

## **IL MELETO**

### NOT FOR THE APPLES

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*Dedicated to my family*

I wished to write this simple family story which tells of the realisation of a dream. It is dedicated to Giovanni and Annamaria who are my life. Together we have accomplished many things. Meleto is one of them.

*In the end, it is the little fragments of family life which are the truly important things.  
Sometimes we don't realise it!*

*We weren't looking for apple orchards!  
We were looking for a rustic house in our Tuscan countryside to which we feel very close.*

“If you dream alone it is only a dream. If you dream with others it is the beginning of a new reality.”

Hundertwasser

## *THE DREAM*

*We had seen so many of them. For Anna and Giovanni there was always something that wasn't quite right!*

It wasn't as if we needed another house. We already had two at the seaside. Where we live in Sinalunga is spacious and very comfortable, but there was a deep seated wish inside of us to have a traditional house in *our* countryside where we were born and where our roots are.

In Tuscany most of the farm-houses have already been restored or they aren't for sale so it is difficult to begin negotiations.

However, come what may, we wanted a house in our countryside!

At the weekend, whenever we had some spare time, we set about exploring this countryside of ours, seeking to uncover a ruin or a farmhouse that might suit us. It was beautiful wandering around these places. We thought that we knew them well, but we didn't.

Lucignano, Trequanda, Montepulciano, Crete Senesi. Most were too far from where we live – 35 minutes or more by car. Anna wanted, and so did I, that this new house would be close to where we live in Sinalunga, no more than 15 minutes by car.

At Trequanda, down near the railway station, we saw a house almost in ruins that looked promising, a typical house for the area, with some improvements, with a little piece of land and exactly 15 minutes away. The price seemed to be right, too.

After a family discussion, we decided to get our architect in to look at it. He told us that we would have to demolish it and rebuild. The foundations were inadequate and the cracks were enormous. We understood now why the price was so attractive! We abandoned the idea. The cost of rebuilding would have been prohibitive.

We saw other houses but there was always something that didn't appeal to Anna or Giovanni. I was more easily pleased because I always tried to see the positive side and I could always see how to improve this or that situation. Often it was the price that wasn't acceptable to any of us.

We began to lose hope and were already thinking of other types of investment.

### THE SEARCH

My wife, Anna, is a Financial Consultant. She has many clients and is respected and admired by them all. Our house is like a call centre with clients ringing at all hours, not only on business but also to ask for personal advice. I tell her jokingly that perhaps she would earn more if she opened a counseling agency.

Tommaso is one of Anna's clients. He is a gardener and an upright man. During one of his consultations with Anna in her office, while talking about this and that, it came out that the property where he worked might be coming up for sale – nothing for certain, but you know how people talk?

“The house is at Farnetella, the Meleto (the Apple Orchard) landholding. The owners are from Rome, people from the world of cinema, and, if they agree, I can show it to you.”

“Oh, Tommaso! We are not looking for apples, apples don't interest us! We are looking for a little house at the right price. I don't think, from what you have told me, that this house is for us.”

“Anna, *tell* Livio otherwise I will *tell him myself* because, if this house is for sale, I want it to go into the care of good people from around here. I'm fond of this house. And it is near my olive grove and I could look after both of them together.”

“Very well, Tommaso. I will tell Livio and then we'll get back in touch with you.”

Anna, with her bloodhound instincts, was not able to resist investigating where this place was. Despite being near Farnetella, we had never noticed it while criss-crossing local roads. Once she had understood where it *might* be, she went off on her own one day to look at the place.

That night, at supper, we started talking once more about farmhouses, which was nothing out of the ordinary. Anna couldn't wait to tell me everything. I realised that this time she was really interested and I thought to myself, “This is it!”

I told her to make a time with Tommaso and we'd go and have a look at it.

At the weekends Giovanni goes out with his friends and doesn't bother himself much with our movements. This time he knew that we were going to look at another house but didn't take much notice at all.

“It will be like all the others!” he said and left.

Anna wanted very much for Giovanni to be able to give us his opinion, at least about the area, because in the past he had had very definite ideas about what he wanted.

One evening after work, unbeknownst to me, they went to see the place – at least, as much as was possible through the closed gate.

“Mamma, we mustn't miss out on this!” exclaimed Giovanni.

Our appointment to see Meleto was fixed for Sunday morning, but I was impatient, too, even if I thought that I had hidden it very well.

Anna suggested that we should go together to see the place from the outside the following morning because it would be good to have some idea what it was like before we met Tommaso.

I agreed and so, the next morning, that's what we did.

About 500 metres past the turn off for Farnetella, there's a little dirt road on the right with a row of cypress trees on each side. We turned onto this road and slowly drove up the hill. Through the cypress trees you could see the vineyards, which give an excellent Chianti wine, alternating with olive groves.

Going up the road, we reached an old deserted farmhouse on the left and then another. Anna told me that they belonged to the Farnetella estate and were not for sale. The road was rather rambling but manageable.

"But, Anna, where are you taking me?" I asked her, "You can't see anything yet."

"Keep going and don't worry!"

A little bit further on, Anna told me to turn right. I turned into a little road. It was very beautiful, with woods on the right and woods on the left, the sides of the road strung with ivy and flowering woodland shrubs. There was the smell of a forest. A little cascade of water gushed out of the dry wall. Further ahead, there was a little parking space under a canopy of oak trees.

"Here we are," Anna said.

In front of us stood a handsome wrought iron gate, set in local stone with a beamed roof, which was covered with old terracotta tiles. Jasmine twined up the sides. There was an air of elegance even in the rustic nature of the place.

"Let's have a look inside. It's *beautiful!*" I exclaimed," But, dear Anna, I don't think we'll be able to afford it."

"Let's wait and see," she replied.

You could see a lovely flight of steps made out of bricks with field flowers poking out of nooks and crannies. There was a big almond tree on the right between the steps and the building. The fan-shaped staircase led to the upper entrance of the farmhouse. The farmhouse was built entirely of stone.

