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The Motorcycle

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The Motorcycle¹

Licia Canton

"Monsieur, Monsieur."

He could hear a voice far away. Then he felt a light tap on the shoulder. He opened his eyes, not knowing they had been closed.

"Monsieur, it's your turn. A23," said the Haitian man sitting next to him. *"Look, it's A23."* He pointed to the flashing red number above the chairs.

His number had been called. He had been sitting there for just a few minutes. He must have dozed off.

He got up slowly. He felt jetlagged. He looked around to see where he was supposed to go.

"That way," the Haitian man pointed right.

"Okay. Thank you." He moved slowly.

It was at the far end of the waiting area, to the right. He took his time getting there. He couldn't walk any faster. Let them wait, he thought.

As he approached the wicket, the next number had begun to flash. A24.

If he had been younger or if he had paid any attention to anyone else, he would have seen a young woman get up and start walking towards the wicket. When she spotted him slowly approaching the wicket, she sighed and sat down again.

"A23," he gave his number to the agent.

"Bonjour Monsieur," the petite woman said without smiling.

She had mustered all of her patience when she saw him approaching her wicket, slowly, after she had already called the next number thinking that A23 was a no-show.

"Bonjour." He stared at the Chinese looking woman who spoke French with a Quebecois accent. He pulled out the papers from his inside breast pocket and handed them to her.

¹ This short story is followed by its Italian translation. Licia Canton wrote the English version first. It was translated into Italian by Luisa Marino and published in 2015 (*Rivista luna specie*. 17 Apr. 2015. Retrieved 30 Oct. 2016.) Subsequently, the English original was published in *The Pink House and Other Stories* by Licia Canton (Montreal: Longbridge Books, 2018.)

He didn't say anything. She knew what she had to do.

"*Merci.*" She took the papers and looked at them carefully. The papers were filled out, in French, albeit with some spelling errors, in a script that said this old person had answered the questions himself. All he had to do was pay.

The tired old man stared at her through his wide-rimmed glasses.

She looked at the wrinkled face underneath the Alpine hat. She hesitated.

"*Monsieur,*" she said, "you know that you can save some money if you eliminate the motorcycle fee?" She didn't smile.

He looked at the agent but did not speak.

"It'll cost you much less," she said loudly and waited for his response.

He was an 80-year-old renewing his licence to drive everything under the sun—from the road tractor to the semi-trailer truck to the motorcycle.

He might still drive a tractor or an 18-wheeler, but would he ever get on a motorcycle again? She stared at him... and waited.

He knew that she had asked a question. He knew that she expected him to respond.

"I'm sorry. Can you please repeat?" he said in an accented voice.

This could take a while, she thought. She didn't have to give him options. It was not part of her government job description to give options to customers. In fact, it would be better for her employer if she simply took the old man's money without asking any questions. After all, he had filled out the form and indicated that he would pay the total amount. If he agreed to removing the motorcycle fee, she would have to do an extra step, and that would slow her down. So why would she take the time to repeat the information? He was an old man. When would he ever ride a motorcycle?

He seemed a little—no, extremely—hard of hearing. He wasn't Chinese, but she was reminded of her own elderly grandfather.

The man gave her a blank stare.

"You can save some money if you don't renew the motorcycle."

"Heh?"

She had to repeat again.

"Do you want to renew the motorcycle, too?"

"The motorcycle?" he looked at the papers in her hand.

"*Oui, yes. Tout. Everything. Je conduis tout,*" he chuckled. "I ride the motorcycle, too. I drive everything. I want to renew everything."

She stared at him with a look that asked "Really? The motorcycle?" And she let out a long drawn out Oh... Kay.

"Even the motorcycle. I have to be ready to drive anything, anytime, anywhere..." The man would have gone on, but she had already shifted over to the computer to do the transaction. If she had wanted to listen, he would have explained that when he came to this country nearly half a century ago, he got a job right away because he could drive every vehicle on the construction site. And he could also ride the motorcycle and the Vespa.

Two wheels might not seem much to the agent or to those who drove SUVs and Audis and BMWs to show off their wealth. Ah, but the Vespa! He knew, and men of his generation knew it, too, that the two-wheeled Vespa was the best investment any young man could make after the war.

It was because of the Vespa that he got his woman. He got a lot of women back then because he was one of the few who had wheels when most young men were riding bicycles. But *the one* woman, the one he married, the one who gave him children, the one who followed him to a cold, faraway land without question—even though he knew that she wasn't always happy, even though he knew that he wasn't her family's first choice... They would have preferred someone wealthier, more stable. Someone without outlandish ideas about emigration. Someone who would not have gone gallivanting to Switzerland and then to Canada. Someone who would not have left wife and kids alone for a year to go set up a tiny basement apartment in Montreal-North. Someone who would not have uprooted a family...

The agent was trying to get his attention.

Had she said something? Was she expecting a response?

"My granddaughter," he said.

The agent looked at him.

"My granddaughter wants to learn to ride a motorcycle," he stared at the Chinese woman. "She's in university."

"Ah." What else could she say? She wasn't sure why he mentioned his granddaughter. Maybe she reminded him of his granddaughter just like he reminded her of her grandfather.

"My granddaughter... Who knows, she may need my help to learn to ride the motorcycle," he looked at the agent to see if she would smile. "You have to be ready for anything, anytime. That's what I always say. That's what I've always believed."

The agent didn't answer.

"You're Chinese, right?" He didn't expect her to answer. "Your parents or grandparents immigrated to Canada, right? We are all from the same mould, you know. Those who emigrated and came here. We have to be better than everyone else because we are not born here."

Okay, you are probably born here, and you have an important government job... But still, you come from a people of immigration. Good stock. So you are like me, like my granddaughter."

She looked at him and the beginnings of a smile began to take shape. She didn't quite understand everything he said in his thick accent. Italian. He had to be Italian.

She had to move on to the next number. She had already spent too many minutes with the old man in the funny hat. She couldn't stop him though.

He was a lot like her grandfather. He had just turned 90. He was just waiting around for the day to come. Still in good shape though. Still drove. He had recently renewed his licence even though he hardly went out. Did he really need to renew it? Did he really need a car in the driveway? Well, maybe he did come from the same mould as this old Italian man. *You have to be ready for anything, anytime, anywhere.* Maybe that's why he had renewed his licence at 90.

She had not spoken to him in a week. She would call him on her lunch break. She would make an effort to visit her grandfather on the weekend.

"Thank you," the old Italian man said as he put the receipt into his breast pocket. "Thank you for listening to me."

"Good day," she said.