

Help! *By the Beatles*

*"Auitami! Sto affogando" ***

These piercing screams startled Luciano from his dismal reverie. He was walking along the banks of the Adige near Bolzano and turned to see someone being carried along mid-stream. Due to its nearby source in the Italian Dolomites the Adige was always a fast-flowing river. After the recent heavy rains it had been transformed into a raging torrent.

On auto-pilot Luciano ran down the riverside path so he was ahead of the person in distress and launched himself into the white-capped maelstrom. The shocking cold almost stopped his heart. He had been a member of the Italian water polo team and was an immensely strong swimmer. Even so it took all his strength to carve a path towards his floundering, flailing quarry. He could see it was a woman and then he lost her as she went under. As she bobbed up again he managed to grab the tail of her jacket. He manoeuvred her into the correct life-saving position and kicked out backwards to the shore.

Luckily, the woman was so spent she offered no hysterical resistance to his efforts to save her. He dragged her into the shallows and when the pounding of his heart had stilled, heaved her up onto the bank. Her coughing and spluttering continued for a while as she expelled the river water she had swallowed.

Luciano saw that even in her bedraggled state she was an astonishingly beautiful woman, probably like him in her early thirties.

"Signora, what happened? How did you fall in?"

Her response startled him. She sobbed, buried her face in her hands and started wailing in an utterly desolate way. Luciano sensed that it was not just the icy alpine water that had induced this distressing reaction.

She finally calmed down a little and in an anguished voice stammered, "I didn't fall in...I jumped. I wanted to end it all but I didn't even have the courage to do that."

Luciano's jaw dropped. A few minutes earlier he had been plagued by the same suicidal impulse and was a whisker away from hurling himself into the river.

Instead of killing himself he had instinctively chosen to save the life of another troubled soul. There was such an exquisite irony in this strange state of affairs that he permitted himself his first spontaneous smile in the weeks since his wife left him.

He quickly switched to a more concerned facial expression in case this fragile young woman might think he was amused by her predicament. "Why on earth do you want to kill yourself?" he murmured in as kindly a tone as he could muster.

"My husband has left me and gone off with my sister Renata to live in Rome. He left a letter this morning..." Luciano looked at her lovely tear-stained face and thought that maybe they had been fated to meet. Suddenly life seemed worth living.

"Signora, my name is Luciano and I think we can help each other....."

** "Help me! I'm drowning."