

The Fireater

(First Broadcast by the BBC World Service)

Every night of his life Giacom used to eat fire. He told me this one day when he came to my room to borrow sugar. "James,"he said,"every night since I was a boy I eat fire.' Mango fuoco' - fire-eater, like in Pinocchio. You know why? Because when I was a boy there was nothing else to eat." He told it too many times to sound funny any more.

That winter I was staying in a delapidated lodging house off Via Coronari, trying to make enough money to live on. I shared the house with Giacomo and a Norwegian artist called Bjorn. Itinerants used to rent mattresses on a nightly basis and lie snoring in the hall with their possessions tied to their feet.

The whole establishment was ruled by Spuria, a huge basso-profundo lady swathed in black who prowled the dingy corridors of her decaying tenement like some pre-historic denizen hiding from the outside world. Whatever the cause of her complaint the fact was that Spuria was just too fat to ever go outside the house. Even if she could have squeezed past the doorway she would never have negotiated the steps into the courtyard.

Despite being confined to the first floor, Spuria managed her affairs very well. Her voice reached most of the shops within a hundred yards and she lowered a basket from the window when the errand boys delivered the shopping.

She needed a daily vitamin injection and rather than pay anyone else she offered me a rent reduction if I performed the task. Every morning she thumped on my door and marched in carrying an antiquated metal syringe that looked as if it had barely survived the siege of Sebastopol. And then crouching over the bed she hoisted up her voluminous skirts and gasped. "Fai, professore, fai! (Get on with it!)".

I remember how on the very first occasion Spuria even had the courtesy to introduce us. Reaching a podgy hand back as far as she was able, she patted her enormous posterior and grunted,"Professore, I call this the 'Internazionale'," leaving me to assume that this was because of all those other previous foreigners who had delivered their mark on those flaccid acres of flesh.

Bjorn lived in the next room. He had a racking cough and eeked out an existence almost entirely on porridge and cigarettes. He spent the morning painting in bed to keep warm, and every evening would carry his pictures down to Piazza Navona, set up his display, and hope for a sale.

Giacomo occupied a tiny box room with no outside window. Every evening he too toiled down via Coronari. Sometimes I helped him carry his bottles of paraffin while he shivered inside his plastic raincoat wearing only a fake leopard-skin loin-cloth underneath. In the raw January night our little procession made a marked contrast to the elegant fur-coated shoppers.

Giacomo was not built quite like the superman he pretended to be, but in the light of his oily flares his gleaming shaven head gave him a compelling oriental appearance. No one ever noticed the troubled eyes hidden by shadows. They saw instead what they wanted to see - a wild devil man branding his body with fire, breathing out billows of flame thirty feet into the air.

He always attracted a large crowd, but it melted mysteriously away the moment he came round with the hat, and he never managed to gain more than a very meagre collection. While Giacomo lit up the piazza with sudden burst of flame the artists, Bjorn among them, waiting hopefully beside their displays under the wrought-iron lamps.

Even on the coldest nights a large crowd of spectators descended on the piazza, strolling from the fountain nearest the Tiber to the one at the other end. In the centre dominating everything rose the massive statue of the four rivers; four giants each straddling a basin wide enough for small boys to jump into in summer, while soaring above an obelisk pierced the sky.

Five hundred years of admiration hovered here. Japanese mustered in groups, matronly american tourists, and the Romans themselves, taking their evening stroll, dressed to kill for the nightly contest of the "bella figura" , looking for all their elegance rather ephemeral beside the gaunt stone supermen.

The evening performance ended between eleven and midnight. Then the crowds went home and the dealers, painters, pick-pockets and hustlers retired to the cheap wine cellars, the paper tablecloth trattorias and the busy pizzarias round via del pace. Here they steamed out the cold, eating minestrone soup and sausages and drinking the rough red wines from the Alban hills.

It was at one of these crowded tables that Giacomo told me his story. "My father was killed by the Camora, the mafia of Naples. He was not big mafioso, not a big fish, just a timid man who was as frightened of my mother and grandmother as he was of the men he had to carry messages for. And a frightened man ends in the gutter with his throat slit. My mother had no money to feed us so at ten years old I went out to work in a bar. Until one day the circus came.

How magnificent it seemed: a half starved elephant covered with tawdry bangles, some pathetic clowns, a few threadbare ponies, but to me it was sheer magic. Every moment I could escape from the bar I ran off to watch the circus. They were people from another planet and when they pulled down the tattered tent and moved off south, I went with them." He shrugged.

"Were you unhappy?" "No,no, just disappointed because when the masks came off the people were the same as everyone else. They were not unkind to me. Italians like children. At first they tried to make me a clown and for a while every night I fell into buckets of whitewash and had water and flour thrown at me, but I never quite managed to be funny and sad at the same time, which is the secret of every clown.

