

*The Ninth  
Acolyte Reader*



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# Nicola

by Christopher Montoriano

[Translated from the Italian by Brian Williams]

At that hour of the morning the whole countryside of Northern Lazio is pervaded by an air charged with sunlight and the scent of the olives. Nicola lay stretched out on the sitting-room couch, in a room where the shadows lingered and the air was still cool; he was reading a schoolbook, preparing for the September exams. Not a sound was to be heard until the noise of a car drawing up at the front gate invaded the silence, followed by the blare of a horn. Nicola got up, awakened from the narcotic inertia of study. His mother, Rosa, was already in the garden, bathed in the light which from inside the house seemed to cancel out all the colors, and even the outline of the house, as if in a negative. Nicola went back to lie down again, but his ears were attuned now. He heard the voice of the guest, full of energy and loud, as he parked his car, then his mother's voice, a little shrill but at the same time raucous because of her smoking. Nicola thought he had better get up and go and meet them, but he didn't. He lay on there, his bare legs stretched out, well-formed and sunburned, streaked with down matching the soft curly tan hair of his head; his chest swathed in a khaki T-shirt that showed off the well-developed pectorals, a little out of proportion to the slenderness of the rest of his body. Possibly if Michael hadn't found something of indolence and conceit in that expression, things might have gone differently.

After he came into the room, Michael paused for a moment as if in thought, then said, "Ciao", and crossing over to him put down his wide white hat on the boy's lap; Nicola took it and put it on his head. There was a strange familiarity between the two, since Michael, an old friend of the family, had seen Nicola grow up. But the boy felt a certain odd affinity with this man – handsome and mature but still strong and slim, his face always sunburned from his travels in the south.

"What have you got to tell me?" asked Michael.

"I'm bored," said Nicola, lowering the hat over his eyes. For a moment Michael could admire unseen the adolescent with his body which was both a man's and a boy's; his serious face which seemed knowing and childlike at

the same time. The miracle that only occurs once in a man's life; that only lasts a brief moment.

"You've grown," Michael said.

Nicola lifted the hat from his eyes, then took it off and put it back on Michael's head. "My old friend, you grow, but you never change," he said.

"You sure of that?"

"Oh yes, very sure..." Nicola replied, getting up.

He went into the kitchen where Rosa was preparing lunch, while the fat cat rubbed against her legs. She had met Michael when she was in London, with a feminist organization. She had recognized in him at once the prototype of the educated, sensitive man, handsome but without macho pretensions, capable of listening, of making love without prevarication or pretense. She had fallen in love with him, when Nicola was already five years old, and she had gone off, leaving her neurotic, jealous husband, saying only that she was tired of it all. Fleeing to her mother's house, she had daily threatening phone calls from his family, reproaching her with expressions of which the commonest was "puttana" – whore. She left for England, where a woman friend from Rome was living in community with several other women. She was given a small room with her son, where every night she could hear the groans of her friend making love with her female lover. Tired of spending nights alone with her little boy, Rosa brought back Michael, the ingenuous and gawky young man whom she had met at a demonstration, and they too made love through the night, with Nicola asleep in a tiny improvised bed behind a floral curtain tacked to the ceiling with nails. But one morning in a damp, soft spring, with the sun making bright reflections on the damp surface of the streets, Rosa saw Michael walking with a boy younger than himself, and after turning round a shadowy corner, kissing him furtively on the neck. Rosa wasn't angry, she merely sought an explanation and Michael was ready to give it. They sat at a table in a cafe in one of those small streets off Oxford Street; he told her about his first experiences with boys in school, his early love-affairs; the difficulties met with, the hypocrisies adopted. They became the best of friends, and never lost contact when Rosa returned to Italy, and through her work as a journalist was able to buy the little house in the Roman countryside. Even though she was a strong, independent woman, Rosa was small and delicate, with a soft skin which belied her forty-five years. Nicola helped her to make the sauce for the pasta, then turned with a certain indolence to do the honors for the guest. But Michael, who had never felt himself to be a 'guest' in this household, had put on a record of Scarlatti.

