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g u t t e r

*Letters*  
*from*  
*Federica*

SUZANNE MONDOUX

BALBOA<sup>®</sup>PRESS  
A DIVISION OF HAY HOUSE

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# Chapter 1

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Night after night, I had watched the yellow and orange lighted bedroom window; and night after night, I had found it lighted faintly, and in the same order. If she was aware of me, I thought, I would see the glitter of tiny lamps behind the lace curtains, for I knew that a small lamp must be set at the edge of a window. She had said to me the second time we met, at her 6<sup>th</sup> birthday party, a week after she moved in next door: "I am not who you see when you look at me." and I had thought her words to be quite silly at the time. Now I realize that they were true. Every night, as I gazed across at the window, I would softly whisper her name to myself... Federica. It sounded like music to my ears, like the soft melody of a harp, where the strings resonated gently off her lips while she whispered my name, Leo. I was six weeks short of my 6<sup>th</sup> birthday. But now, the name Federica sounded to me like some drifting and blurry being. It filled me with tears and yet, I longed to be nearer to her and to look into her eyes again.

The ever-so elegant Mrs. Caterina Russo sat at in her chair, drinking coffee, when I came downstairs for breakfast. While looking in her coffee cup, she said, as if returning to something she had wanted me to hear again:

"Yes, I would say she was...but there is something familiar and yet unfamiliar at the same time...there is something exceptional about her. I'll tell you what I think..."

She began to sip her coffee, no doubt putting every single word of her opinion in the proper order. "Quiet little girl she was! When she was just a toddler, she was rather timid, never talked much, and she would

just smile; but over the last two years, I grew curious of her and of her stories about this boy.”

“I have my own story about this boy.” she said. “I think he is one of those...delicate boys...But it’s hard to say...”

She began to sip her coffee without sharing more of her opinions with us. My father saw me staring and said to me:

“Well, so your friend is leaving Cambridge, you’ll be sad to know.”

“Who? I asked.

“Federica.”

“She’s leaving?”

“Mrs. Russo here has just told us so. She came for a cup of milk. It was decided yesterday.”

“I knew that I was under observation, so I stopped eating to show that the news interested me.” My father explained to Mrs. Russo.

“Federica and Leo were becoming close friends. Federica taught him how to play the piano, mind you; and she said she saw something in you.”

“We’ll miss her.” said my mother quietly.

Mrs. Russo looked at me during breakfast. I felt her big dark brown eyes examining me, so I satisfied her curiosity by looking up from my plate the entire time while I ate. She returned to her coffee and finally put the empty cup in the sink.

“I wouldn’t like my only boy,” she pursued, “to have to worry about someone like Federica leaving.”

“How do you mean, Mrs. Russo?” asked my mother.

“What I mean is,” said Mrs. Russo, “it’s bad for him. Here is what I believe: let Leo, a young man, give his attention to what and whom will give it back ...Am I right, Leo?”

“That’s what I believe, too.” said my father. “Let him not waste his time where nothing can be expected in return. That’s what I always tell my boy: take caution. When I was his age, I knew what I wanted and went for it. I married the woman I wanted to marry, your mother. Love is all very fine...Mrs. Russo might want another cup of coffee.” he told my mother.

“No thank you, I’ve had enough caffeine for this morning.” replied Mrs. Russo.

My mother put a plate of scrambled eggs on the table.

“But why do you think it isn’t good for him, Mrs. Russo?” she asked.



“It’s bad for this young man...” replied Mrs. Russo, “...because his mind is so impressionable. When such a boy sees a girl like Federica, you know, it has an effect...”

I dropped my fork loudly on the plate for dramatic effect instead of uttering my thoughts out loud. What an infuriating stuck up bitch!

It was late and I still hadn’t fallen asleep. Though 40 years later, I was still pissed off at Mrs. Russo for alluding to the way boys like me saw girls like Federica. In the moon light of my bedroom, I imagined that I could once again feel the kisses of Federica’s soft red lips. I wrapped my arms around my pillow and squeezed it tightly. But her face still stared at me. It whispered, and I understood that she wanted to say something. I felt my heart receding into some unpleasant and stormy region; and there again, I saw her waiting for me. She began to speak to me in a whispering voice, and I wondered why she cried continually and why her lips were dry with salt. But then, I remembered that she had died two weeks after our wedding, on November 24<sup>th</sup>, 1999, and I felt that I too was weeping as if to absolve myself from something I did that may have caused her disappearance.