The grounds were terraced, rising on various levels by way of stone walls. Adjoining buildings, also in stone, were nearly hidden from view by large trees.

Beyond, majestic olive trees grew, surrounded by stone walls. Everything had a faded elegance. *We were entranced.*

"Anna, I like it very much. But let me repeat that the price which Tommaso has suggested it might be doesn't seem reachable!"

"Let's find out" Anna said.

*THE VISIT WITH TOMMASO*

On Sunday morning we arrived at Meleto at about 10.00 a.m. to find Tommaso already there.

He told us that he had spoken to the owners who had given him permission to show us everything, inside and out.

“Very well, Tommaso. Seeing that we’re here, let’s have a look!”

As we wandered around, we very quickly realised that the property had been left to itself without much care for some time. Only the open spaces away from the trees were well kept. Tommaso cut and raked the grass regularly.

The group of buildings was well presented; the house, with its inviting flight of steps, was on the right; facing it was the adjoining annexe and looking down to the left was the pool. Going towards the pool we often had to bend over because the branches of the trees touched the ground. Nature was re-possessing its territory.

“How come that it is so overgrown, Tommaso? It’s lovely but enough is enough. You can’t even pass!”

“You have to understand that I’m not even allowed to touch a leaf,” he replied, “The signora doesn’t want me to do anything except cut the grass and sweep up. The plants are growing and taking over everything, but what can I do about it?”

The ambience was charming. The excellent position of the swimming pool, surrounded by tall trees, shrubs, hedges and walls, gave it all a feeling of peace and relaxation.

The farmhouse was on two levels. The entrance from the terrace on the top level led onto a landing from which opened four bedrooms and two bathrooms. A narrow staircase led down to the ground floor.

The ceilings were beautiful, with typical wooden beams and terracotta tiles

The walls were painted in strong, dark colours. The floors were carpeted with harsh, green carpet and the lighting was poor.

“But everything needs doing!” exclaimed Anna.

I agreed with her.

Tommaso added, “Yes, it’s true that it needs some work, but you’ll see that it will turn out well. The roof and the walls are structurally sound. The rest can be changed.”

I suppose we expected it. The house reflected the way old houses were restored in the 60’s and 70’s when little attention was paid to maintaining the traditional country style.

After its long peasant and pastoral history, which lasted until the '60's, the house came into the possession of a family of goldsmiths from Arezzo. They did the first restoration. After that, a well-known film actress bought it. The present owners had bought it from her in 1992.

The staircase which led to the ground floor was really ridiculous.

I had to help Anna down because the steps were so narrow.

With a bit of an effort we reached the bottom of the stairs. From here, through a small hallway and a door in a thick wall you reached the living area. There was a bathroom to the left.

The living area was large and evocative and was made up of three interconnecting rooms with wonderful archways which defined the spaces. To the right of the middle room was a sitting room with wicker furniture. To the left, there was another sitting room with a big, open fireplace and chimney. The middle room, which we called the Reading room, had a trough along the walls which was filled with books and other paraphernalia.

The rooms were filled with old style furniture, very harmonious to look at. On the walls were gilded, wrought iron candelabras which were a reminder of the taste for beautiful things of times past.

Blending perfectly with the ambience were the chestnut wood arched windows and French doors all with hinges and door handles in wrought iron.

The well-furnished and inviting dining room was accessed from the central living area but the kitchen was a disaster.

Taken as a whole, the living space was comfortable and welcoming. You could see that, although it had been neglected, people with good taste had lived in the house.

We told ourselves that if it were restored carefully and with respect to its origins, the house would regain its former splendour.

While Tommaso was showing us around I said to him, "Well, then, is this house for sale or not?"

He replied, "They haven't said anything about selling to me directly, but you can tell. And, really, the Signora made me understand that it was."

"Then, if you can, ask them frankly if they want to sell. If they do, how much do they want and can we arrange a meeting," said Anna.

"Very well," said Tommaso, well satisfied, "I'll phone them during the week and I'll let you know."

You could tell that he was happy with the trust we had placed in him, giving him the task of making contacts and initiating the first moves.

### *FARNETELLA*

Farnetella is a little mediaeval hamlet that is part of the district of the Council of Sinalunga. Nobody has an exact idea of its ancient origins, but it probably began as the residence of a branch of the Cacciantoni family – more precisely, the Counts of Scialenca and Berardegna, when the family took possession and established itself in many parts of the Siena region. Certainly, Farnetella was fortified by a castle which was destroyed in 1271, by order of the Republic of Siena, because it often gave refuge to Siennese exiles.

Farnetella was, for a long time, an autonomous commune. The foundations of the church of St. John date back to 1392.

The castle was rebuilt at the beginning of the last century.

The village is the home of a small community, which retains its old traditions and is sought after by tourists who wish to experience the tranquil life of times past or who wish to do light shopping.

From Meleto you can reach Farnetella not only by car but also by following, on foot or by mountain bike, a pretty pathway overlooking the Val di Chiana for about 1,500 metres.

*Historical notes from: Storia di una comunita` del gruppo fotografico Sinalughese*

### *CONTACT WITH THE OWNERS*

We were all impatient to know what was what. By now we were in love with the house and the place in itself. Anna and I talked about it all the time and how we could do this or that. We were tormented by the idea that it might not be possible to reach an agreement for any one of a thousand reasons - the high price, other people who may have already expressed interest, real estate agencies who by now would know about it and were interested.

Several days passed without a reply.

“I’m going to ring Tommaso because I want to know what’s going on,” Anna said impatiently.

“Don’t worry,” I said to her, “Perhaps he hasn’t been able to speak to them yet. You’ll see that he’ll let us know something soon.”

In fact, the day after, Tommaso rang Anna and told her that he had spoken with Signora Maria. She hadn’t made up her mind definitely about selling but she would speak to her husband and son about it.