"So they tried to make me an acrobat but I couldn't control my movements. Then they tried to teach me the wire-a trapeze artist, but I was scared of heights." "So in the end you became a fire-eater?" "Ah, James, it is not difficult. Just long as when you squirt out the stream of parafin you don't stop halfway through." He chuckled but it was only his mouth that smiled, not his eyes.

"Suppose you get burned?" "My tongue is very hard. With a little chalk you feel only at the tip and the sides. The flames go out as the torch goes in and blazes as it comes out. As for my skin I rub dust into it." Two nights later Giacomo had an accident.

For some reason he had chocked and the billowing flame he was spraying out spilled back onto his upturned face.

I wasn't there but Bjorn described what happened. "I heard him screaming. You couldn't see his head for a bright ball of flame but nobody in the crowd did a thing. They were loving it. You should have seen the ghoulish excitement on their faces. And Giacomo could tell. "You bastards!" he kept on screaming.

Bjorn was still quite shaken. I poured us both more wine. "He was rolling about on the ground lashing his head with his hands. I threw my coat over him and took him to the Guglio Caesere hospital across the river."

Giacomo was not too badly burned. For a week he stayed in his box room with his hands and head bandaged. He shrugged off the accident but Bjorn avoided telling him that another fire-eater had arrived in the piazza.

"How do I tell him? You haven't seen this new 'mango fuoco' . He's a real Tarzan, a real 'buffone'." But Giacomo soon found out. The day the bandages came off he confided in me. "There's a new fire-eater, I hear James. Tell me, is he very good?" "Not as good as you." He smiled. "James, thank you, but tell me the truth, please. Is it true he eats glasses and razor-blades and snaps pencils with banknotes?"

I nodded. The previous evening I had gone out with Bjorn to inspect him. "The pencils certainly, but that's nothing. As for the wine glasses, I'm not convinced. Perhaps there's a trick," I suggested hopefully. "Perhaps they're not really made of glass."

"No trick. I've seen it done. Also the razor blades. You must eat much bread." There were tears in his eyes as he commented sadly, "But I, Giacomo Mangofuoco can eat only fire."

Two nights later the three of us stepped down via Coronari to the piazza. The other fire-eater had already established himself in Giacomo's customary space at the Tiber end in front of an expectant crowd.

Giacomo didn't say a word. He moved to the other end and set himself up opposite Bellini's church where high up under the cupola a white marble statue of the Virgin stared down with hand raised in alarm at the four pagan river giants far below. But despite all his strenuous efforts he could only draw very few of the crowd away from his rival.

"People are very fickle," Bjorn exclaimed angrily. He had made a sale that evening otherwise Giacomo would not have eaten. He tried to appear indifferent but it was obvious how bitter he felt.

"I wanted to suggest he try another job," Bjorn admitted later in my room. "As what," I asked. "The only thing he's ever done is eat fire. He'll never get a job in a bar or anywhere else with that head." For Giacomo, though no beauty before, since his accident now looked truly horrific. The whole of his bald pate was pitted, blackened and scarred. "Perhaps in Cine-Citta, in a movie," suggested Bjorn. I interrupted, "You mean he should go to Fellini who likes freaks in his films?"

Every night the rivalry between the two fire-eaters grew more bitter and always Giacomo came off worst. The 'Rival', as he called him, as well as chewing wine glasses and razor blades had started to swallow swords. Giacomo each night gathering fewer admirers could only eat his fire.

I wasn't there the night the Rival challenged him to a contest but Bjorn told me all about it as in solemn despair we walked back from the hospital. "When I arrived the two of them were already at it. If anything Giacomo was the more impressive, his fireballs cremated the entire piazza. Even the four river Gods seemed awed."

Bjorn pulled his overcoat tighter around him. "Suddenly the Rival snatched up a wine glass, chewed it, spat out some splinters and proceeded to eat the rest right down to the stem. You should have heard the crowd. They just went wild." Bjorn turned his back to the wind to light a cigarette. "Giacomo made his decision. By this time the crowd had started a mocking chant, goading him on. He picked up two of the Rival's glasses and ate them one after the other, stem and all."

The sky was paling over the Aventine hill. I glanced at my watch. Six o'clock. We turned into Campo dei Fiori to find the fish market coming alive and the traders warming themselves beside fires of burning boxes. In the centre, perched on a plinth above the stalls, brooded the hooded figure of Savonarola.

Bjorn peered up at the ravaged features. "Two of a kind," he said morosely. "Fanatics dead by their own endeavours." I only wanted to forget the last few hours and Giacomo's troubled eyes seeking a reassurance I had been unable to give. We went into a bar and had a coffee with a dash of grappa. Bjorn started coughing and lit another cigarette. Outside it was suddenly day.