

## **WHEEL DANCE**

by John Tilbrook

The attack comes early in the second week of their Italian holiday. Brian Bradley has been aware of the occasional twinge in his right side for some time, but his doctor, after a cursory examination, has told him that nothing drastic appears to be wrong. Lying drugged and semi-comatose in a screaming ambulance on its way to Florence, clutching Barbara's hand and remembering all the horror stories told by friends of medical disasters in foreign countries, Brian decides to change his doctor as soon as he gets home. But in fact he finds that the Italians treat him with efficiency and consideration, and after a week in a small private hospital, he is sent back, minus a badly infected gall bladder, to recuperate in the little Italian village where, as it is the end of the holiday season, their landlord has allowed them to stay on in their apartment overlooking the piazza at a reduced rental.

Now, a week later, while Barbara catches up on family postcards, he has ventured out for the first time on his own. He sits at a small rickety table outside the tiny Stella Café, with the still warm air of an Italian autumn night caressing his cheeks, trying to remove the very last drop of grappa from his glass with a fingertip. It is his first alcohol since before the operation, and Brian's reward to himself for going at least part of the day without resorting to the prescribed painkillers. But as soon as he pushes himself upright and attempts to stand, it occurs to him that perhaps both the cessation of painkillers and the grappa have been a little premature.

The sudden pain under his ribs makes him gasp and stagger slightly and bile rise in his throat. He pauses a moment and then slowly turns and, supporting himself on chair backs and tables, moves through the empty café to the toilet at the back. He holds onto the urinal with both hands while he relieves himself, rezips with difficulty, and then turns to negotiate the journey back to the street. By the time he emerges onto the main piazza, he realizes he may be in trouble. He half turns back towards the café but his table and chair have already been taken in, and the doors are now closed and dark. He turns back to the piazza. The apartment building on the other side of its expanse of worn stones now seems impossibly distant.

He tells himself that, should he collapse on the way, someone will surely notice and move to assist him. There are a few embracing couples in doorways, and from the only place still emitting sound and light, a group of young men are emerging, their laughter and shouted comments echoing against ancient buildings. Outside the café six motorbikes, looking feral in the subdued lighting, are drawn up, which the youths straddle or lean against as they converse. But Brian is only marginally aware of them. He focuses on the grey stones before him, knowing that the longer he delays, the harder it will become to goad himself to action. He visualizes the line he must take across the piazza, bisecting it in his mind, quartering it, dividing it again and again to reduce it to manageable sections. Then, with extreme care, he steps out and places his feet upon it.

It is not as bad as he had expected. Within a few steps he has discovered a technique in which he is able to hold the top half of his body still, moving only his feet. In this way his abdomen is insulated from sudden movement, and the only time the pain jars is when he inadvertently catches a toe on the uneven stones. Suddenly he is confident, increasingly relaxed, anticipating Barbara's affectionate, if physically circumspect, greeting when he reaches his goal.

Then the peace of the piazza is shattered.

Six motorbikes simultaneously roar into life. The glare of headlights lashes at him and beyond him to break in a wave of luminescence on the buildings at the far side of the square. Brian's body jerks in response, sending pain lancing through his intestines. His immediate reaction is that of a wild animal suddenly caught in the lights of a car – to freeze, to convince himself and his predators that he no longer exists - until the machines and their riders have turned and roared around the piazza and disappeared from his life.

Except they don't. Instead of leaving, the motorcyclists start to move lazily round him in a wide but diminishing circle. Brian's imagination brings up hysterical images of sheepdogs rounding up sheep, of picadors closing in on an old and wounded bull, of American Indians drawing loops of menace around an isolated wagon. Obviously this last image has also occurred to them, for some give vent to ironic war whoops, vibrating open palms against

open mouths. Unable to think of anything else to do, he continues his almost mechanical progress across the square.

Then, without warning, one of the six breaks out of the circle and roars to the other end of the piazza and turns and brakes in a snarl of smoking rubber. For a moment he sits there twisting the throttle, and then rockets forwards, finding a gap between the circling riders. As the machine and its apparently demented rider bear down on him, Brian knows that under normal circumstances he would be unable to prevent himself from leaping desperately to one side in a vain attempt to avoid being hit. But he also knows that any such violent action now would rack him with almost unbearable pain. So he does what he did before. He freezes, retreats into lifeless immobility, and waits for the crisis to pass.

And, amazingly, pass it does. He is aware of the brush and slap of clothing on his left shoulder. His nostrils are filled momentarily with the reek of leather and hot metal and petrol and human sweat, and his ears with a triumphant ululation before the rider rides on and rejoins the enclosing circle of men and machines.

