Assimilation

by Caterina Edwards

At the end of his first month in Canada, Nino is convinced that he has made a mistake. This is not the place for him. But he cannot go back defeated, a failure, a fool in the eyes of his family and friends. He wants to return with something in hand, something to show for his sojourn in this wild west. Not just money, but accomplishment. He needs to be able to say I did this, I made this.

"Give it time," says Cesare, who has rented him a room.

With a year of high school English, Nino thought he would be able to manage, to make his way. He discovers that though he can read signs—stop, walk, men, women, Canada Customs, visa, police station—when people speak, he understands practically nothing. When a cab driver or a clerk or a prospective employer opens his mouth, Nino hears a flow of unintelligible sounds. He must rely on gestures, or Cesare, to communicate. And Cesare's own English is broken. Even Nino can hear that.

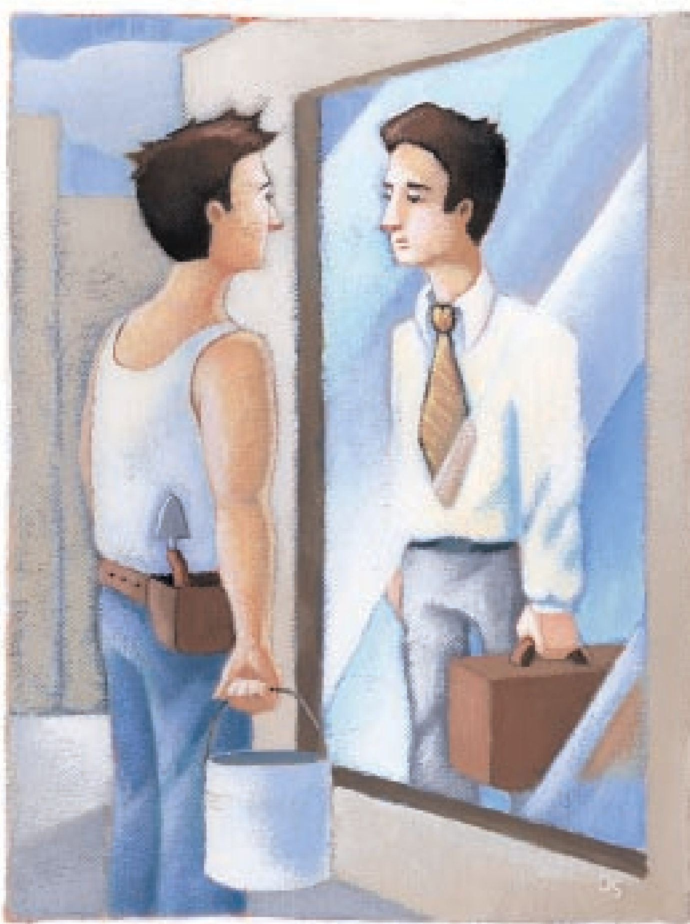
On his second day in Canada, another man, a tailor from Treviso, who does speak English clearly, if not correctly, takes him to an employment office for an insurance number. And in an hour, he has his very own number. He is certified legal; he can work in this country.

He is impressed by the tailor, by Cesare and his wife Amelia. They do not know him—Cesare's father was a friend of his father—but Cesare helps him, they all help him, automatically, without question. "That's what we do," Amelia says.

Nino is also impressed by the ease with which he registered for work. This is a better place, he thinks. Of course, being able to work and actually working are separate things.

His first job is with Canadian National Railways, working on a stretch of track an hour out of the city. The first new words he learns are "pick" and "shovel." And that is what he does, hour after hour: drive the pick into the ground and then shovel. He lasts three days. His legs, his back, his arms, his hands and even his head hurt worse each day. "This will kill me," he says.

On his second job, he lays plywood subflooring. He is fired by the contractor, who points out that the nails he takes so long to hammer



DENA SEIFERLING

consistently miss the beams. "You didn't get it right once," the man says.

"This is the land of possibility?" he asks Cesare.