As soon as Anna told me this I thought to myself that it was always the same prevarication and that we were never told exactly what was going on. So I decided that the best thing to do would be to ring the husband, Signor Luigi, to see if we could make an appointment with them.

We let several days go by before ringing so they could think about it. Meanwhile, we kept hearing about people who wanted to see Meleto. It was obvious that the owners had definitely made their decision to sell.

On one hand this was encouraging but on the other hand it made us anxious because we knew that if there were too much interest the price would inevitably go up.

Eventually, I rang the home number and, after a little while, Signora Maria answered. I introduced myself and told her that we were the people from Sinalunga whom Tommaso had told her about and that we were interested in Meleto. She passed me over to her husband who, after the usual greetings, told me that it was possible that Meleto would be put up for sale and that they would be at Meleto for the olive picking in two weeks’ time. We agreed to meet there.

In the two weeks that followed, Anna was kept informed, either through Tommaso or through acquaintances, of everything that was happening at Meleto. Several people had been to see the Meleto. Some had been sent through a real estate agency which, we came to know, had been appointed by Signor Luigi

Anna couldn’t sleep at night.

She kept saying to me, “Livio, I want that house. I don’t like any other one now. It’s this one or nothing.”

“Don’t think about it. It’s highly unlikely that we’ll get it. But, we’ll try.”

Inevitably, every evening we talked about Meleto and did calculations on how much of our savings we could invest. We knew that we couldn’t cover the whole amount that Tommaso had indicated we might need. We looked at options, and we speculated whether, going ahead with the purchase, we should avail ourselves of a loan.

Another idea was to sell the house in Castiglione and with the proceeds concentrate on buying and restoring Meleto without borrowing anything.

They were all ideas that we tossed around while we were waiting and which all depended on the price.

### *THE MEETING*

That Saturday evening in mid November, we went to pick up Tommaso at his house in Farnetella. He and his wife, Silvana, were there waiting for us. Tommaso was all dressed up and had a confident air about him. We talked a little about the olive harvest before we left.

Tommaso is passionate about olive trees. He explained to us how he is able, with minimal pruning, to get just the right amount of fruit each year without “forcing the plants”. That afternoon, he had stopped picking the olives early so that he could go with us to Meleto. This was a generous thing to do because in these parts, when the olive picking begins, there’s no time to waste. You don’t even stop for lunch because in the evening there’s the weighing to do and a competition to see who has picked the most!

When we got to Meleto we rang the bell and entered the garden through the iron gate which was already open.

A slender, polite woman welcomed us and invited us in. It was Signora Maria. After the introductions she took us into the sitting room on the ground floor. Her husband, Signor Luigi, stood by the fireplace.

Tommaso, not wishing to intrude, remained in the garden where he always had something to do. In the olive grove, people were picking olives with the old wicker baskets tied onto their waists.

We felt as if we’d been transported back in time!

It is not surprising that the conversation began from there. Our hosts told us about the excellent quality of Meleto’s oil; how good it tasted and what a low acid level it had.

“These olive trees don’t produce huge quantities of olives but the oil which is extracted is unique.”

The Signora promised us a bottle of oil to take away with us when we left.

We were offered tea in the dining room where, by now, we had made ourselves comfortable. No one had yet spoken about the sale of the property but I soon broached the subject saying that we had heard, through Tommaso, that Meleto may be for sale and that we were interested in negotiating a price.

Signor Luigi showed little interest in the matter but made several pertinent points. Meleto had been his gift to his wife years previously and so the decision had to be one taken by

the family. In the event of the sale of the property he, because he was in the film making business, had to also take into consideration some other interesting propositions.

We started talking about this and that. The conversation flowed easily, ranging from topic to topic but inevitably, as it always does between parents, centring on our children. They, too, have a son the same age as our Giovanni.

They told us about the history of Meleto and its previous owners, including the famous actress.

In the end we were asked to make an offer for Meleto with the understanding that neither party was under any obligation.

We explained that, although we were very interested in the property, we had to stay within our budget. We offered the minimum, knowing that it wouldn't be sufficient but thinking that it would be enough to kick-start the negotiations.

Signor Luigi made no comment and returned to the subject of the "world of the cinema", declaring that in that environment everything was possible – one just needed to wait for the right moment and the right person.

By then, other guests had arrived and Signora Maria left us to greet them. We chatted for a while and then said our goodbyes and left, promising to keep in contact.

The days passed. We heard that well-known people from the entertainment world were visiting Meleto and we became more and more concerned about our chances of buying it.

Talking it over as a family, we thought that perhaps we should contact the owners again and so I telephoned Signor Luigi at their home in Rome. Our discussion was very cordial but we couldn't come to any agreement because, as he explained to me, his wife was very attached to Meleto and they had to discuss the matter further with the family. But we did decide to have another meeting and set the place.

The city of Chiusi is half way between Rome and Sinalunga and we thought it an ideal spot for a meeting. The main railway line between Milan and Naples connects here with the line that links Siena and Chiusi. Therefore, it is very easy for those who come from Rome by train.

Anna and I waited for Signor Luigi's arrival in the Bar at the station. We were convinced that we had to come to some arrangement quickly. Several times Anna said emphatically that she wanted that house because she already felt attached to it and that she didn't want to spend more than a certain amount!!

At this point I suggested that we offer a figure which was more than we had really allowed for but which was within our budget limits. And we waited for Signor Luigi's answer, which wasn't long in coming.

"I have conflicting priorities. Personally, I would give the go-ahead but, because of my business affairs and because my wife is so attached to the place, I can't give you the positive answer that you are looking for."

You could tell what an emotional decision this was for the family, but we were there to do business and, as we all know, everyone in such a moment plays his own part.

Final farewells and a promise to keep in touch concluded our millionth meeting. We were disappointed. Only a thread of hope was left. On those rainy February days we dreamed of the Spring and how beautiful Meleto must be when everything was in bloom, with the hawthorn hedges, the wild flowers everywhere and all the rampant vegetation. We needed to close the matter with a definite “yes” or “no”. We couldn’t keep on letting it eat away at us.

