



WILLIS'S TUSCAN RETREAT

an autobiographical note

by

Willis Crumb

There has been little comment among the scientific community on the easily observable fact that intelligence is an attribute with which non-English speaking people are only modestly endowed.

I waved our passports in front of the rental agent to remind her we were citizens of the United States of America. Flipping mine open, I pointed to my name, Willis C. Crumb, hoping it might be familiar. As a published novelist, I am not unknown in educated circles. From her blank reaction, I saw I was dealing with a semi-literate.

“We want to rentare un auto,” I said again. I took care to speak slower and louder. I was not in a good mood. After our flight from Boston had landed in Florence, nearly two hours ago an official at Immigration had delayed us unnecessarily because of some bureaucratic misunderstanding.

The woman agent leaned forward, holding out her hand as if to ask for something.

“Your *patente*?”

“No, we are very impatente.” I caught a glimpse of rounded, olive breasts peaking through her white blouse. Given brains, she could have been attractive. “We want a car.”

Eleanor stepped in front of me, and passed over her driver’s license.

“*Per favore, vorremo noleggiare una macchina media,*” she gabbled.

I drummed my fingers on the counter as the agent completed a long, printed form, while explaining something to Eleanor.

"They'll have a car ready for us in about ten minutes," Eleanor told me. "She just has to deal with some other customers first."

I felt my equilibrium out of balance. We should have been on our way by now if the idiot immigration official had not taken me aside. He made me wait while he checked the computer and made some long distance calls, claiming he had to verify my passport. My photo matched a face he was supposed to be looking out for. Finally, he apologized but it meant we were among the last to come through Customs. Now I was in no mood for any more nonsense. Every moment of our stay in Italy was valuable. For years, the daily stresses of life had blocked my thought processes. In an attempt to solve my writer's block, my wife and I had rented a Tuscan villa for six weeks as a creative retreat where she could paint while I started my new novel. It was my long-awaited cure and I was not going to allow petty frustrations to thwart me at the start.

"I'm going to see if there's a bar in the Departures lounge," I told Eleanor.

"I really don't think --," Eleanor began.

"You watch the bags You know what Italians are like."

I picked up the passports and licenses and slipped them into in the leather travel folder I had purchased for the trip. I like to keep important documents together.

The bar was almost empty. The only other customer was a distinguished looking businessman in a dark, striped suit.

I relaxed for the first time since we had landed in Italy. Dropping my folder on the bar, I waved my arm to catch the bartender's attention.

"*Una cerveza,*" I said.

The bartender stared at me in a stupid, foreign way.

"*Cer-ve-za,*" I said more loudly.

"*Birra,*" said the solitary customer on my left.

I turned to stare at him, annoyed that he might be trying to get an order in before my own, but he smiled at me disarmingly.

"We call it "birra" here," he said. His English had only the hint of a foreign accent. "At least, I assume it's beer you wanted?"

I shrugged. "Beer, wine, whatever. I just need a drink."

"Then allow me to make a suggestion." Without waiting for my response, he ordered a cocktail from the bartender.

My first reaction was doubtful, but as I downed the bitter, reddish brown liquid, I felt better.

"*Negroni*," he said, replying to my unasked question. "Easy to make, one third Campari, one third sweet Martini and one third gin. Please excuse me, but you look familiar. You are an actor perhaps?"

"I've had my moments of fame." At least one critic had referred to my novel as "unforgettable" and I smiled modestly as I emptied my glass. "That was very good, by the way."

"Then allow me to buy you another." He leaned across an empty seat to shake my hand. "Let me introduce myself, Pietro Sangiovine. I don't use the title nowadays."

"Title?"

"Count of Sangiovine, but please, just call me Pietro." He raised his glass as my next drink came. "Your good health, Mr. . . . No, let me guess your name. Of course, you work in Hollywood?"

"You're getting warm." I opened my passport to reveal my name. "Ring a bell?"

After studying it for a while, he looked closely at my face and exclaimed aloud, "Of course. Willis C. Crumb! You're a . . . No, don't tell me."

He clasped a hand to his forehead, lost for a moment in thought. He beckoned to the bartender to bring me another *negroni* and turned to me again. "You're a famous writer?"

"*The Cockroach in the Coffin* is perhaps my best known novel," I said.

"WILLIS!"

I recognized the voice but I finished my drink before turning around. Fortunately, as the *negronis* had stabilized my equilibrium sufficiently, I was not unduly disturbed by Eleanor's shout. From her glistening forehead and panting breath, I suspected she had over-exerted herself again. A willowy blonde with what many might consider an attractive figure, despite her age, she was too thin for her own good. I wanted to introduce my new friend but he had suddenly disappeared.