Nino joins a work gang travelling through Northern Alberta pouring foundations. They work 14- to 16-hour days, but he hangs on until the company cites lost contracts and lays him, and many of the others, off. "Thank God," he tells Amelia. "You wouldn't believe the food in

those small town cafés. Garbage: fried, greasy garbage."

He goes to work at a car wash. At the end of the week, he realizes that he is earning half as much as he was as a tour guide in Venezia.

He phones the tailor, and together they take his diplomas, high school and university, into the employment office. A plump woman, dressed head-to-toe in pink, smiles and smiles at him, then tells him, through the translator, he will have to be re-educated, reassessed and re-examined here. Different standards, she says, different criteria.

The immigration official in Milan, the embassy staff in Rome: they told him that Canada needed skilled and educated workers. They recruited him. The Canadian government paid for his airplane ticket. They had all misled him—all of them. And he had been stupid to believe them. He, of all people,

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should have known that you couldn't trust anyone representing any form of government. There are no jobs for him. He isn't needed; he isn't wanted.

At the Italian grocery store, he meets an engineer who feels as frustrated as he does. The man has been in Edmonton for over a year and is working as a waiter in what passes for an Italian restaurant. He had visited a local lawyer of Italian origin who acts as a vice-consul. "I demanded that the Italian government pay for my trip home. I demanded that the government take responsibility," the engineer says. "Italy should be protecting its citizens, protecting them from charlatanism and exploitation."

"I bet he laughed," Nino says.

"Mr. Vice-Consul laughed," the engineer says. "I wanted to punch him."

"Italy doesn't give a shit. Canada neither."

At the end of his second month in Canada, Nino is convinced both that this is not the place for him and that there is no easy return. Then, as the days grow shorter and the air colder, giving an inkling of what is to come, he rediscovers hope. He hears about a rich and successful Italian architect whose company is building all over Alberta. He hears that Peruzzi, a Florentine, prefers to hire Italians. And he must need architects, technicians, surveyors, assistants, designers; Nino is eager and qualified to fill any of those jobs.

He puts on his best suit and tie; he takes out his diplomas. He cannot deal with phones and English-speaking secretaries. He goes to the company offices. He is persistent: he waits; he will not leave. At closing time, with his chin up and his back straight, he walks into Peruzzi's enormous office. But the man does not receive Nino the way he expected.

When Nino recites his qualifications, Peruzzi assumes an expression of distaste, as if Nino is a panhandler with his hand extended. "I don't need an architect."

Nino, who checked out a couple of his high rises the day before, and was disappointed by their ugliness, would like to differ. "I am a certified *geometra* as well. It took me several years to decide what I wanted to do. I studied one thing, then the other. They are related, of course. See—my diplomas."

"I don't give a flying fuck about these pieces of paper." Nino has heard this before. He will hear it again, many times. In Canada, whenever his education is mentioned, it is dismissed. Strong arms, a strong back, and money: that's what matters, he is told over and over. "Anyway," Peruzzi shuffles the pages of Nino's curriculum vitae, "you never worked as an architect."

"Renovations," Nino says. "I designed—"

"Restorations. In Firenze, the rules and regulations that have to be followed, the government boards to be pleased: a nightmare. You couldn't put up a building over four stories. And it had to blend in with the old ones. My creativity was in chains."

Thinking of those two high rises he had seen, Nino again has to suppress the urge to say something pointed. "Makes it tough to make a profit."

"Here, it's different," Peruzzi says. "Here they don't give a dried fig what you tear down. Or what the new building looks like. We are free."

Peruzzi hires Nino to do odd jobs on the construction site of a warehouse. Nino is to assist: to fetch and carry, to clean up after, to follow orders. Joe boy.

Earning a measly $1.50 an hour, Nino realizes he is being tested, but for what? Patience? Loyalty? And if he passes, will there be a reward? A job that does not leave him with screaming muscles at the end of the day?