I told Anna that if she really wanted the place we would have to offer more. I agreed with her that perhaps the owners were taking a little advantage of our obvious interest and love for Meleto and, for this reason, it was better for us to get the whole thing over and done with so that we could stop tormenting ourselves.

That night I rang Signor Luigi again. I made another slightly higher offer, adding that this was our last offer because we were already looking to other investments. He told us to put it in writing.

As well as the price, the offer included the terms of payment, which were very advantageous to them and, importantly for us, contained a time limit on the offer. They had until mid-day of the following Monday to decide, after which we were both free to go elsewhere.

Monday arrived without a word from them. Anna and Giovanni were disappointed but also resigned because deep down we realised that it would be difficult to reach a positive conclusion to Meleto. Subconsciously, however, I still kept on hoping. This thread of hope was based on several things - our clear and open way of negotiating, the favourable terms of payment and the speed with which we could conclude the sale. I kept everything inside myself, not saying anything to them so as not to give them false hopes.

It was 11.30 a.m. of that Monday and I was at work. My mobile rang and I answered.

“It’s Signor Luigi from Rome.”

“Good morning. It’s Livio speaking. How are you?”

“Very well, thank you. I’m ringing about your offer.”

“Tell me.”

“Signor Tiezzi, I know that I’m giving you a gift and I don’t want to keep you in suspense.

We accept your offer, not for the money which is little, but because we want Meleto to go into good hands. We liked your family very much and so I’m giving you this gift.”

My heart swelled.

“I’m happy,” I said, “But I think my wife and son will be even happier. Thank you for the trust you have placed in us.”

I accepted his “gift” graciously and asked him to put it all in writing as the law requires. I gave him my fax number so that he could send it to me.

Five minutes later his fax arrived!!!

I couldn’t wait to get home and tell Anna. Giovanni was working away from home that day and I decided that it was only fair that Anna should give him the news seeing that she had been the instigator of the whole business.

I went into the kitchen and put the fax in front of her.

“Here you are. Signed, sealed and delivered!”

Anna exploded with joy and rang Giovanni immediately. He was so overcome with happiness that he cheered.

We made an appointment with Signor Luigi for the following week to make arrangements and to sign the contract.

But, in the meantime, let me just go back a little.

*GUIDO AND ROSA*

Guido and Rosa are Anna's parents. They are a wonderful couple, getting on in years but very active.

Guido is a great grower of fruit and vegetables and a garden lover. He now enjoys his retirement as an ex train driver, spending his time looking after his garden with amazing results. We are never short of every kind of fruit and vegetable.

Not many people are able to enjoy the first produce of the season picked directly from the garden.

Rosa looks after the house. She's very good at making homemade pasta and Tuscan style desserts, using the finest homemade ingredients.

When they were young, before Guido became an employee of the Railways, they were both farmers. They often tell stories about their experiences in the country when there was little machinery and they depended on manual labour for their work. In those days the greatest expectation a farmer could have was to have a land holding on the plains where carts and ploughs pulled by oxen could move easily over the flat ground. It was a hard life with little return.

Rosa always says that she likes living on the plains where you can walk easily. And she likes living near the town so that you can see people.

Now that we were sure of the purchase of Meleto and were back on an even keel, we hoped to conclude the deal as soon as possible.

In the meantime, however, we wanted to show the property to Guido and Rosa. We still did not have the keys so, once again, we turned to Tommaso and asked him to come with us on the following Sunday when he wasn't working.

At first he didn't want to, even though he trusted us, because he had not been notified of the sale by the present owners

Anna assured him that she had sought and been given permission by Signor Luigi to go and see the property. And so he agreed.

During the car trip along the little road, bordered by rustic hedges and woodland, leading to Meleto the conversation went like this.....

Rosa: Mamma mia, what a terrible road. It's like going to the woods!

Anna: Be quiet and be patient, Mamma.

Guido: You young ones are really mad. I'd spend my money much better.

We parked the car in the little space in front of the iron gate and Rosa exclaimed how pretty it was.

As we climbed the stairs that led into the garden she added, "Here's a shed, but where is the house?"

"This is it!" replied Anna.

"Oh, no! How ugly it is!"

Tommaso joined in, "You don't quite understand that people these days like this kind of house because they are rustic and old."

Rosa insisted, "No, no, no, this is a waste of money. I have lived in these old houses and I don't like them. They were awful. There wasn't water or power. I like tidy town houses with square rooms. These houses are just stone sheds."

Guido added, "Money thrown away! The best land is where it's flat, where you can walk easily, where the fields are rich, where the plants are all in rows and where it's easy to prune. What do you want to do here? There are only stones and woods!"

Dear Tommaso, believe me, you can't get anything here. These people are really mad!"

Comments like this continued. It was useless trying to explain that in these houses history comes alive. We no longer have to sweat and toil in order to enjoy the beauty of these places. We no longer depend on the fruits of the land to survive.

And so the evening went on as we inspected the house and the land around it. The comments of Anna's parents showed their concern, not just because this place reminded them of their hard working past, but also for the effort which would be needed to renovate it.

"You'd better get out of it while you're still in time!"

You could tell, however, that underneath it all there was a sense of satisfaction even though they couldn't express in words their true feelings about the acquisition.

When we left Rosa exclaimed, "Let's hope everything goes well!"

*CLUES TO MELETO'S PAST*

The origins of Meleto go way back into the past. There is no document which tells of its past. We know for sure that it has been part of the Farnetella community since 1271.