"Do you know this?"

"Yes, it's one of his most beautiful..."

"I mean, can you play it?"

"Sure."

"Go on then, play...."

Nicola snorted.

"Please," Michael begged, gazing across at him. Nicola gave in, and turned off the stereo; he sat down at the piano beside the window which looked out at a hillside terraced with vines.

Rome, 1986. Nicola was thirteen, and was playing the piano in his grandmother's apartment. On a coffee-table there was a plate with home-made sweets, and Michael was eating them, slowly, sunk in an armchair. He was in his prime then, his skin clearer, his hair black. His gaze was fixed on the movement of Nicola's fingers on the keyboard, on his arms and his back....

Nicola made a mistake and gave a snort of irritation.

"Come over here; you must be tired," said Michael, a trifle paternally. Nicola came over to him, his light chestnut hair parted in the center and long, untidy; his eyes intensely green, his body slim and – presumably – supple. He sat in the armchair in front of Michael, crossing his legs and eating one of the sweets with appreciation. Between his legs, there was an unexpected swelling in his crotch.

"You have grown," Michael said to him.

Nicola didn't answer.

All of a sudden Michael felt embarrassed; his usual calm had given way to a nervous increase in his heartbeat at thoughts that left him a little breathless.

"You're a young man now," he said, awkwardly, "not a little boy any more. Boys start having certain thoughts at your age..."

'Dear God, what am I saying?' he thought to himself. 'This is too ridiculous; I'm going to make a fool of myself.'

"Do you have a girl-friend?" he asked.

"No."

"Strange. You're not a bad-looking boy...."

Nicola shrugged, after taking another cake. Michael was about to say something else, but the detested sound of the key in the lock announced the arrival of Rosa.

In the summer of the same year, they were at the seaside, on the coast of

Tuscany. The beach was so wide that people were scattered, and there was always an impression of solitude around, with the high vault of the sky as blue as in an early Renaissance painting. They were all three on the beach; Rosa was preparing rolls, while Michael sun-bathed and Nicola was playing with a little plastic tractor in the sand. They ate in silence; Rosa put all the waste paper in a plastic bag and got up, saying she was going to fetch the sun-cream from the car. They were alone, he and the boy, who had stretched out face downwards on the sand. Michael, lying on his side, gazed at the boy's still pale body, the perfect back, the well-formed legs. He stretched out a hand and laid it on Nicola's back and let it travel slowly down till it reached the elastic of his red bathing trunks. Slowly he pushed the elastic down and with an exploratory finger he felt between the two firm, rounded buttocks. He knew that Rosa wouldn't be back for at least ten minutes: the car was a long way away. The costume slid back completely from the object of his desire, revealing the innocence of the young form. Nicola was moaning softly, and this encouraged Michael to go further. With the palm of his hand he separated the boy's buttocks and exposed the pink opening to the sun, small but beautifully formed. Michael stretched himself out, and with his tongue nudged at the tiny fissure, seeking to part it. He kissed it, as though it were a mouth. Nicola was breathing quickly and moaning softly. But Michael had to abandon his pursuit. As Rosa returned, silence once again enveloped the tumult of his heart and his senses.

They had finished their meal and were drinking coffee on the veranda which looked out over the garden. On the table there were plates with the remains of the sauce, and with left-overs from the meat; red wine stood in the bottoms of the glasses. They felt that sensation of fullness and slight nausea which is sometimes also the aftermath of love-making.

"I heard Nicola playing earlier on," said Rosa.

"Yes, I had to beg him; he didn't want to," Michael answered.

"How is his playing?"

"It's excellent; he certainly hasn't lost his talent."

Nicola lowered his head, embarrassed and unsociable; Rosa looked at him with that mixture of satisfaction and pride typical of the mother who has brought up her child alone.

"I practice when I'm alone, sometimes," the boy said.

"Why, are you ashamed to play in front of me?" his mother asked, instantly offended.

"No, I just like to play on my own," was Nicola's rather abrupt defense. He had certainly learned to take a hard stand against his mother's

occasional outbursts of emotion.