It is mid-November and cold, too cold for anyone to work outside. But the work proceeds: a steel skeleton welded, walls raised. When he complains, the other men laugh. "This is nothing," they say. "Wait 'til it gets really cold. 'Til your breath freezes in the air. 'Til your bare skin freezes in two or three minutes."

On advice, Nino goes to a shop called Army & Navy and buys a heavy parka (par-ka, he learns to say), deerskin gloves and work boots. Still, when outside, his forehead throbs, his cheeks burn, his fingers and knees stiffen. He dawdles in the trailer, hovering over a heater, stretching out the breaks. To three workers from Reggio, Calabria, adjusting hat brims and pulling on gloves before they brave the outside, Nino says: "*Abandon hope all ye who enter here*." All three look mystified. "Out there is hell," Nino says.

"And in here, purgatory. We're paying for our sins."

"It is only going to get worse," one of the three says. "You'll see," says another.

The temperature drops and drops; the snow falls. The site manager suspends the work. Nino is moved to a small factory where the parts of prefabricated houses are made.

Giacomo, who studied to be a lawyer in Rome, stands beside him on the various assembly lines. Together, they are rotated from beams to window frames, from counter tops to floors. He tells Nino that Peruzzi hires Italians because he can pay them less.

He tells him that a building that their boss built in Italy, or maybe Argentina, fell down.

Once a week, Peruzzi strolls through the plant, inspecting. Each time, he pauses when he comes to Nino. He plants a hand on Nino's shoulder. "How are you doing, *bischero*," using the Tuscan word for dickhead.

Nino does not smile. "You can call me Nino." He uses the *tu* form with Peruzzi, as Peruzzi has with him. The boss laughs, strolls on.

"You've got balls," Giacomo says.

"It irritates me. The condescension and the vulgarity."

"He's a Tuscan. They have the foulest mouths in Italy."

The next week, Peruzzi again stops when he comes to Nino. "Hey, fuckface, what are you fucking up today?"

Letting go of the drill, Nino turns. "Look at your own face. You'll see that you're the dickhead." And he walks out.

After the Christmas break, he finds a job as an assistant to a tiler. Nino is careful and precise cutting the tiles and laying them. He is good at patterns, at colours and finishes. He makes his suggestions to the tiler, who passes them along to the store- and homeowners as his own. Nino starts an English class in the evenings. Six months in Canada and he is beginning to understand what is necessary.

Nino meets a girl at a bus stop. Haltingly, he asks which bus will take him to Woodward's downtown. He knows the answer, but seeing the girl standing there bundled up, shoulders hunched, a red scarf drawn across her mouth, only her dark eyes visible, he is touched. He wants to speak, to coax her out of her cocoon. She pulls down the scarf to answer. She smiles; "I'm going there myself," she says.

Of course, Nino thinks. I should have been doing this from the beginning. What better way to learn English? Nino is no Casanova, not like some of his old friends. He has neither the energy nor the interest to conquer for the pleasure of conquering. But he had his adventures. Especially with the pretty, eager girls—Swedish, French, German, Yugoslav—who flood into Venezia each summer. So many of them are looking for an experience, a flirtation; they expect a Latin lover to go with the palaces and the gondolas. And now and then, Nino had obliged; he had done his duty in service of the reputation of Italian men.

Of course, Nino thinks, as he talks to Colleen with his eyes and hands and broken sentences. "What better way to learn English?" he tells Giacomo. "To get to know Canada?"

"Be careful," Giacomo says. "You don't know the customs here. You're plunging in blind."

Nino shrugs. "It's all easy here. No problem." And Colleen is easygoing and placid, a big-breasted, thick-ankled Alberta girl. Her hair hangs down her back, and she prefers flowered cotton dresses that reach down to her feet. "She lets me do anything," Nino tells Giacomo, laying a finger on the side of his nose. "Anywhere. I don't have to ask."

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Once more, he thinks Canada is about freedom, space and possibility.