The next morning, after breakfast, I went down to look at the little bookstore in the antique collectors’ district of Raisin Street. It was an unassuming little bookstore, registered under the curious name of *Her Old Bookstore*. The windows consisted of mainly old books, manuscripts, diaries and songs; and on ordinary days, a notice was usually hanging in the window, saying: “Reading by still-living unknown authors or their still-living friends”. A new notice was visible now, as the black security bars were up. A brass bell was hanging over the door. A young woman was reading the notice that had been taped to the window. I also approached and read it. It said:

Tonight: By Invitation Only

Those who had been invited also received a short note from me. It read:

Singer-songwriter Federica Russo,  
aged 30 years, left us November 24th, 1999.  
Reading of letters from Federica,  
by her friend Sophia.

The reading of the notice and invitation letters persuaded me to question whether she was really dead, and I was disturbed to find myself doubting it. Had she not been dead, I would've gone into the far corner of the shop to find her, sitting in the burgundy velvet armchair by the window, nearly smothered by the shop resident cats, Mister and Misses. Perhaps, had my mother still been alive, she would have given me a tin of her favourite overly buttery shortbread cookies to give her, and this present would have enticed her out of the chair and away from the felines' grip. It was always I who wiped the cookie crumbs off the piano and sofas of our seaside pink 16<sup>th</sup> century castle, for her hands clung to the piano keys too much to allow her to do much of anything else, except for when she wrote me love letters and hugged me and the cats. Even when she tapped her fingers on the piano keys, little bits of cookie crumbs would fall from her fingernails onto the keys. It may have been these constant sprinkles of cookies which gave her pink grand piano its sweet odour for the corner where it stood, and it was quite infectious with a sweet smell of cookies and roses, her favourite flower.

I wanted to go in and look at the empty armchair, but I didn't have the courage to open the door. I walked away quickly along the cloudy side of the street, counting the cracks in the sidewalk as I went. I found it normal to be mourning, and I even found it gratifying to find that I had a sense of weakness, as if it had been replaced by something as a result of her death. I wondered about this for some time, as my father had said so many years ago, she had taught me how to play the piano, and she had seen something in me. She had been sent away to an Italian private college for young girls at the age of 8, and returned when she was 18, and during every trip home and every summer holiday, she had taught me the meaning of different music, from rock and roll to opera, and how to read and write music. She had told me stories of villages by the sea and of courtesans in 16<sup>th</sup> century Venice, and she often spoke of the various designer dresses worn by these courtesans. Sometimes, she had amused herself by presenting me with rather difficult musical compositions, asking me to play them over and over again, while she wore one of the many courtesan dresses that she had fabricated as she found them quite exquisite and curious. Her playfulness showed me how complex and mysterious were the whims of these courtesans which I had always regarded as the greatest of contrast,

given that Federica was trying to counter her Catholic upbringing and Mrs. Russo's expectations of her, and to assert my place in all of this. The duties that Federica and the courtesans performed, as well as the secrecy of the confessional, seemed so clear to me that I wondered why people just didn't have the courage to lie in the confessional, as I did. Back then, I felt as I do now, that although I had nothing to confess, I would go through the ritual nonetheless in order to gain favour somewhere. Then I grew up and stopped that nonsense, and I also stopped going entirely. I kept my eyes on the love of my life, and I married her even though I didn't know my place, according to Mrs. Russo. And I wasn't surprised when Federica told me that courtesans of the 16<sup>th</sup> century had written poems and books as thick as the Bible, and that these had been read by many. Often, when I thought of this, I could make no other thoughts come to my mind or only smile at things she used to smile or nod her head at. Sometimes, she used to put me through the ringer of the music lessons, day after day, during which she had made me learn masterpieces by heart, on top of these private piano lessons that my mother had enrolled me in the first week after she saw Federica teaching me how to play the piano; and, as I mastered the lessons, she used to smile softly and nod her head, now and then stuffing cookies in her mouth. When she smiled, she used to uncover a beautifully gentle split between her two front teeth – a smile which had me feeling aroused at the beginning of our acquaintance and every day thereafter.

As I walked along in the shade, I remembered Mrs. Russo's words '*know your place*' and tried to remember what had happened afterwards in my dream that night. I remembered that I had been sitting at the piano, playing a mix of rock and classical, and a large audience stood silent. I felt like I had been very far away from them, in some other land where people are strange, in Venice perhaps. I thought...but I couldn't remember the end of the dream.

