now though, we made our way to the front of the church. The massive oak doors suddenly burst open and people started to trickle out and then they poured as from a broken pipe. With reverence they held their heads low, continuing to sing the hymn emanating from deep inside – their Italian language (sounding in itself like music to my ears) harmonised with the boom of a robust organ.

Ladies with cymbals, men with drums, children with triangles poured along with them. People of all ages scurried out of those massive church doors like ants evacuating an anthill. A gaggle of altar boys carried ornately decorated wooden crosses larger than themselves. Priests followed – splashes of red velvet, proud as peacocks, swaying thuribles in the summer breeze. It didn't seem credible that the old church had a belly big enough to fit all those people – it felt like the mass exodus was never going to stop.

'Shall we join them?' I whispered to Fred when it seemed the flow of people had slowed. He readily agreed. This opportunity appeared even a better way to 'say a little prayer' for our loved ones and we were intrigued.

The procession separated into two seemingly endless lines. Fred stood behind me. Amongst clouds of incense we walked with our heads down and our arms folded in prayer, just like everyone else. We felt a little proud that we were worshipping like Italians – we weren't like the lines of tourists gaping at us as we marched by – and a little bit like imposters too. Not a soul spoke during all this pageantry. People either sung or remained silent. Bells pealed continuously as we proceeded. Not just those from the church we had just left, but every church in Cernobbio and Como called to one another, their unique heavenly music echoing through the green hills and valleys like magpies carolling over and over to each other, *all is well*.

Cernobbio is normally a bustling, busy town congested with traffic, but that night the traffic stood still as the parishioners wove their way around the town like a long slithering snake. It was a snake that commanded respect too – not one of the myriad of locals or tourists called out as the procession passed. Without exception, they watched us in respectful silence. The local police ensured that traffic and pedestrians waited for our long procession to pass. It blew me away – I couldn't help comparing that town to Australian ones. I just couldn't imagine a whole town standing still for faith like Cernobbio had that night.

We shuffled slowly in our long line, the drums and the cymbals beat in time to the soft hymns. Rhythmic and repetitive, the sound of our feet on the cobbled

footpaths seemed to me to be a component now of the music. It made God feel palpable to me. I found myself thinking to march for something I believed in with others who felt the same felt so special. I was feeling good when I felt the nudges in my back.

‘What?’ I almost hissed, annoyed to have my thoughts interrupted.

Fred’s whisper was almost inaudible. ‘I feel like I’m Mr Bean,’ he said.

Those few innocuous-sounding words almost proved my undoing. Suddenly my sense of wellbeing floundered. Instead, my mind was flooded with images of Mr Bean. Ridiculous, hilarious Mr Bean who found himself in situations he had no idea about – and went with it. An awful image of him suddenly slapped me in the face. I saw his head hung low, nodding and bobbing, his arms folded in prayer following long, long conga lines of people...and for all the world not knowing why.

Oh no! I thought. *Could all those hymns actually be funeral dirges? What if we’ve inadvertently joined mourners like a typical Mr Bean act? What if we were expected at the end to deliver a few personal words for the dearly departed – in Italian!*

My thoughts became so frantic that I actually considered what Mr Bean would do in the same situation. I envisioned him at the head of the procession clashing cymbals loudly out of tune whilst clutching his teddy bear.

Fred prodded me again. Damn his apt observation! I nodded solemnly to indicate that I had indeed heard what he’d said. It was all I *could* do knowing that there was absolutely no way that I could possibly turn to face him just then, without seriously losing it. The images of Mr Bean suddenly seemed very funny to me. I realised with horror that I was in grave danger of bursting into hysterical giggles.

I definitely did not want to offend anyone on such an obviously auspicious and holy occasion and I forced myself to continue shuffling forth. I ventured to look around me at all the bent heads and unsmiling faces. And then a small boy of about seven or eight met my eyes and subsequently rewarded me with a wide, toothless grin. Smiling back at his twinkling eyes was akin to letting air out of an overblown tyre. It helped a bit.

The line continued its mission around the streets haphazardly like a kitten toying with string. At the town piazza it suddenly came to an abrupt stop. I nearly toppled into a solemn couple in front of me. Way, way ahead I heard the priest’s voice boom through the sudden silence. My limited Italian allowed me to catch a few

words, *preghiamo* – which I knew meant *we pray for* and *la povera* –which means *the poor*. I suddenly felt as light as a communion wafer. It was prayers for live people – and not the dead.

As the priest prayed, I felt myself relax. The prayers, like the procession were very long and soothing. Even though the words were foreign to me, I felt their solidarity – their warmth – and the way they seemed to speak directly to my heart. They felt like love. The line slowly wove its way back to the old church and the people filled its belly once again like Christmas lunch and we slipped off into the night.