"I put the bags in the car," Eleanor panted. "We're ready to go."

"About time too." I put my hand out for the key.

"I'm driving," Eleanor said. "You're drunk."

Her voice was cold. She needed a *negroni* or two to loosen up.

"Then I'll navigate," I said.

I managed to unfold the map before falling asleep in the passenger seat. Some time later, I awoke as the car slowed and I looked up in alarm. Ahead of us, armed *carabinieri* were flagging us down on a quiet country road.

“Keep driving,” I whispered.

Eleanor came to a stop and listened as an officer leaned by her window. She said something in Italian and he waved us on with a friendly smile. I offered to take over the driving. She told me to go back to sleep.

Eleanor's bad mood dissolved as soon as we arrived at the villa. The antique structure of brick and reddish stone appeared to grow from the steep, hillside on which it perched. She clucked in delight as she set her easel up outside. Sheltered under a vine, the tiled patio overlooked a rolling landscape of Tuscan hills, made up from a patchwork of olive groves, vineyards and fields of beaming sunflowers.

“I could start painting right away,” she cooed. “If this doesn't cure your writer's block, nothing will.”

I did not bother to explain that the creative process of writing is more complicated than the simple craft of painting a canvas. It takes time to find the muse. It occurred to me, as it had before, that I might have been better off coming to the retreat on my own, but I needed someone to cook and clean. Also, Eleanor was paying for the trip.

She sat out on the patio while I went inside to take a seat by the window in the dining room. I plugged in my laptop and looked at the landscape as I waited for it to boot up.

I typed the sentence, “I stared out across the Tuscan hills.” It was a good beginning but for the life of me, I could not think what to write next. I alternated between looking at my laptop and staring out of the window. Outside on the patio, Eleanor filled her canvas with a glowing pattern of green, yellow, ochre and blue. I opened up a new page on my word processor and typed the same sentence again.

Eleanor was no longer outside. I had just noticed the fact when I heard her voice from behind.

“Isn't it wonderful, Willis. How could anyone fail to be inspired?”

“Uh-huh.” I saved my file and closed the page.

“About to start a new chapter?” she asked. “Why not take a break? We need to give some time to ourselves. We've grown so far apart, Willis. ”

I understood what she wanted and slipping my hand inside her shirt, I pulled her down onto my lap.

“That's not what I meant,” Eleanor said, teasing me.

I ignored her and caressed her breasts. It was a long time since I had felt physical arousal, and to my dismay the old magic was not coming back. The thought of inviting intimacy and then failing to perform was too humiliating to contemplate.

"It's no use," I told her, knowing it was better to be blunt. "It's a matter of age."

"You poor old thing," Eleanor said. "You mustn't worry . . ."

"Not my age. Yours. You don't excite me the way you used to."

She let out an exclamation, which I took to be disappointment. To soften the blow, I told her that I might feel differently after dinner and a few drinks.

"You better give me back my license." Her voice now sounded very different.

"License?" I echoed awkwardly.

"If we're going to eat, I'll have to go to the village and pick up some food."

Passport? License? I remembered placing my folder on the bar at the airport but I had no memory of picking it up..

"I'll go," I told her. "We'll have cocktails on the patio before dinner."

The village Coop, selling wine and food, was about to close when I arrived. With the aid of gestures and smiles, I found the bottles I needed.

On the way back to the villa, I hesitated at the first junction, remembering that in my hurry, I had forgotten to buy food. I reckoned that after a few *negronis* Eleanor would be happy to overlook dinner for one evening. I took a left since the road looked more familiar. I soon had doubts.

About a mile ahead, I saw another police roadblock. It had certainly not been there before and now I was sure this was not the way I had come. I backed into a farm entrance to turn around and then speeded up to regain lost minutes. When I heard the siren, I slowed to let the police car pass. A dark blue Fiat with flashing lights squeezed by. It screeched to a stop a few yards ahead, forcing me to slam on the brakes. A bottle of gin flew off the back seat, shattering against the dashboard.

As a uniformed *carabiniere* approached my car, I leaned out to explain that I was in a hurry. I had left my wife alone in a rented villa. He said something I didn't understand. I smiled and opened my hands in helpless incomprehension.

"Your license, please," he said with a heavy accent.

I told him I thought I might have left my license in the airport.

Beckoning me out of the car, he looked inside and sniffed around it like a suspicious dog. Without warning, he yanked my hands behind my back and snapped handcuffs onto my wrists. Ignoring my vocal protests, he pushed me into the back of the police car.