That evening, Sophia took me with her to the reading at *Her Old Bookstore*. It was 7 pm, but the shop windows that looked to be closed reflected the gold and rose lighting of the small lamps found all around the shop. Howard received us at the entrance and, as it would have been unseemly to not have hugged him, Sophia kissed him on both cheeks, and I did the same. This old friend pointed to the far end of the shop and, on

Sophia's nodding, we proceeded to walk along the narrow passage before us, her raised head looking at the guests along the way. She stopped at the first row of books and beckoned me forward encouragingly towards the opening ahead at the end, which was occupied by the burgundy velvet armchair. Sophia and Howard stepped forward and, seeing that I hesitated to go ahead, Sophia began to tug at me a bit with her head.

I stepped forward with a half step. The passage through the rows of books was suffocating with dust and dim lighting, where the lamps looked like mystical lights. She had been absent. Howard led the way, and we three stepped closer to the chair, surrounded by guests. I pretended to smile, but I couldn't gather my thoughts because the people distracted me. I noticed that a rather colourful cast of characters always surrounded Federica. This was the same crowd, but older. The fancy came to me that Federica was smiling as she looked down on us, probably sitting in the chair if I looked hard enough or wanted to see what I wanted to see. She had never been laid in a coffin. They'd never found her body. The only thing they'd found was a strand of her beautiful black hair floating in a pool of her blood on the banks of Rosedale River. The white rushing water poured down off the red cliffs into the sea. So, she could have been anywhere but up in heaven, as they all wanted me to believe.

But no! I wasn't to have such thoughts of her still alive somewhere. I was to accept that the love of my life had died. When we approached the armchair and went to the side where the guests had gathered, I saw that Federica wasn't sitting in the chair, smiling. There she stood, quiet next to me, as I wanted to see her, her beautiful short black hair and olive skin. Her face was very tired, with strong eyes. There was a heavy odour of old books in the shop, mixed with the scent of roses. She would've loved that.

We greeted the guests and I stepped aside. In the little corner, we found Robert sitting in an armchair, facing the window. I made my way to my usual chair in the corner, while Sophia went to Federica's armchair and brought out a bottle of champagne in the corner, while Howard went to the side bookshelf and brought out some champagne glasses. He set them on the table and invited everyone to take a glass of champagne. Then, at Sophia's bidding, she filled the glasses and passed them to us. She pressed me to take some shortbread cookies also, but I declined since I thought I'd make too much of a mess eating them. She

seemed to be somewhat disappointed at my refusal and went over to the armchair where she sat down. No one spoke. We all gazed at the letters she held in her hands.

Robert waited until Howard sighed and then said:

“We miss our Federica, and she is not gone to a better world. The world was better with her in it.”

Howard sighed again and raised his head in assent. Robert swirled the stem of his champagne glass before sipping a little of it.

“Who else knows about these letters but us...?” he asked.

“No one, not even her mother.” said Howard. “The first letter is dated a week after the wedding.

“And everything found in here...?”

“Howard found the letters while going through some of my old books in the castle library. He found the letters when he opened *Ulysses* by James Joyce.”

“Leo knew nothing of them?” asked Howard.

“He was quite resigned with the songs he had left at the house. He felt that he had no cause to search for anything he thought she would have left for him to find, not even in his favourite book, which he often read through. *Ulysses*, first edition, had remained untouched since her death. Leo had avoided that section of the library. Federica had been hiding her love letters to Leo in books from the very first day they had kissed, her first trip home from school at the end of his first piano lesson. Mrs. Russo was out that afternoon.” said Sophia.

“That’s what I said, I had no cause to...” said Leo. “She was just gone and then, the next morning, I was told that she was dead. No one would think she’d have written these letters. But I remember telling her that I wanted to read *Ulysses* again. She laughed because it would have been my seventh time. No doubt it would’ve been the best place to leave me the letters.”

“Yes, but why would we think this?” asked Sophia

She sipped a little more from her glass and said:

“Well, Leo, at any rate, it must be of great comfort to you to know that you didn’t doubt for one minute that Mrs. Russo was lying about Federica. You were both the love of each other’s life, and these letters are proof of this love.”

Howard stared into his glass.

“Poor Leo!” he said. “Only God knows what happened to Federica, and as rich as you are and all the efforts you’ve made to find her, we wouldn’t want anything more than to reunite the two of you.”

Howard closed his eyes and shook his head slowly.

“She is the love of his life and we are his family.” he added. “There isn’t anyone in this room that Leo can’t trust, even his old lovers are here today. These men have stood by him through all of these years. Even though he has found love again with William, who couldn’t join us tonight because, as usual, he is saving someone’s life, Leo will find out what happened to Federica and bring her back home.”

“Indeed that is true.” said Robert. “And I’m sure now that Federica’s letters have surfaced, we’ll find the truth of her story in these letters.”