When Farnetella was demolished by order of the Sienese Republic, the house of Meleto probably suffered the same fate because it belonged to the Scialenca and Cacciacconti, nobles of the time. They were punished because they sheltered Sienese exiles, casualties of the skirmishes between the communes. There may be some evidence of this which came from our reconstruction work.. Digging around the walls we found inside charred stones. At Farnetella there's a saying:

*Just dig around the walls and the past reappears*

We know that in recent times shepherds and farmers inhabited the house. The last shepherds, Tommaso told us, were there until the 70's. Tommaso, in his youth, used to come visiting to this house on winter evenings because there were seven pretty girls who lived here. Sometimes they organised parties and country dances which was a tradition in those times.

The head of the family, a certain *Gaspare*, had to work very hard to keep these girls on that little which the poor soil produced. He needed men to work it! Sometimes he didn't know just how to keep going and so he put in place one of his "sound remedies"!

Even all those years ago, the hills of Farnetella produced an excellent red wine which was strong enough to make your head spin. When he had lots of problems, the girls' father would sit on a stone which juts out from the upper terrace (it's still there) and, calling one of the daughters, he would send her down into the cellar to get some of the good wine. As he decanted it into a bottle he would say,

*"Tomorrow is another day and something good will happen!"*

Seeing that he got all the daughters married off,.....

During the movement away from the country by people in the 1960's, Meleto remained empty. Then it was sold to some gold industrialists from Arezzo who carried out the first renovations and used the house as a country holiday house.

Years later, Meleto was sold to a well known film actress who kept it until the 1990's and then sold it to the family from whom we bought it.

Respect for nature and for the past has allowed Meleto to keep the bygone atmosphere intact. It's not easy to define this atmosphere but it impresses everyone who has had the chance to spend some time in its ambience. When our guests show their pleasure in the uniqueness of this place we are really happy and feel as if we have been repaid in some way for the work we have done to preserve this oasis.

### *THE CONTRACT*

We made an appointment to meet with il Signor Luigi and la Signora Maria on the Saturday of the last weekend of February. We had to go along with clear ideas of how to conclude the deal.

For this procedural work we appointed our business manager, Carlo Bianchi.

The Bianchi family, with Paola his wife and his children, Letizia and Massimo, are our friends. We needed an opinion on what we were about to undertake from a person whom we trusted. That person was Carlo.

We were welcomed and invited to sit at the oval table in front of the big fireplace where big logs of wood were burning and sending out a pleasing warmth.

In the meantime, Anna, Giovanni and la Signora Maria had already gone into the rooms to look at furniture and fittings in order to decide what would stay at Meleto and what would be taken to Rome. This was done quickly.

At our table Carlo read the contract, carefully noting little details. Everything went smoothly until we got to the deciding of the contractual conditions of the deed. Because of the vendor's administrative motives, everything had to be prepared in less than a month.

Carlo exclaimed that it wouldn't be possible to prepare all the papers in less than a month. How could they do the notarial business, the title searches and the surveys within such a limited time frame?

I agreed with him. We couldn't accept. The time needed to complete all the bureaucratic requirements wouldn't help things either.

Il signor Luigi admitted that we were right but he needed to stick to this timeframe. We needed to find a solution in some way.

We understood that he was not insisting because of a principle or lack of trust but really from urgency.

We weren't trying to lengthen the time needed for the operation but only for enough time to do what we needed to do well. We needed a loan from the bank and we had to meet the bank's conditions regarding the time.

We noticed that our other suggestions for how to solve the problem were not well accepted and therefore we needed the expertise of Anna. She knew how to process

urgent procedures due to the fact that she works in the world of banking. Once that she was brought into the picture she said straightaway that she would look after everything.

She knew exactly what to do and how to do it quickly. The Notary was a friend and would find a space in her schedule to do the contract.

Carlo praised Anna's decisiveness in knowing how to get things done.

And so, i signori Luigi and Anna, were happy and the contract was signed.

Anna got to work immediately in the next few days, seeing to everything that needed to be done and making sure that the bank completed all the paperwork for the loan quickly.

### *THE BANK'S VALUATION*

A beautiful blonde woman knocked at our door.

“I’m the bank’s Land Valuer. I have to make a report on the property that you are buying and so I need to see it.”

Anna immediately offered to take her there in our car.

On our way to Meleto we realised that we were dealing with a very able person, one who was very knowledgeable about the history and the art of Tuscany. She had all the maps of the place and knew what she was going to see. But nothing prepared her for the particular nature of Meleto.

“What a beautiful setting!” she exclaimed. “The house is well preserved and has a pleasing design. Its commercial value is well beyond what you have paid for it. I can assure you, that after my report is presented, the bank won’t have any hesitation in granting you a speedy loan.”

We expected something like this and we were happy.

Finally, the contract was drawn up and concluded with signatures and handshakes.

We thought that we would take possession of Meleto very shortly afterwards, as is normal, but la Signora Maria asked us if she could stay in the house for a little bit longer. We didn’t have the heart to refuse her request because we could see how painful it was for her to leave the house and also because they had been very kind to us.

About ten days later we were invited to Sunday lunch by i signori Luigi and Maria. It was an excellent meal, country style, cooked by the lady who looked after the house and who cooked for them when needed.

We talked about so many things but they were all linked in some way to this house we had just bought.

After lunch they showed us how everything worked in the house.

We were just about to leave but first we wanted to know when they would leave the house and give us the keys because inside ourselves we were keen to get in.

The fateful moment approached when suddenly la Signora Maria said, “Monday, when we leave, we’d prefer to be alone just like the other times when we went back to Rome after our Meleto holidays.

You will find the keys in the hiding place where we left them for our friends. I'll show it to you when I leave"

The emotion got the better of us and we embraced affectionately as we said goodbye.

*BORGO DELL'AMOROSA*

What has Borgo dell'Amorosa got to do with Meleto?

A great deal, because that is where my roots, which I thought I had forgotten, are. I was baptised there in that pretty little church. I can't help but remember all this and my parents who taught me to love the simple things of life. I am sure that they would have been very happy to spend some enjoyable days in this place.