"We go to the station in Siena," the policeman said.

It took nearly forty minutes to get to Siena and by then I was more angry than alarmed. Eleanor would be worried. I had been gone for more than an hour and she would probably have called the police already. At the station, a more senior officer who spoke better English told me I was being held on a charge of drunk driving. He asked for my license. I told him I had left my passport and license at the airport.

The officer nodded and asked me for the address of the villa where I was staying. I told him I didn't know it. Eleanor had made the arrangements.

My answer caused neither surprise nor distress.

"You can explain everything to the captain . . .," he said.

"Good," I said and got to my feet, more than anxious to sort out the nonsense with someone more intelligent.

"When he returns tomorrow morning," the officer finished as two *carabinieri* escorted me to a small barred cell.

As the door slammed shut, I reflected I had not played my cards well. I should have been more aggressive. To treat an author of my standing like a common criminal was unconscionable. It could take me days to recover my equilibrium. I slept poorly that night. I sat up at every sound, convinced that an apologetic officer would arrive any moment to escort me out. The next day, when at last someone came to take me to see the police captain, it had been light for several hours.

Swarthy with chiseled features and a black, neatly trimmed moustache, Captain Tartoni spoke while examining a file in front of him.

"I will not waste time, Mr. Crumb," he said, without looking up. His English was fluent with a barely detectable accent. "We have a more important matter on our hands. It is my intention to release you with a warning once I receive verification of . . ."

Looking directly at me for the first time, his voice tailed off, and his face lit up. I was pleased to be recognized, but soon I was to be even more confused.

"Luigi!" he exclaimed.

He barked an order and the handcuffs were snapped back onto my wrists while two *carabinieri* held my arms. I stared at the Captain in astonishment as he rattled off volumes of nonsensical Italian. When he came to a stop, he looked at me as if expecting an answer and then repeated what must have been a question.

I shrugged, which was difficult with my arms secured, and spoke as distinctly as I could. "No comprendere. No speaka di Italian."

The captain frowned. "Very well." At least he now addressed me in English. "To humor you, we'll maintain the charade, but the game's up Luigi Sardonello. Pretending not to speak Italian is only going to make things worse in the long run."

"The name's Crumb," I protested. "Willis C. Crumb and I . . ."

"And you've lost your license, lost your passport, can't remember where you're staying and can't remember your own telephone number," Captain Tartoni said.

He was tall, close to six feet. Women of a certain type might even consider him good looking in an Italian sort of way. He spoke to his colleagues and must have made some clever witticism because they all began to laugh.

"So where's Pietro?" he asked me in English. "I thought you two were inseparable."

"Pietro?" It was time to show some anger. "I tell you, when the American embassy hears . . ."

"We'll have no trouble proving who you are. Let me remind you, Luigi."

The captain removed a photograph from a file cabinet. If I had a few shocks before in the last twenty-four hours, nothing compared to the sensation that overcame me at that moment. The person depicted bore an uncanny resemblance to me. The caption printed below, *Luigi Sardonello, o 'Il Volpe,* meant nothing.

"Does that help your memory, Luigi?"

"It's not me," I said. "It's a lookalike." I remembered explaining to my writing class that a doppelganger was a cliché of bad fiction. Now I was confronted by the reality. Without my passport, it was going to be very hard to prove who I was.

"There could not be another human looking like you," the captain said. "That is impossible. Do you not remember that you're wanted for armed robbery, assault, fraud, forgery, dealing in narcotics, kidnap, and murder? That we have twenty-seven witnesses prepared to testify against you?"

I felt ill. The photograph was horrifyingly familiar. I even began to think it must be me. Then I remembered that the police had taken my fingerprints after my arrest. Although I objected vociferously to this indignity, I now saw it as my salvation.

"It may not have occurred to you," I told the captain, "that you have my prints. All you have to do is compare them and you'll see your mistake."

"Then at least we agree they are yours." The captain removed a card from the file in front of him and showed it to me. "You are sly old fox, Luigi. It was the first time we have ever been able to obtain a fingerprint from you. It completes our file."

It was the card the police had put my prints on the day before but the name above was LUIGI SARDONELLO. And the prints were undoubtedly mine. My confidence

evaporated completely. My legs gave way from under me, leaving me suspended by the two officers on either side.

"I'm not Luigi."

Even I was not convinced. I felt an unpleasant warmth and realized that something awful was happening to my bowels.

"You have been on the run a long time, Luigi. Your capture is a great honor. I am calling Rome to announce it. They will want you there as soon as possible."