"I'm proud of you, kid," said Michael, so that the boy wouldn't feel he was under attack. "Right from the time I started to give you lessons I knew you had talent." He lit a cigarette and leaned against the back of the sofa, with the air of someone who doesn't intend to say any more, or to get involved in the tension in the air, but only to relax and enjoy the warmth of this afternoon in the country.

Rosa began to clear away. Michael offered Nicola a cigarette.

"It's English – dry and no filter," he said. "I'm afraid you're depriving yourself of the pleasures of life. You have an ascetic look about you; you're pale, and too skinny. I remember only a couple of years ago your hair was longer, and there was a bit of a flush in your cheeks. But you've got a lot more muscle, in compensation – I suppose you go to the gym like all these sedentary kids, and manage to keep your conscience clear without making too much effort! But you're still a beautiful boy; I can't deny that."

Nicola smiled, as he always smiled at a compliment, without revealing his teeth, but with his face lit up. With the years he had not lost all his innocence; he still saw no hidden malice in a compliment, nor anything self-seeking. Michael suggested they should go for a ride in the car, and Nicola agreed. They told Rosa, who was just about to take an afternoon nap, and they promised to wash the dishes when they returned.

Michael sat comfortably at the wheel and chatted. Nicola, as usual, gazed out of the window and seemed not to be listening.

"Your mother is a bit odd today," Michael said. "She doesn't talk much in the way she used to – there was a time when I felt I was being completely swamped by her, though in fact what she said made a lot of sense. She always had a keen political instinct, your mother. Perhaps you should talk to her more; relations between you don't seem very easy."

"Maybe it's just your presence. Ever since you phoned to say you were coming, she's been a bit anxious."

"Not pleased?"

"No, I wouldn't say that; she seemed to be more anxious to make a good impression; perhaps she was afraid you'd find she'd aged, or something like that"

"Has she said anything to you?"

"She sort of hinted, with a couple of remarks, but I don't remember anything definite."

They were passing through a hilly region where the tufa landscape was irregular, but softly curving, and with only gentle climbs. Rows of olive trees were everywhere; they were in a forest of olives in the stillness of the

afternoon.

Nicola, in his own way, seemed to be intrigued by the discussion, and he went on, "Perhaps she feels as if we're two strangers, two people with whom she has nothing to share."

"Do you think that's because of me?"

"I didn't say that."

It was difficult for Rosa to accept things as they stood. She must have imagined that something of the kind existed, but she had stored it away at the back of her thoughts, and the deeper reality was out of anyone's reach.

It was the summer of two years after that incident on the beach in Tuscany. Rosa had rented a small attic in the center of Rome, because of the job commitments which meant that she had to be in the city a lot of the time. Michael was spending a good deal of time in Italy, as the guest of various friends – on Capri, in Sardinia and in Sicily, where he had had a tormented affair with a boy named Salvatore who had captured his sympathy with his life wracked by poverty and unhappiness. Michael even had to help get him out of jail – he had been found in possession of his father's hunting gun which, unknown to him, was loaded. Salvatore was a simple and good-natured boy in reality, but full of self-dramatization, lazy, and beset with problems. He had no job and had attached himself like a limpet to Michael, who as a result had had to leave Sicily secretly, abandoning his other intended visits, and return to Rome. There he found Rosa busy and constantly tied up, leaving Nicola on his own with his friends or, more often than not, just with his piano.

Nicola was more than usually pleased to see Michael; he had many things to talk about; he was going through a puzzling period in his life and there was no doubt that Michael inspired a mixture of almost filial respect and friendship in him which made him the ideal person in whom to confide and seek advice or at least comprehension.

So they found themselves alone in the sitting-room, with the windows thrown wide on the blue sky and the roofs of Rome, extending like a sea of terracotta broken by the domes of the churches. Nicola was playing, while Michael, seated on a white sofa, was following the notes of the Scarlatti sonata with the score. The boy's fingers were clumsy; he made mistakes.

"It's so easy, Nicola. What's the matter?"

Nicola stopped; suddenly he seemed completely calm.

