

THE IMPERFECTIONISTS BY TOM RACHMAN

Note: The American journalist and editor-in-chief of an international paper based in Rome, Kathleen Solson, takes part in a panel discussion at an international media conference.

[...] Will the newspaper industry survive?' the mediator asks her.

'Absolutely', she tells the audience. 'We'll keep going, I assure you of that. Obviously, we're living in an era when technology is moving at an unheralded pace. I can't tell you if in fifty years we'll be publishing in the same format. Actually, I can probably tell you we won't be publishing in the same way, that we'll be innovating then, just as we are now. But I assure you of this: news will survive, and quality coverage will always earn a premium. Whatever you want to call it – news, text, content – someone has to report it, someone has to write it, someone has to edit it. And I intend for us to do it better, no matter the medium. We are the quality source among international newspapers, and I encourage anyone who doubts this bold claim to buy the paper for a month. Better yet' – lilt in voice; complicit smile to audience; pause – 'better yet, buy a two-year subscription. Then you'll really see why our circulation is publication in its class. If we can do that, readers will turn up. Those of you who have followed the paper's progress since I became editor in 2004 will know the radical changes under way. There are more to come. It's thrilling to be a part of, to tell the truth.'

What truth? The paper is hardly at the cutting edge of technology – it doesn't even have a website. And circulation isn't increasing. The balance sheet is a catastrophe, losses mount annually, the readership is aging and dying off. But she has acquitted herself well onstage. The audience applauds and hurries out for the free lunch, while she excuses herself to the organizers. 'I wish I could stay,' she tells them, 'but that's life at a daily newspaper.'

On her way to the cloakroom, she is approached by a Chinese American student from the audience. He introduces himself as Winston Cheung, dabs sweat from his face, wipes his glasses, and proceeds to rattle off his academic credentials. Since he won't get to the point, she gets

30 there for him. ‘Okay,’ she interrupts. ‘And the punch line is, Do I have a
job for you? You said you’re studying primatology, right, so I’m guessing
you’d be interested in a science section, which we don’t have. If you
wanted to report general news, lots of publications are hunting for people
with language skills. Do you speak any Asian languages?’

35 ‘My parents only spoke to me in English.’

‘Pity. Languages are key. You don’t, by any lucky chance, speak
flawless Arabic?’

‘Not flawless Arabic, no.’

40 ‘Meaning you speak *flawed* Arabic?’ she says. But this guy is a
nonstarter – no experience, no languages, and look how jittery he is. She
needs to get rid of Winston Cheung. ‘Look, if you want to send us
something – purely on spec – we’d look at it. She rattles off Menzies’
email address and ducks into the cloakroom.

45 As she heads for the exit, someone touches her shoulder. She turns
irritably, expecting Winston Cheung again. But it’s not him.

She steps back with surprise. ‘My God,’ she says. ‘Dario.’

Dario de Montecchi is the Italian man she lived with in Rome during
her twenties. When she left the city in 1994 to take a reporting job in
Washington, she left him, too. Now here he is, temples graying, eyes
50 bagged, slightly handsome but slightly jowly, wearing the sleepy
surrender of the family man. ‘Sorry to sneak up like that,’ he says. ‘Did I
scare you?’

‘You have to try harder than that. I am somewhat caught off guard,
though. My God, it’s so strange seeing you. How are you?’

55 ‘I’m well,’ he says. ‘And you were excellent today. I’m most
impressed. But are you leaving?’

‘Sadly, yes. I have to. They need me at the office.’ She answers. ‘I’m
sorry, by the way, that I haven’t been in touch since I got back to Rome.
It’s been crazy. You know I was back, right?’

60 ‘Of course.’

‘Who from?’

‘Just heard – you know how small Rome is.’

65 ‘Weird having my private life pop up when I’m in professional mode.
Puts me off balance,’ she says. ‘You might not believe this, but I really
wish I didn’t have to go.’

‘Not even time for lunch?’

‘I don’t get lunch, alas. We close the first edition in a couple of hours.’

If I'm not there, the world ends. What are you doing at this even anyway?'

He hands her his business card.

70 Oh, no,' she exclaims, reading the card. 'I'd heard a rumor about this.

But Berlusconi? Ouch.'

'I do press for his party, not for him personally.'

She raises her eyebrows skeptically.

Dario says, 'I was always on the right, remember.'

75 'Yes, yes, I know, I remember you.'

'Well, anyway,' he says, 'I should let you go.' He kisses her cheek. She rubs his back. 'You don't need to keep comforting me,' he says, smiling.

'I'm not still upset.' [...]

(847 words)

Source:

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Annotations:

l.4 unheralded: unexpected

l. 12 lilt: way of speaking in which the voice rises and falls in a pleasant way, as if singing

l. 28 to dab: to remove something with quick strokes

l. 29 credentials: qualifications and previous achievements

l. 31 primatology: science that deals with primates, the most intelligent and highly developed mammals

l. 40 jittery: nervous

l. 42 on spec: here: without obligation

l. 42 Menzies: paper the protagonist works for

l. 50 jowly: with the skin on the lower jaws slightly hanging down

l. 67 alas: unfortunately

l. 71 Berlusconi: former Prime Minister of Italy

l. 74 on the right: conservative