L'Amorosa was a very important farm, which belonged to nobility. The village is part of the Sinalunga district and is about 10 kilometres away from Meleto. Once it was a source of pride to belong to this community and the farm workers vied to become share farmers on this farm holding.

I remember the parties that were held in the town square, the old songs, the threshing of the grain, going to Catechism lessons and Sunday Mass. It was a joyous and ongoing ritual.

Nowadays, this village has taken on new life. It's no longer the farmers who come and go in the town square with their carts full of grain, but well-to-do tourists from all over the world who sleep in the beautiful rooms and eat in the characteristic restaurants.

The "Amorosi" still feel linked to this place and it's quite normal to see them back there, talking and retelling the stories from long ago.

### MY PARENTS

The farmhouse where I spent my childhood is called *Colombaiolo*, and it's situated just outside the village of Borgo dell'Amorosa. The house is not lived in any more but it would be a prime target for restoration - except for the fact that the owners are not interested in selling.

I was born there after my two sisters, Edda and Licia, were married. My parents were Angiolina Cresti and Ezio Tiezzi. My mother had two names, Angiolina and Italia, but she was called Italia because when she was little she preferred it and everyone started using it. She only used the name Angiolina for signatures.

Every child thinks that his or her parents are the best in the world but I shall say it again because I still think it's true.

My mother "*knew how to do everything*".

At least, this is what everyone said!

My father was an excellent farmer and he used to tell me how he used to win lots of prizes for the best harvest. I remember them lovingly because they taught me the rules of how to lead a good life as well as many practical things. And they loved me deeply.

I am thinking of them now as I write because I know that, from above, they will be very happy and proud of the things that Anna, Giovanni and I have achieved. They will be particularly happy with the way in which we have undertaken the work of restoring Meleto, with the aim of preserving traditions, which were so dear to them. It would be wonderful if they could be here with us today to join in the pleasure of reliving times past.

I pay tribute to them.

*WE GO TO SEE OUT HOUSE*

Finally the house was ours and we couldn't wait to get into it! That same Monday we went to get the keys from the hiding place. There they were waiting for us. Anna took them, opened the gate and exclaimed, "Meleto, you are mine!"

We were overwhelmed. We couldn't believe that we'd done it. We approached the entrance of the house and as Anna opened the door I said to her, "Open everything wide, Anna."

"Why?" she replied.

"Now I'll show you!" and I picked her up in my arms in a strong embrace, like I used to do when we were young, and carried her over the threshold!

We didn't know where to begin. There were so many things to do – the kitchen, the cleaning, the flowers, the garden, the restoration, the stairs.

We decided to make a long list and then start with the most urgent tasks.

Anna agreed with me about the list but made sure that I understood that for her the kitchen was a priority. She told me that she wouldn't even go into the kitchen in its present condition.

"All right, Anna. I understand what needs to be done first!"

And so, we made a list of what needed to be done and, naturally, on the top of the list was the kitchen just as Anna wanted.

*THE CASUCCI BROTHERS AND VALDA*

Giovanni, Giorgio and Giuliano are Anna's cousins on her father, Guido's, side. Their father, Igino, was his brother. The three boys followed different career paths. Giovanni is a University Professor in Medicine, Giorgio is an Accountant and Giuliano is a Judge.

For family and professional reasons they live with their beautiful families a long way from each other. Giovanni is in Perugia, Giorgio lives in Adelaide, Australia and Giuliano is in Lanciano in Central Italy.

Distance, however, has not affected the strong ties that exist between them and periodically they get together somewhere in the world to spend some time with each other and their families. Laughter and fun is part of their family life when they get together just as it always was.

Anna tells about when she was small and the three brothers used to visit Zio Guido and Zia Rosina at their house in Foiano. Zio Guido used to run behind them as they were riding his bike over the crops yelling, "Stop! Stop! You're breaking everything!" When they came to visit in the country, comical adventures were the order of the day and it was a joy just to watch them.

Anna heard from Giovanni Casucci that Giorgio and his family would be arriving in Italy soon for a holiday and suggested that we invite them to spend the day with us at Meleto. We all decided on a day in Springtime.

*WHO WILL DO EVERYTHING?*

Usually, at dinner time in the evening we three talked about all the work that had to be done at Meleto and our conversation might go something like this:

Anna: Livio, I don't know how we're going to do everything that has to be done! These things need money and we've already spent it all!

Livio: Anna, don't worry. Slowly, slowly we'll do everything. Firstly, the things that are necessary to make the house liveable and then all the rest. I like doing all the reconstruction work and you like fixing up all the things in the house. You'll see that if we work together everything will turn out well.

Anna: But you're mad! We can only do the cleaning and the finishing off jobs. We don't have the time to do anything more, even if we wanted to, because we have our normal jobs that take up every day. And we need *them* to live!

Livio: You're right, Anna, but there are always the weekends. For us it will be a hobby!

Anna: Livio, as usual you are looking at things too simply. Try to face up to reality!

Livio: Listen, Anna, I believe that we've already done the hardest part which was buying the property. Now, we are moving to the next stage and I am sure that, with a bit of sacrifice and some patience, we will finish everything.

Anna: Let's hope so! I'll be curious to see what happens.

Giovanni, who is rather diffident about manual work, generally listened to these discussions in silence. But he was driven at last to exclaim, "You two think about everything. I'll just come and see how the work is going and if you don't do it *properly* I'll tell you all about it!"

*THE WORK BEGINS*

The following weekend, early in the morning, we were all ready to begin the work at Meleto. Tactfully, Guido, my father-in-law, tried not to get too involved in the decisions of what needed to be done but I tried to bring him into the discussions because, deep inside, I knew he wanted to be part of it. And we wanted him, too, because we know all too well how able he is, how passionate he is about farming and how enthusiastic he is in everything he does.

When we arrived at Meleto we found Tommaso already there waiting for us. We set to work. Guido and Tommaso got to work cleaning garden and pruning the overgrown bushes. Anna and I? In the kitchen!