"I'm in love."

"Oh yes? Well, that's nice.... Does Rosa know?"

Nicola was a little taken aback; he had thought that the news would



have more effect on Michael. His apparent indifference seemed almost to be aimed at reducing the importance of his sentiments.

"It's the real thing. I never felt anything like this about anyone. I'm bowled over, but at the same time I feel quite happy with it."

Nicola hesitated; with his feline gaze he watched Michael, who waited, with an air of detachment, to hear what would come next

"She's called Lucia; she's in my class at school. Every now and then I talk to her, and she's quite friendly to me, but I can't seem to get to know her."

"Is she very pretty?"

Nicola's eyes lit up and became more human and more innocent.

"She's really stunning. She's the dream – the ideal girl everyone wants to have. You'd love her."

Michael lowered his eyes and smiled with a disarming elegance. Nicola coughed and looked out of the window at the afternoon which was just turning golden. He had got up as he spoke and his figure was silhouetted against the window with its drawn curtain.

"Undress," said Michael softly; the word was not so much an order as an invitation.

Nicola was turned to stone. He realized his words had not touched Michael at all; they hadn't stamped out the desire they both felt. But he began to undress, trembling slightly, throwing his clothes in a heap on the marble floor. Then, naked, like a shadow in the light filtered through the curtains, he stood there, a silhouette of perfect elegance: his well-shaped legs, his sex protruding strongly, his thighs a little wide, the slimness of his torso. It was a statue which expressed not so much the strength of masculinity as the grace of adolescence, a timid and apprehensive grace which offers itself while remaining an enigma.

"Come over here," said Michael in a voice betraying the strength of his feelings and his excitement.

When that marvelous young body was once again beneath his hands, he had Nicola lie full length on the couch, and, bending over, he began paying court to the boy, licking the toes one by one, the soles of the feet, the ankles, nibbling at the fleshy calves and the thighs where the first signs of hair were appearing. He moved on to the orifice, which he stimulated with his tongue, made Nicola tremble with pleasure. Then gently inserting his middle finger there, he guided the boy's penis to his mouth, and in one breath took it, down to the roots, synchronizing the movement of his finger with that of his lips, then releasing the boiling rod while he took both balls in his mouth. Nicola was at the point of orgasm; pleasure seared him like a blade, and his

muscles contracted, but Michael interrupted his labors for a moment, to allow the threat of orgasm to subside, quietly, back into its source. This gave them an instant of calm in which they remained, mouth to mouth, for a long moment, before Michael slowly lifted his face from the boy's and looked into his eyes, overwhelmed by the excess of pleasure which he was unable to control. What a surfeit of affection, of love, Michael felt for this boy; he felt the need to protect him, to hold him clasped tightly, caressing the slightly protruding shoulder-blades, the curves of the neck. The soft, fresh skin, fair as a child's made him tremble with tenderness and love.

Rosa was arriving; the lift announced her approach. Michael half-heard its hum, and listened as it ascended without stopping on a lower floor. "Nicola, quickly – put your clothes on," he just managed to say. And Nicola, aroused from the kind of half-sleep into which he had lapsed, realized at once what was happening and leaped up from the couch, gathered up his clothes, closely followed by Michael, and rushed to lock himself in the bathroom just at the moment that the key clicked in the lock.

Rosa was not one of those mothers who pretend to themselves not to know what's happening. She had already taken in everything when she saw Michael standing up and nervously lighting a cigarette; usually so careful about the way he dressed, this time he looked a bit disheveled. And then Nicola, shut in in the bathroom, wrestling with his clothes... well, the scene was clear enough. There was no need to make a drama of it; after all, a woman like her would already have sensed something a bit overheated in that almost parental friendship between the two. Her only mistake, an error of form, one might almost say, was to view the relationship in terms of a rather ambiguous kind of incest. She saw nothing graceful or innocent in it, used as she was to viewing everything that happened in the world with a tired cynicism.