"I am not Luigi Sardonello, whoever he is," I said, my voice rising to an involuntary squeak. "I'm Willis C. Crumb, the writer."

"I have the evidence of my eyes, Luigi." The captain wrinkled his nose and picked up the phone. "And you have an unpleasant smell. You will wait in your cell until I receive instructions. It is unfortunate that you have no one to vouch for you."

"My wife can vouch for me."

Already on the phone, the captain gestured to the *carabinieri* to take me away. Alone once more, I tried to console myself that the experience would benefit my writing but the only sentence that came to mind was, "I gazed at the wall of my cell."

My misery could not be for long. The captain would be in trouble as soon as his superiors got wind of what had happened. It does not take long to make a phone call and I expected my captors to return any moment. Minutes turned into hours. It was late afternoon when the *carabinieri* came back for me. I saw from their expressions that I was still in deep trouble. I became even more worried when I saw the captain. Instead of standing up to apologize, he glared at me as I entered.

"Is there no limit to your evil, Luigi? I have just learned that the Milan police believe they shot Luigi this morning."

He had another photograph in front of him and he turned it over with an expression of disgust. Something did not make sense. Although I was confused, it did not take me long to deduce the obvious. If the police had killed Luigi, it proved I was not Luigi. I pointed this out to the captain, making the explanation as simple as I could.

"Ah, I think I understand," he said. "If it's true we shot Luigi, it's impossible you are Luigi. Is that right?"

"Exactly. You've got it in one."

"I said they believed they shot you. Fortunately I have a witness." He snapped his fingers and one of his men left the room. "We captured your old associate Pietro Pianelli after a gunfight in Milan. He was the one who showed us your body. He tried to tell the police you died during the battle."

"Luigi's body," I corrected. "So what more do you need?"

He turned over the photograph on his desk and passed it over to me. "This body was found beside Pietro when he surrendered. Do you recognize it?"

I recoiled and suppressed my vomit. Italians could be trigger-happy. It would have taken several rounds of a fast-firing automatic to turn that body to pulp. I heard someone come into the room but I was too shocked to look.

"He's dead," I whispered.

"Ah, Pietro!" In rapid Italian, he spoke to someone standing behind me before addressing me again. "But who is dead? Please do not waste more time. Your old associate Pietro has made a plea bargain. And we have another witness, too. . ."

"I don't know any Pietro."

"Then please turn around so he can see you."

"Yeah, sure." As soon as I recognized the charming Count Sangiovine, I stood up in relief. "Thank God you're here, Count. We met at the airport. You bought me a *negroni*, or maybe two."

The count stared and said something to the captain.

"You remembered me as soon you saw me," I reminded him. "Willis C. Crumb, the novelist, right?"

Inexplicably, the count laughed and shook his head. Then, after shaking hands with the captain, he left, escorted by a policeman.

"So you have sorted out the truth at last," I said.

"Oh, yes." The captain looked pleased. "You used Willis C. Crumb as a decoy, didn't you, Luigi? The dead body was almost your double, but you made a mistake. You forgot he had identification with him."

There had to be a flaw to the captain's logic. He was right about me being clever but I had to think hard to work it out.

"There's no doubt on this one," the captain continued. "Your old friend Pietro has agreed to testify against you. I'll see you receive the maximum penalty under the law."

"Death?" I asked weakly, wondering what specific form of capital punishment Italian justice favored.

"We are not savages," the policeman answered "Only one country in the developed world makes a practice of putting humans to death. Now unless you have anything to say --."

"Wait!" I had remembered something. "You said you had two witnesses who could confirm my identity. Who's the other?"

"A woman has phoned claiming to be Mrs. Crumb and stating that Mr. Crumb disappeared last night."

"Eleanor!" I said, regaining my normal voice. "I told you she'll vouch for me."

The captain shook his head. "But we do not know she is Mrs. Crumb. She claims Mr. Crumb lost her driving license and her passport. It is what an impostor would say. They do not call you '*Il Volpe*' for nothing. On the other hand, in case she really is Mrs. Crumb, the Milan police prefer we do not tell her that they shot her husband by mistake. You see my dilemma?"

"You do not believe she is who she says she is? If she's Eleanor, I can testify to that."

He nodded. "Indeed, but that raises a problem of logic. I have another way."

"Ask her mother?"

"I plan to go see her. Are you prepared to face the woman whose husband you killed?"

"Sure. But if it's Eleanor and she identifies me, you said you still may not believe she is who she says she is."

"Art is my hobby and my passion."