Colleen introduces him to her group of friends. They have known each other since high school, they take turns saying (which, Nino thinks, is no excuse for being so dull). Every Friday, they go the bar, which, he discovers, is not a bar, or even a single place, but a series of beer parlours. the Riv, the Commercial, the Klondiker and the Cecil: enormous shabby rooms with rows and rows of small round tables topped with terrycloth and glasses and glasses of beer. The friends pull a few tables together. They throw their dollar bills onto a pile. The waitress automatically brings twenty or thirty glasses at a time and wordlessly fishes the right change out of the pile.

A couple of the girls ignore him, but the others flirt, hanging over him as they teach him new words or give him advice on Canadian life. "Your accent is so sexy," one says. "Don't you love it here," says another.

The men of the group don't like him. They mutter to each other; they exchange looks. "What sound does spaghetti make when it hits the wall?" one says. "Wop, wop, wop," say the others. Most of them drain glass after glass of the beer, until they slur their words and laugh or cry, fight or embrace.

Nino wonders whether all Canadian youths are like them. Unlike his friends in Italy, they never discuss politics or philosophy, Marxism or capitalism, books or films or ideas. They talk of hockey and foot-

ball, of the cars they want, of the houses they will build, of their idiot bosses or customers, of how drunk they were or will be. I was hammered, wasted, stoned, they say. But when they stand up to dance at the beer parlors or at parties, the music is familiar to Nino, as is their freeform dancing. Some things are the same everywhere.

Nino has grown tired of Colleen. He is starting to find her as dull as her group. He must stifle the urge to say nasty things to her

placid face, to slap her on the buttocks, to bite into her fleshy arm: anything for a reaction, for a flash of light in her eyes. "She just lies there," he tells Giacomo. "Opens her mouth and her legs."

"Come out with me," Giacomo says. "I've discovered an Italian club at the university and met this group of students."

It is at this club that Nino meets Fulvia. And everything changes: Nino changes.

The first time, he sees her across the room, and his eye, his attention, is caught. She stands alone, self-confident and self-sufficient. He does not have to ask if she, like most of the girls at the party, is the daughter of Italians but raised in Canada or if she has arrived recently from Italy. Her posture, her silky blouse, her high-heeled shoes, her throaty voice: all proclaim her *Italianita*. The second time he sees her, he wrangles an introduction. Fulvia barely seems to register his presence. Her Italian seems almost too cultured, too perfect, the result, he will discover later, of hours of practice to obliterate her Sicilian accent.

The next time, at a bonfire party, he immediately manoeuvres his way to her side. He whispers into her ear. "You are splendid, a goddess."

"Cut it out." She makes a face. But later, over marshmallows and sticks, they are joined in their inexperience. "See," she says, pointing to the others. "You stick the blob into the flames. A tribal ritual." Her first is burnt. His drops off the stick. She giggles. And when, finally, they do bite into these famous Canadian marshmallows, they laugh together. "Help."

Courting Fulvia, Nino puts aside his habitual irony (with women). He has had enough detachment. From the moment he arrived in Canada, he has felt disconnected. As if everything he saw was an elaborate hallucination. Or perhaps it was he, unmoored, who was unreal: a ghost, a projection.

Now he revels in this new connectedness. He finds himself repeating her name and sighing, or making the most extravagant declarations, and then he is surprised to realize he is not assuming a pose. He means the sighs, the words. And this goes on for weeks, months. The longer, the better, he knows her, the more obsessed he becomes. He discovers nothing sloppy or shabby about Fulvia.

He tells Giacomo, Cesare, Amelia and the tailor how much he admires Fulvia. "She's working at two jobs. She has embraced this country."

"Be careful," Giacomo says.

"She's from down there," Cesare says.

"What would your mother think? Would she be pleased?" Amelia says.

"It is as if all the women before were silver," Nino says, "And she is beaten gold."

Surprising himself again by how much he believes it.

Edmonton author **Caterina Edwards**'s *Island of the Nightingales* was a co-winner of the Writers' Guild of Alberta 2001 Award for Short Fiction.

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