

**L'inizio di Notti**  
**(The Beginning of Nights)**

By Ahnaliiese Bell, grade 9  
Word Count: 1,730

“It had been a long day; other gypsies, animals, soldiers – it seemed like everyone wanted to kill me, but still I was successful. I did everything exactly as I had planned for so long in my head. I had left early in the morning from my home, very far away from the duchess’, and I killed every guard in my way (without so much as a sound from them, mind you) to make it to that room of glory. When I was there, I thought I must have died and snuck passed the judges to Heaven. Everything was glorious, everything rich and beautiful. Gold was everywhere; the walls, the bed, the tables. My heart burned and my hands itched, but I only took what I had come for. I left just as a servant caught sight of me and called for help. I had to run with all of my strength and will to escape them, there were so many – an army, I would say. I ran for so long, I thought I would die.

“And then, as I was sure I was alone and the night had just set, I very carefully snuck across the dark and narrow street. I was confident that I would make it to the safe-house that stood only about four meters away and just a little to the right, when--”

“No, no, no, you’re telling it wrong!” old Gianpaolo cried out, disappointedly waving his head, its balding front gleaming in the bonfire. He stomped his long wooden staff on the cool earth once before continuing. “The safe-house was to the *left* and it was an *inn*, not a house!”

Fiorro shrugged his broad shoulders from his makeshift wooden bench on the other side of the fire. “So? What does that matter? It’s a stupid little detail and I was just getting to one of the best parts. You interrupted me.”

“I *corrected* you,” Gianpaolo said in a condescending manner. He faced the young boy sitting next to Fiorro. “Nicollo, don’t listen to this fool. He gets everything wrong. *I* can tell you what really happened.”

“You tell stories as well as fish fly,” Natalya argued. “With Fiorro, it’s as if you are listening to a beautiful song.” She winked at Fiorro as she passed a cup of warm soup to everyone around the fire, holding the beaten old tray with her apron. After she was finished serving, she sat down on the other side of Nicollo. “Look around you.” She waved her arm around and Nicollo carefully followed its motion, looking with wide, youthful eyes at the dark forest around them and the large city just barely beyond. The sun was just beginning to set, and people were still bustling around the great Italian market that stood there. A few men carrying incense were walking in and out of the great cathedral that stood as the city’s most magnificent building, and the hoarse cries of the market men could be heard from the forest. “All of Italy is full of beauty, pain, happiness, life, and love. The rocks on the ground and the trees before us have been here so long and have seen many, many things. To be able to tell their story... Now that is a gift from the Heavens.”

“And lying is a gift from the Devil.”

The fire could have been made of ice for as cold as everyone felt right then. They turned to find Gabriele, a solid man of the church and his loyal assistant, Ermanno, glowering down at them. “How many times have we commanded you filthy gypsies leave our most holy city?”

Gabriele asked coldly, quite obviously not expecting an answer.

“Well, if I had to count...” Fiorro began, causing some of the other gypsies who had been frozen in fear to snicker.

“Too many!” Gabriele snapped, moving his robes closer around him. “You... heathens are corrupting our city!”

One of the gypsies with a long dark beard leaned over to his brother next to him. "He almost said an unholy word," he whispered, and was immediately glared into silence.

Gabriele, his normally pale face now a burning red, began to pace back and forth in his fury. "You are all fools. Living out here in the woods, stealing from good people, and ignoring the Church! The very structure of all that is holy! The Devil will have your souls, for I am sure God can no longer save you." As he gave this speech, the flames practically lit the passion in his eyes, and he seemed to grow with power. The gypsies wriggled with discomfort. The power of the tall churchman seemed to dull their bright bonfire and make their own lives seem pitiful and next to nothing.

"You do not understand us, dear holy man and friend. We are not all one thing," Fiorro countered, his tone calm as he tried to express his reason. He stood and spread his legs apart. "For one, we have our different reasons for being here. I grew up with many brothers and sisters, in a very poor house. I left at a young age for a life of adventure and freedom, away from hard work and toil. Some people are born as gypsies, and some are not, but find themselves here because of... different circumstances."

