

THE GIRL ON THE VIA FLAMINIA

by Alfred Hayes

ACT I

Rome in the winter of 1944. The American army has occupied Italy. The action takes place in the apartment of the Pulcini family. There is little work to be had in Italy. To survive, the family has turned their apartment into a meeting place for lonely soldiers and young Italian women, a place where companionship and sexuality are exchanged for chocolates, warm food, and a safe roof.

Lisa, young, pretty—but homeless, jobless, and hungry—agrees to become the companion of Robert, a lonely American soldier. The bitterness and self-hatred generated by their “arrangement” brings into sharp relief the degradation that befalls both conqueror and conquered in the aftermath of war.

In the following scene, early in the play, Lisa is convinced by Nina (who already has her own “arrangement” with a soldier) that she should go ahead with the planned meeting with Robert—that it is not as unpleasant to have sex with a strange man as it is to starve to death.

NINA, sits left at dining table: I'm exhausted. Such a day. Such excitement.

LISA: When will he come?

NINA: Who?

LISA: Your Roberto.

NINA: Mine? Yours, dear.

LISA: When will he come?

NINA, rises. Opening purse to get at nail equipment in cosmetic bag: I telephoned. Dio! To telephone an American! First one answers: who do I want? I say il sergente Roberto. Roberto? What Roberto? They never heard of a— *(above table)* Roberto in their company. Oh, he says—Bob! Si, Bob! Well, he says, this

one on the telephone, how about me, babbee, instead of Bob? Finally he goes. Va bene. Comes another one to the telephone. Again who do I want. Again the Roberto; again the Bob. Then he says: 'allo. 'allo, who's speaking? I say Nina. *Nina!* *(Lisa shushes Nina up, stands center)* This one shouts, on the telephone. *Loudly:* How's the old tomato, Nina? Che pomodoro? Who has a tomato? But that is how one telephones an American.

LISA: And when you spoke to him?

NINA: Who?

LISA: Roberto.

NINA: He was happy you had agreed. Why not? Look how pretty his girl will be.

LISA: Pretty?

NINA: But you are pretty.

LISA, crosses back to dining table: Yes, and this is pretty, too. To wait, like this, in a strange house for a man I've never seen.

NINA: Why do you have to see him? If he's nice, he's nice, sight unseen. Listen to me, cara. For three weeks he's bother me to introduce him to a nice girl. *Lisa turns.* Have you eaten today?

LISA, crosses. Sits by Nina, right: It's not important.

NINA: Have you paid your rent? So. At least with Roberto you'll eat, and you'll have somewhere to live. *During the following Lisa has to fight back the tears.* I've told Adele you are married to him. I've explained to Roberto how it will be—that you are not a street girl, and that the arrangement will be a permanent one. He's anxious too. The Army's a cold place.

LISA: But I can't.

NINA: You can't what?

LISA: Make love to a stranger. *Banging on the table, she causes Nina to accidentally smear the nail polish she is applying.*

NINA: One learns.

LISA: Oh, Nina— *(To above table)*

NINA: What do you want me to say? *Repairing fingernail job with a tissue:* One learns. One learns everything. Wars are all the same. *Rises.* The men become thieves, and the women— *(crosses to left of table)* And it's the same everywhere. *Throws tissue on floor.*

LISA, turns: Not in America.

NINA: In America, too, if they had gone through what we've

gone through. *Lisa sits left of dining table. Nina crosses to Lisa. Gently touching her hair:* No, cara, one doesn't live as one likes to, but as one must. *Crosses up right center. Go through the city! On the Corso, on the Via Veneto, on all the bridges—it's the same. Everywhere the soldiers and the women. Why? To right of dining table. Because there is nothing else, cara mia, except to drink and to make love and to survive. Our men? Poof! They guts are gone. Let them whimper and shout—the cigarettes they smoke, and the coffee they drink, we buy them.*

LISA, *loudly; rises:* I'm not one of the women who stand on the bridges.

NINA: Did I say you were? We are all unlucky in the same way. We were born, and born women, and in Europe during the wars. *Sits above dining table. Closing her cosmetic bag:* Besides, who will it harm? Adele will have her rent—and if you won't be happier, at least you won't be hungrier—

LISA: But what will I say to him?

NINA: Madonna!

LISA: I've never gone with a soldier.

NINA: Ask him how's his old tomato! *Lisa turns away left.*

Nina throws down purse: Dio, you've talked to a man before.

LISA, *back to Nina:* Not the Americans.

NINA: They speak exactly the same language.

LISA, *bitterly:* The liberators!

NINA, *rises:* We lost the war.

LISA, *moves in to the table:* Only the war?

NINA: Oh you make me sick! *Crosses up center.*

LISA, *crosses up to Nina. Holding chair back of table:* Yes, he'll feed me because he's won the war, and that's part of the arrangement, and then after he's fed me we'll go to bed, because that's part of the arrangements, too. *Cross down left.* But why should I be better or different than the women standing on the bridges? How stupid to think one is different or better. *Crosses to couch, sits dejectedly.* I'll have my American. Everybody has one now.

NINA, *follows Lisa to couch. Impatiently:* No, you'll jump in the Tiber.

LISA: Why not?

NINA: They'll fish out another fool!

LISA: There will be one less in the world.

NINA, *turns away:* I ought to let you!

LISA: It's not important either way.

NINA, *turns back:* Except I went through all the trouble of getting you a nice one!

LISA: You take him. You like Americans.

NINA, *crosses down left, sits on couch below Lisa:* Like them? Some I could spit on. You should see their officers as I've seen them—what animals! Screaming in the hotel corridors, and such jokes! To them it's a wonderful joke to hang toilet paper from a chandelier—

LISA: Che brutta guerra.

NINA: Sì. But what shall I do—cry my eyes out? Or jump in the Tiber? There's enough corpses on the bottom now—and it's better to eat and *(leans back)* to go to Firenze when one can—

LISA: Or wait for some Roberto.

NINA: Or wait for some Roberto.

LISA: But—

Lights build before Adele's entrance.

NINA: But what?

LISA: He may not like me.

NINA, *looks at her and smiles slightly:* Would you like to bet?