"I don't see how that helps."

"Are you not familiar with the name Eleanor Crumb?"

"I told you. She's my wife."

"And that's all?"

"What more is there?"

"Even more you convince me you are Luigi. Eleanor Crumb's husband would know her reputation."

"I am Willis C. Crumb and my wife will confirm it."

"You're lying, of course, but I need only to look at this woman's painting to know if she is an impostor."

Captain Tartoni gave some orders and I was bundled into the back of a police van. As he handcuffed me to a steel rail inside the van, he explained, flatteringly I suppose, that I was too dangerous to be taken in an ordinary police car. I hardly cared. It was a forty-minute ride from Siena and not a comfortable one but when we bumped down the rough driveway and slewed to a stop in front of the villa, I felt a wave of relief. I was home free. Or almost. Peeking through a small, barred window of the police van, I could see Eleanor painting on the patio.

"Eleanor! Hey, Eleanor!" I shouted through the window.

She was concentrating on her work and it was several seconds before she turned. I thought she would be able to see me in the van but I was mistaken.

"It's me, Willis," I yelled. "Why the hell didn't you call the police sooner?"

Eleanor made a gesture as if swatting a mosquito and focusing again on her canvas. Captain Tartoni walked over to her and, after wasting time in exchanging polite greetings, watched her paint without saying a word. Standing in his crisply pressed uniform and glistening belt and buckles, he looked very official. I worried that he would soon conclude that Eleanor was not a real artist and therefore not who she claimed to be. I have had my doubts about my wife's work. Clearly he was not sure. As if trying to make up his mind, he walked around her, studying the painting from every angle.

"*Bellissima!*" he exclaimed at last. He was only being polite because he was looking more at Eleanor than the painting.

He pointed toward me and the van and said something I couldn't quite hear.

"Oh, no, no," Eleanor said. "I assure you it's Willis. That voice is unmistakable." She added something else in a whisper and giggled.

"No, that is not possible. If you are the famous Eleanor Crumb, I will have to release him on your word. If you are not, I would have to take you both back to Siena. Do you have proof of your identity?"

"He lost our passports but I have some press cuttings and a few photos of Willis."

She laughed at his inaudible reply and put her brush down. "Of course, I can show you more of my paintings. I brought two with me. Would you like to see them?"

"More than anything," the captain said, in a low, vibrating baritone.

"Come on in," she said. "They're in the bedroom. And perhaps you'd like a glass of wine?"

"Later," I shouted. It was no time to be offering hospitality.

I was the one who needed a glass of wine. Perhaps more than one. I assumed the matter would be settled in moments. Eleanor could be very persuasive. I might even accept Tartoni's apology. When they did not reappear after several minutes, however, I feared my wife was having trouble. If the policeman knew anything about art, her paintings would almost certainly fail to pass muster. I became more worried as time passed and the daylight turned to dusk.

The light went on in the bedroom and someone closed the shutters. Eleanor laughed. I heard creaks, a few bumps. My wife is not well organized and I guessed she was moving suitcases as she hunted for her paintings. I heard her exclaim aloud, an ecstatic cry of delight. Obviously she had found one of my photographs. Moments later, Captain Tartoni shouted out, sounding just as pleased. It was a good sign and I expected him to appear

any moment release me. Yet I had to wait a long time before he came back outside. I could guess the reason. His uniform, no longer so neat, was partly unbuttoned. He had clearly been in an argument. My wife can be thoughtlessly tactless with foreigners. My suspicion was confirmed when I saw Eleanor standing at the door, no doubt thankful to see him leave.

He waved to her as he climbed into the front of the van and started the engine. Putting the vehicle in gear, he blew onto the palm of his hand and waved to Eleanor, an insulting Italian gesture. The tires were already scrunching on the rough gravel as I banged on the wall. The fool had forgotten I was there. He stopped and came around to the back to unlock my handcuffs. Forgetting my resolve to be forgiving, I told him I would report the incident to the American embassy. He smiled, I guessed in embarrassed apology. Still looking around at Eleanor as he drove out, he scraped the gatepost.

Alone together that evening, Eleanor and I sat out on the patio sharing a bottle of of *Brunello di Montepulciano* as we watched the flickering lights of distant villages nestled among the hill. I told her how upsetting the incident had been to me and how I could not understand why she had waited so long to report my disappearance. She gazed happily across the evening landscape, too overcome with joy at my return to say a word.

Next morning, I started a new page and rewrote the opening sentence, "I gazed across the Tuscan hills." Then I couldn't think of anything else to say.

THE END