“Poor Federica.” replied Howard. “She seemed to be troubled by her secret. You could always hear her playing the piano in the house. Still, I know she’s gone and all of that...”

“It’s when I wake up every day that I miss her the most.” added Leo.

“I know that.” said Howard. “I haven’t made music like I used to back when she was still with us.”

He stopped as if he were remembering a moment or a song, and then said quietly:

“Mind you, I noticed that there was something bothering her at her birthday party. Whenever I’d bring her some cookies, she would refuse them.”

He looked down at the plate of cookies and smiled: then he continued:

“But still, and all she kept saying was that when the concert tour would be over, she’d go out for a long walk one fine day just to see the gardens again, where I had walked for hours with my love, Leo, and take all of us with her. We would get dressed in the most outrageous fashions of bright orange, yellow, pink, purple, and red costumes for the day... that is what I’d like to do. She had her mind set on that...our dear Federica!”

“Wherever she is, I wish her love and peace!” said Sophia.

Howard took out his handkerchief and wiped his tears with it. He put it back in his pocket and smiled at the crowd for some time without speaking.

“She was too outrageous, always.” said Leo. “The duties of the rock

and roll singer and songwriter were sometimes too much for her. And then, her life was, as you might say, woven.”

“Yes.” said Sophia. “At her birthday party, she told me that she felt rather tired. I could see that, and I tried to get her to talk some more about it, but she’d put on that beautiful smile of hers’ and drift off into the crowd.”

A silence took possession of the little bookshop and, amongst the rows of crowded books, Leo approached the burgundy velvet armchair as he sipped his champagne, and he then leaned back against the wall. Sophia seemed to have started to read the first letter quietly. They waited respectfully for her to break her own silence; and after a long pause, she said slowly:

“This is the first letter...that was the beginning of it. Of course, Leo has read them all. He said it wasn’t until the third letter that Federica writes something meaningful, I mean...that’s what brought us together today. Leo has shared these letters with us to help him find Federica, even though he acknowledges that they were written for his eyes only.”

“And do we learn more about the mystery of Federica since her birthday from these letters?” asked Robert. “Let’s see if we can find anything in the events between the wedding, her birthday and the day she went missing. Wedding date. November 12<sup>th</sup>. All was well. Birthday party, November 16<sup>th</sup>. She seemed ok. She was a bit off, but nothing out of the ordinary, I think. The first letter was written on November 16<sup>th</sup>. Was it written before or after the party? She makes no mention of the party in that letter. So let’s assume that she wrote the letter before the surprise birthday party. Her second letter was written on November 18<sup>th</sup>. None of us saw her that day, except for you Leo. Can you think of anything that she did or might have said alluding to anything that may have raised concern? I know that it was a long time ago. We can come back to that. The evening of the 18<sup>th</sup>, you also left for Canada for a few days. None of us saw her for those three days. She didn’t return any of our calls until the morning of the 21<sup>st</sup>, the day before you were to return home. She invited us for drinks that evening. It was an early night. We left by 10 o’clock. Her third letter was written on the 19<sup>th</sup>, her fourth letter on the 20<sup>th</sup>, her 5<sup>th</sup> letter, the last letter, was written on the 22<sup>nd</sup>. You came home late that evening. On the 23<sup>rd</sup>, you spent the day together. That evening, she went

missing. On the 24<sup>th</sup>, the forensic evidence suggests that the large pool of blood that had been found at the scene indicated that it would have been impossible for Federica to still be alive. In such circumstances, the police established that she had died of exsanguination, which basically means that she bled to death. If that is the case, where is her body? Why wasn't it at the scene? How could she have fallen into the rushing waterfalls? They searched everywhere for her body.”

Leo nodded.

“Something occupied her mind.” he said. “After that, she began to write songs by herself, talking to no one and wandering about by herself with the cats Lune, Étoile, Scarlet and Romeo in the garden. The night she disappeared, she went out for a walk on her own in the garden and, by dinner time, the staff was unable to find her anywhere. They looked everywhere on the property and the surrounding area. I suggested that we search the animal sanctuary where she loved to spend her time when she'd come home after a long tour. We got in the car and searched the entire grounds. After hours of searching, she was nowhere to be found.”

Sophia stopped in the field as if to listen for her. I too listened, but there were no sounds in the field. We stopped to listen in the house as well, but there too, there was no sound in the house. I felt in my gut that Federica was in a place where I'd never find her.

Sophia looked up at everyone. I looked down at the letter in her hands.

Sophia sipped more champagne. “My darling Leo, my love, forgive me...” read Sophia.