The kitchen was in a poor state both hygienically and in terms of equipment. Anna declared loudly that what was needed in that kitchen were some strong gloves and a small truck parked outside the door ready to take the rubbish to the dump!

Anna, decisive as always, wouldn't accept any compromise. Hygiene and cleanliness take priority! We needed several trips to get that kitchen into order.

In the meantime, Guido and Tommaso worked frenetically in the garden. We could hear them talking about how to do what needed to be done in that garden. Each of them wanted to show the other that he knew best!

At one stage they were potting some small Tuscan cypresses ready for the final transplant at a later date. It went like this:

Guido: Tommaso, which way does the east wind come from?

Tommaso (indicating): Oh, Guido, do you think I don't know? East is over there?

Guido: I don't think you do know. Dear Tommaso, the poles that support plants must be all positioned facing where the cold comes from. That way they protect the trunks from the bad winter weather. You, however, have put them at random.

Tommaso, surprised and dumbfounded at not knowing this, thought for a bit and then took the wrongly positioned post and turned them towards the right direction.....

Tommaso: O Guido, that's easy. See! I know how to do these things!

Guido: Tommaso, you're a genius. I elect you gardening expert!

And this is how the work went on every weekend at Meleto. Anna and I worked inside and Guido and Tommaso worked in the grounds, bickering amicably and never missing an opportunity to poke fun at each other.

We were pleased with the results of these initial endeavors because bit by bit we could see the elegance emerging with everything in harmony with the rusticity of the place.

“Now we can ask our friends to come,” said Anna.

“Yes, it’s time,” I replied.

*THE CASUCCI BROTHERS COME TO VISIT*

The May vegetation was luxuriant, wonderful wood scents came from the bushes and from the flowering broom, and the daisies made a white and yellow carpet on the little path that leads to the pond where frogs croaked continuously in the evenings.

The blackbirds twittered as hard as they could in the trees like children awaiting the arrival of their teacher.

“These birds talk too much and don’t do anything,” I said to Anna. “They don’t need to go looking for food because they eat all Meleto’s fruit! Unfortunately, they don’t leave anything for us. We have to find a solution.”

“Let’s plant sunflowers near the fruit trees,” suggested Anna. “Birds love sunflowers more than cherries and grapes.”

And so we did, thus creating a way of living together happily. We feed them, they sing for us and they leave us some of the fruit.

I often thought about how it was possible in this place to enjoy nature and how much it would please those who love nature and know how to look at and listen to it.

We awaited the visit of the Casucci brothers. Everything was ready and we were anxious to see what impression Meleto made on them because they were our first guests.

When they arrived, after the hugs and kisses, it became a festive occasion. Valda fell in love with Meleto straightaway and kept saying, “It’s so beautiful, It’s so beautiful” in her Italian with its English cadence, taking photos from every direction all the time.

We spent a wonderful day together, made even more enjoyable by a lovely lunch under the trees. Anna cooked roasted rabbit with fennel in the old wood oven. It was wonderful and we all christened her “Top Chef”

That evening we ate supper around the flood-lit swimming pool – typical specialties from the Val di Chiana, all washed down with wines from the Chianti region. It was such a wonderfully festive occasion. A few shots of Guido’s homemade grappa led to the telling of seemingly infinite jokes which made us choke with laughter.

In between the jokes, speaking about this and that, Valda and Anna talked to each other:

Valda: Anna, this place is simply glorious. You can’t keep it just to yourself! How would you feel about letting Meleto out as a holiday place, even if it’s only for short

periods, so that others can enjoy it, too? And you could earn a little bit of money to help with the maintenance.

Anna: You're quite right, Valda. We have to do something because this place is a bottomless pit in terms of expense. In fact, Livio and I have talked about it but we're not ready for it, yet. There's still so much to do!

Valda: But it's wonderful as it is! I'm sure that Australians would love it like this. They're people who appreciate the things that matter. If you like, I can make enquiries with Australian agencies.

Anna: Thank you very much, Valda, but you know what a perfectionist I am! I want people to feel at home here, to be comfortable, with everything at their fingertips and to feel welcome in every way. We want them to appreciate the peaceful atmosphere and to relax completely and we want to be perfect hosts.

Valda: Your organising ability is well known, Anna! When you say you'll do something, you do it. I admire you for this and so I'll wait for your go-ahead and then I'll get to work!

Guido and Rosa were happy to see their dear ones together in such a happy atmosphere. Down at the end of the swimming pool the glow-worms flittered and flashed and the frogs in the little lake croaked vivaciously at the moon.

But all good things come to an end and all too soon it was time to say our goodbyes. Many were the hugs and kisses and plans for the future but, inside ourselves, we knew it wouldn't be easy.

But everything had gone well and we were satisfied.

### *THE RESTORATION*

We needed to prioritise the work.

One evening we wrote out a list which set out the things we needed to do to make the house liveable and a logical procedure for doing the restoration.

Once again the kitchen was at the top of the list because once it was done, we'd be able to use it while the work in other areas was in progress.

Floors! Wiring! Painting! Shutters! Furniture!  
Everything had to be restored or repaired. The work had to be done properly and according to tradition, so we used local artisans who know about the art of Tuscany to help us.

Enthusiasm was high and the weekends flew by. Things got done quickly.  
We were really satisfied when we saw the furniture, fittings and furnishings brought back to their original splendour. It was our reward for our labours.

In Summer, the pool came to life with Giovanni's friends who, between splashing in the pool, sang and played the guitar.  
For us it was a pleasure working like this!

Then came the time for the work to begin on the upper floor. We had used temporary doors to isolate this part of the house so that the dust didn't get into all the rooms. For a while the house had two entrances – the one which led to the part which was already restored, and the other which allowed us to get into the part being restored.