They reached a little medieval church dominated by three rough ancient towers standing above it like totem-poles. They entered the church, which was denuded, focusing the attention all the more forcefully on a fresco portraying the Last Judgment, terrifying and didactic in its impact as a popular ballad. The scene culminated in the red devil at the right who, in the crude imagery of the times, was defecating out the damned after having gobbled them with his enormous jaws.

They left the church in silence and climbed up towards the towers which overlooked the whole countryside with the variegated greens of the olive groves and the darker undergrowth.

Michael took several snaps of Nicola who, as usual, posed with a

measure of nonchalance, tinged this time with a slight air of sadness. His slender, strong young body, so indefinable in form, had been offered so many times, yet it seemed to have something of the unexplored. Michael was caught between the excitement of contemplating the boy and the thought that his arrival was not all that welcome to him – in short, he felt something of an intruder in what he had long thought of as his own family. He felt alone, excluded and useless in that silent deserted spot with its strange air of religiosity.

They exchanged few words during their return to the house, where they found Rosa at work in the kitchen, preparing the dinner. She was cutting up onions and carrots and vegetables, while on the table there was a plucked chicken and beside it a basket with a tuft laden with large red peppers, reminding Michael of the naïf flames of hell in the medieval church wall painting.

A guest was expected. She was a friend of Nicola's, whom he had met at the university; a very rich girl, daughter of an Italo-American film producer. She arrived at the wheel of her own powerful steel-gray car from which she emerged like a Raphael figure, her reddish hair flowing wild, like the branches and leaves of a tree, her gray eyes alert and all-assessing.

It was quite normal for someone to turn up for a visit, and in fact in the past there had been more people coming and going, for recently Rosa had lost many of her former contacts; her prestige had declined and many of her friends who had kept the ideological flag flying for such a long time had fallen victim to the mediocrity and political decline of those years.

Nicola seemed very ill at ease – and indeed who wouldn't have, finding himself in those circumstances? In contrast, the girl, whose name was Celia, was very friendly to Michael, and they talked a good deal to each other during dinner. The conversation was mainly about the cinema. Rosa kept to her limited role of bringing in the various courses, serving the pieces of chicken, and taking as little part as possible in the conversation. Every now and then Michael cast a glance at her, it was as if she had become devalued, robbed of her sexual interest, the strength and dignity which had once lit up her face had disappeared and a veil of rancor had taken their place. Her skin was dry and her neck dotted with small marks – her whole figure had been redimensioned. Michael felt a wave of affection for this woman whom, in his own way, he had loved; he felt as if he had betrayed her when he admitted his homosexuality, and sensed that she had never really accepted this situation. And then, there was Nicola....

Celia was talking about Godard, stroking her red hair half-

consciously with one hand as she spoke. This girl – who was she? Was she Nicola's lover? Michael suddenly felt a spasm of real hatred towards her; Celia, this unknown who had probably had sex with Nicola without thinking much about it, and now might even have carried him off with what could only be the illusion of love. Women: always different; always the same – in the pain and the challenge they brought always unknown, like angels sent to claim something, to remind one of wrongs suffered. Silent or vocal, they were always the same.

After dinner, Celia made herself useful, helping Rosa to clear away. Michael and Nicola were in the garden; every now and then Nicola bent down to pluck up a medlar-plum from the ground, while Michael, standing upright in the pose of the mature man, with hands clasped behind his back, watched him silently.

"Do you like Celia?" Nicola asked him, not without a touch of embarrassment.

"In what way?"

"Well, she's very pretty, isn't she?"

"Oh yes."

"And very bright."

"Indeed."

"Why that smile, Michael? Are you making fun of me?"

"No, no. I'm sorry. You seemed so embarrassed, just like a kid. Maybe you were right after all this morning. We never really change."

"For God's sake, why do you always have to be so complicated?"

Nicola offered him a medlar.

"Nicola," Michael said, his voice suddenly changed, "a few minutes ago you used my name."

"So what?"

"You never did, in the past, when you were little."

Michael laid a hand on His shoulder, and Nicola frowned slightly, without losing his sardonic smile.

"How was the plum?" he asked Michael.

"A bit sour."