Natalya took this as a cue to stand. "I am Natalya Sofya Anya. I come all the way from Russia. My father was killed by an Italian, and now I must make my revenge. Until I can kill this murderer, I must live with these gypsies," she explained, and then calmly sat back down.

Ermanno cowered nervously behind Gabriele, who looked shocked and disgusted at the same time. "And you see how this woman is! Living amongst you scoundrels, quite obviously without religion," he testified. His look of shock vanished as his point seemed to have been proven. "This is exactly why we want you scoundrels out of the city. We need to keep you away

from our women and children..." As he said the last word, his eyes fell with heavy surprise upon Nicollo. "Nicollo?" he breathed in utter shock. "What in Heaven's name are you doing here?"

All eyes turned to the young boy. "I came to live with the gypsies because they are more fun than the Church. They do not beat me for not saying my prayers and the food is much better," he answered, with the blatant honesty that only a small child could give so innocently. Several of the gypsies laughed and patted him on the back, but Gabriele scowling furiously at all of them.

"Give me back the boy." Gabriele demanded.

The gypsies scattered quickly, some climbing into the trees, some hiding in the bushes, all so fast the two churchmen hardly knew what was happening. As they blinked in surprise, they saw that Nicollo was no longer there. "Call it give and take, my friend!" one of the gypsies with a smooth voice called, seemingly from directly above them. "We won't surrender!"

Gabriele, now thoroughly infuriated, roared up at the tree branches. "Repent!" he cried, his aged voice shaking with anger. "You fools have sold your souls – it could even be too late for you! Repent your sins, leave this town, and give me back the boy! Step into the light and welcome our Lord's great day!" Something rustled in the bushes and he moved forward, making to grab at it. "You filthy vagabonds lurk around in darkness and wrap yourselves in sins while we of the Church are gifted with the light of our hearts and souls to use for good within the light of day. Step out! Repent now, or mark my words you shall pay for it eternally!"

Now Fiorro moved about, popped his head through leaves before running off somewhere else. He appeared before them for a split second, and then dashed off into nothingness only to reappear again behind them. "Why, you do not see how wrong you are, my

friend! The whole world is changing. Our ways are not dark and evil – they are the ways of the changing winds! The changing world!” he said. Very quickly, very lightly, he touched Gabriele’s shoulders and then moved off. “You must look around you, my friend. Science – we are getting smarter. Music, art, acting, and yes, even the Church... It is all changing so grandly! This is a new age. A great rebirth!”

“You can either move with it, or be a stick within the mud,” Natalya added, dancing in front of them with her long skirts flowing before disappearing back into the foliage.

“Living with the Church, I could never just go out and play with my friends!” Nicollo called out. He was held by different gypsies, tossing him around. “And I could never go to any of the festivals in town. You always told me they were set up by the Devil.”

Gabriele grabbed his hair in frustration. “They are, they are! These new things, they are all merely tricks by Satan to bring you down to Hell! You must not succumb, dear boy!” he yelled. He was growing desperate and he fell to his knees, his hands shaking as they clenched each other as if for dear life. “Dearest boy, dearest Nicollo, think of your soul. Think of your immortal soul! Would you rather have it in the hands of these heathens, or in the hands of the Holy Church? If not with the light, then I will have to leave you, and we will be enemies. Do you understand that?”

It was silent as the sun slowly sank below the horizon. The people in the city went back to their homes and stopped their business. Animals either retreated to safety, or crept out into the dark. The gypsies slowly came forth from the shadows, Fiorro and Natalya were at their lead, holding Nicollo in between them. Ermanno abandoned his master as they advanced, leaving Gabriele shaking, his knees hard against the cold, dark ground, ducking as if it would

help him avoid the sound of the harsh wind ripping through the tree leaves and the sense of pure dread that was beginning to consume him.

“Go home, holy man,” Fiorro said softly. “The day is over. It is time for the night to truly begin.”