The hardest part of all was redoing the stairs. I did this part myself with only Guido and Mario to help me. I was afraid that a bricklayer, perhaps in a hurry, would rush through the work without taking care to respect the authenticity and thus ruin the harmony that was there.

I planned it on the computer in meticulous detail so that I could see what it would look like on completion.  
It showed that two doors needed to be moved – not easy because the walls were 80cms wide and of solid stone.

It was in these walls that we found the charred stones of when Farnetella was burned down

*THE WORK ENDS!*

After their visit to Meleto, we kept in contact with Valda via email. There was always news to exchange about our families and the continuing progress of work at Meleto.

Valda couldn't wait for the work to finish so that she could get on with informing Australians about this wonderful place. All she needed was the go ahead from Anna.

The moment finally arrived – the work was at an end. Anna sent photos of Meleto to Valda with the instructions to *Go ahead!*

Within a very short time Valda contacted us to ask about the availability of Meleto for two families for two weeks.

We gladly accepted the booking and prepared Meleto in the best way we could for our first guests.

### *OUR FIRST GUESTS*

The Summer of 2002 will be remembered for how dry it was. Although Meleto is usually covered in green, that year the colour was predominantly straw-yellow but still beautiful. This is what our first guests found when they came to Meleto.

We expected our guests to arrive in dribs and drabs. We wouldn't have been able to personally meet each group and so we put up temporary signs to help those who arrived later find their way.

They were exhausted by their long trip and were terribly jet lagged. They explained to Giovanni, who speaks excellent English, that they wished to go to bed straight away and asked if it would be possible to postpone the tour of the house and the instructions until the next day so that they could concentrate fully.

We understood the situation immediately and assured them that it would be OK.

We left some things in the kitchen for them to eat, which they really appreciated because the last thing they wanted to do at that moment was to go to the supermarket. All they wanted to do was sleep and they made do with what we had left them for a meal.

The next morning we arrived to find them much rested and ready to go. The girls were ready for the pool in their bathing suits and the men had already done a walk around the house and grounds to get their bearings. They were all bare-footed and completely relaxed.

They told us how much they loved the house, which pleased Anna greatly. Then Anna began to explain where things were, how the kitchen and laundry worked, how to look after the ancient wood oven which, when used properly, gave foods cooked in it a wonderful and unique flavour.....

Giovanni could hardly keep up with the translation but he enjoyed it immensely and Anna and I made ourselves understood with gestures.

We went to visit our guests on various occasions over the next two weeks because we understood that it made them happy to see us. In fact, we felt that a bond had been established between our two families, so much so that they asked Anna to cook them a meal of various traditional Tuscan roasts and delicacies in the old wood oven.

The meal was a joyous one, eaten around the pool at a festively decorated table. The pool and the surrounding garden were illuminated with lights placed inside the plants and in the pool creating an unusual and beautiful effect.

The menu?

#### *Antipasti*

- Prosciutto and melon
- Bruschetta

#### *First Course*

- Pasta baked in the oven

#### *Second Course*

- Duck with Fennel
- Stuffed and seasoned roast rabbit
- Rack of pork with rosemary
- Roasted potatoes
- Salad

#### *Dessert*

- Mantovana of pinenuts

#### *Wines*

- Il Meleto red and white
- Guido's home brewed Grappa
  
- Coffee

It was a great success for Anna!!

*THEY LOVED BEING AT MELETO*

Our guests just loved staying at Meleto during their holiday despite the fact that we encouraged them to go out and see the sights.

We often invited them to visit the important centres of art and culture so easily reached from Meleto. They could easily have done day trips and come back to Meleto comfortably by evening to enjoy the delights of Meleto. There is just so much to see and do in the vicinity of Meleto

Sinalunga		Km.	6
Pienza	“		23
Montepulciano		“	22
Chianciano		“	29
Rapolano terme		“	9
Castelnuovo Berardenga		“	20
Zona Chianti	“		20
Volterra		“	85
S. Gimignano	“		80
Montalcino		“	30
Monte Oliveto	“		25
Cortona		“	16
Perugia		“	45
Siena	“		34
Arezzo	“		26
Assisi	“		60
Firenze	“		85
Roma	“		180
Chiusi	“		26

But first they just wanted to enjoy Meleto to the hilt. We were happy about this because it showed us that we had done our work well and the prospects for the future were bright.

After this positive beginning there was a continuous stream of interested requests for a stay at Meleto.

Perhaps we are on the right track to giving people what they want in a holiday?

### *CONCLUSION*

So now I am at the end of this brief history, which is really only the first part of the story.

If I have time, there will be a second part as there are still many things to write about – the countryside, the woods, the pathways, the olive grove, the sports and so on.

Until then, best wishes to all from the Tiezzi family – Anna, Giovanni and Livio

*FROM PABLO NERUDA*

*Thoughts of a Dying Man (An Ode to Life)*

He who becomes a slave to habit is someone who is slowly dying, repeating the same thing every day, never changing step, never taking risks or changing the colour of his clothes or talking to a stranger.

He who avoids passion is someone who is slowly dying, who prefers black to white, who dots his “i’s” and crosses his “t’s” rather than experiencing a gamut of emotions, those emotions which make the eyes shine, turns a yawn into a smile and makes the heart beat when faced with a mistake or a feeling.

He who doesn’t turn things upside down is slowly dying, who isn’t happy in his job, who won’t risk certainty for uncertainty to follow a dream, who won’t allow himself even once in his life to ignore sensible advice.

He who doesn’t travel is slowly dying, who doesn’t read, who doesn’t listen to music and who isn’t pleased with himself.

He who destroys his self respect is slowly dying, who doesn’t allow himself to be helped, who passes the days lamenting his bad luck and the never-ending rain.

He who abandons a project before even beginning it is slowly dying, who doesn’t question the things that he knows, who doesn’t answer when he’s asked about the things he does.

We can avoid a creeping death by remembering that to be alive requires an enormous effort just to simply breathe.

Only ardent patience will bring us to a splendid happiness.