For a moment, only the sounds of engines and the occasional squeal of tyres, the movement of the constantly turning motorcycles fill the piazza, and then the whoops and the laughter return. Brian doggedly walks onward – one step, two, three – and another rider breaks ranks and performs the same trick from the other end of the square. Brian is again terrified but somehow less so than

before, and his standing immobile whilst the machine rushes past him is now far more an act of volition than an instinctive reaction to overwhelming fear.

The hard edge of something metallic catches him in the small of the back as the machine rushes past, forcing him to stumble two steps forward, so that an intense spasm of pain flares in his guts and then gradually fades. Brian steadies and collects himself and walks on. He tries to steel himself for the next attack, the next blow, but when it comes the machine flirts with him instead, avoids all contact, and he barely feels the wind of its passage.

Now two riders separate themselves from the circle, roar out to opposite ends of the piazza, then simultaneously turn and bear down upon him from both sides. But Brian, although his back still smarts from the earlier impact, suddenly realises he is no longer afraid. His instincts tell him that moments earlier, had he attempted evasion, the young riders might have had no compunction in leaving his body lying bruised, damaged, even lifeless at the square's centre. But his apparent courage in remaining unmoved by their assaults has caused a subtle variation in the rules of the game.

Inviolable and exalted, he feels himself the focus of a strange mechanical ballet, a ritual dance. Around him the gleaming motorcycles and their young riders perform loops and arabesques which seem precisely choreographed, the voices of both men and machines orchestrated with equal deliberation. As the headlights play across the ancient stone buildings, the splinters of light that momentarily bounce from the small windows flicker like the facets of a

disco mirror ball. With both pain and fear submerged in a sudden flood of exhilaration, he walks almost normally, his teeth bared in a savage grin, and the compulsion to turn at the piazza's centre and lift both his hands and extravagantly conduct this extraordinary performance is irresistible. He does so, briefly, and is rewarded by a whooping cheer from the young riders and a cacophonous revving of engines.

He turns and walks on, and the riders again change their formation to a single circle, going from right to left in front of him as he walks. As each machine passes before him, its rider lifts the helmet on his left wrist in an ironic salute, and this is repeated three times on three circuits of the piazza. Then each of the riders gives one of those strange ululating cries and peels off and roars out of the piazza, the last one leaving behind him a silence which for a few moments is deafening.

There, at the very epicenter of this silence, Brian again stops and lifts his hands and looks around and beyond the expanse of paving to the perimeter of the piazza, expecting...something. Applause, perhaps? Some kind of acknowledgement of the small but intense drama that has just taken place and of his pivotal role? But the silence, if it ever in fact existed, has already eroded. The couples are again – or still – embracing, an indistinct shout of discontent or command ricochets off the enclosing buildings, there is the sudden clash of shutters as the café from which the motorcyclists emerged closes down.

Brian is suddenly overwhelmingly aware of the pain in his gut, the weakness in his knees which threatens at any moment to upend him on the grey paving stones. Above all he is conscious of his now ludicrous position and posture at the Piazza's centre, and he drops his hands and lowers his head and stumbles forward, intent only on reaching the sanctuary of the doorway of his apartment building. He is almost there when a raised paving stone catches the toe of his shoe and he takes the last two steps in a shambling run with his arms outflung, completing his journey half-collapsed against the stone pillar at the entrance, holding it in an absurd embrace.

As he leans there trying to control both his laboured breathing and the inner pain which now seems to be intent on consuming his entire body, he feels a hand closing on his bare forearm. He turns his head. The woman's face, just centimeters from his own, fills his vision, although he is vaguely aware of a faceless companion, obviously attached to her other hand, in the half-light beyond her. Her eyes, of a blackness more intense in the streetlight than that of her hair, briefly explore his features. Then she smiles, and squeezes his arm and removes her fingers and her face disappears as she turns and moves away behind him.

By the time Brian has eased himself away from the pillar and turned his head to seek her, both she and her partner seem to have vanished into the semi-darkness. For a moment – but only for a moment - he entertains the notion that she was an hallucination born of the pain, the grappa, and the remnants of the drugs that are still in his system, as perhaps was the whole bizarre

episode at the piazza's centre. He finds that he can now breathe without conscious effort, and move without the danger of imminent collapse. Feeling desperately in need of the consolation of Barbara and their narrow bed and yet at the same time aware of a strange sense of satisfaction, Brian finds his key, opens the ancient door and, slowly and with extreme care, climbs the stairs.