

“I fidanzati” Part II

Ermanno Olmi, Dir. (1962)

Giovanni walks along the beach. He encounters a group of goats. Is he coming directly from work? He’s still wearing a suit and tie. He holds a newspaper over his head to protect his eyes from the bright Sicilian sun.

We see a number of families at the beach to spend a day by the sea.

Giovanni gets an ice cream and stands in the shade of the vendor’s awning with the other customers, looking all around at his new environment.

Continuing his walk, he passes by the salt pans where workers are shoveling salt into piles. The shots are very beautiful; sheer poetry, really. As with the geometry of the industrial plant, cinematographer Lamberto Caimi has captured the exquisite beauty in the ordinary.

Two men walk along a narrow path out to a windmill, where they begin working. Giovanni, curious, stands and watches them, shielding his eyes with his paper.

He goes towards them and says, Good morning.” But the men continue working; they don’t stop to chat.

Exploring, Giovanni sits on a curb in this ancient town with its one-story houses. A little car with a loudspeaker comes around the corner. “Last night, on Via Enrico Toti, or on Via Garibaldi, or at the Splendido Theater, a wallet containing 5000 lire and other important papers was lost. Whoever finds it is can keep the 5000 lire, but is requested to return the papers to their owner.”

The car drives on, the voice growing farther and farther away. Giovanni gets up and crosses the street to a church. As the loudspeaker fades out, we hear the singing of children. It’s quiet at first, but grows louder as Giovanni gets closer.

Giovanni enters the church, newspaper in hand, and makes the sign of the cross. Sitting in pews that face the altar, about 20 children are singing.

Again, someone has designed this scene with care. Notice the geometrics of the white wrought iron railing, the stacks of wooden chairs and the angular wood pews.

Giovanni sits in the back pew. He looks to his right: a dog has come in to the church.

The priest comes out and scolds the group, “Children, how many times do I have to repeat it? When you come into church, no talking and no running.” In the meantime, the dog is wandering around quietly. The priest continues, “No laughing and no spitting! You must pray.”

The dog starts to bark. The kids laugh and go towards it. Even Giovanni smiles. He stands up and cranes his neck to watch what happens. The poor priest cannot get control of the children, “Keep still, children,” he says, but they are determined to catch the animal, maybe pet him or play with him. They run towards it, some of them climbing over the pews. “Go back to your places. *Children!*”

It’s another day. Giovanni, wearing the same outfit, still with his briefcase, is out in the town. In the background, lilting music is heard. Someone – the director, the set designer – has put in Giovanni’s path a man carrying balloons. So things are looking a little bit cheerier.

And now we see more of the landscape: we discover it along with Giovanni. It will be his new home for at least the next year and a half.

Giovanni turns onto a narrow street, lined by buildings on either side. The street is deserted except for a man sitting in a chair smoking, a magazine in his lap. The camera focuses on a stairway and soon enough, Giovanni gets there and walks up, going under an archway to enter the courtyard to the building complex.

He walks in, knocks on a door and a man wearing a T-shirt and pajama bottoms answers, “What can I do for you?”

“I’m looking for a room.”

“Make yourself comfortable.” The man excuses himself and goes to put on his pajama top. Now he is dressed to conduct business.

“Come, come,” he says. “When would it be for?”

“As soon as possible. For now I’m at the company lodging, but I don’t know how long I can stay.”

“Here it is,” says the man, showing a room full of beds. “At the moment, everything is full. There’s that bed in the corner. It might be free in a few days. Come now, I’ll show you another room.”

“This could even be free right now, but it’s a single room. It goes for between 10,000 and 12,000 lira a month.”

“Here we are, look,” says a woman, showing another room in another apartment, “This one even has a nice balcony. From here you can see the street. You can get some fresh air.”

Giovanni is riding the bus with a man dressed in casual clothes. The man says, “When they opened the plant, it was different. Then the locals realized, they raised all the prices and now it’s not worth it to come to work here.”

A passenger in a suit chimes in, “Now the cost of living is the same as in Milan, and some things even more. Before I got transferred, I’d have a little left from my paycheck at the end of the week. Now it doesn’t last.”

The first man continues, “All things considered, it’s no longer a good deal to come here.”

“If you have the family here with you maybe. A lot of them brought their wives, but it’s a life of sacrifice. They can’t manage it.”

Another man adds, “After all, the Sicilians are good people. They’ve always been hungry, so it’s only natural that when they see a little cash going around, they want some.”

The man goes on, gesturing, “As soon as they put some money aside, they start building a house... they eat bread and lemons and save their money to pay off their debts. They plant oranges and mandarins, but above all lemons and tangerines, because they grow first.”

As he explains, we see scenes of such people working their land. A man spreads seed in a field. A man dressed in shirt and tie is behind a horse pulling a plow amidst some trees.

As he explains, we see scenes of such people starting to work their land. A man spreads seed out in a field. A man dressed in shirt and tie is behind a horse pulling a plow amidst some trees.

“A few years later, as soon as the orchard starts to make money, they leave the plant and go to live on their plot of land.”

We see Giovanni wearing a work shirt and walking through the plant grounds with a co-worker who fills him in a little more. About the Sicilians, he says, “It’s not that they’re lazy. They do their work. They’re just a little crazy. The sun’s real hot and they never have a chance to blow off steam. I was one of the first to come here. You should

have seen it. It was full of Algerians back then. They'd bring their lunch wrapped up in a rag. Now they all carry briefcases and look like executives."

Giovanni's co-workers have taken him to carnival. There are lights hung throughout the square. It seems that the whole town is there. People are packed in like sardines.

Everyone is wearing masks, there are some men dressed as women, men dance crazily with other men, confetti is thrown through the air. This truly is a pagan festival!

Only Giovanni doesn't look happy. He seems all alone in this crowd.

He sees a drunk old man fall down on the ground and this brings back a memory of his father, who apparently has a problem with alcohol.

In this memory – which we see as a flashback – his father is being taken care of by a woman. The old man coughs; the woman prepares a hot water bottle. She says to someone off-screen, "He's been drinking again." Giovanni knocks on the door and enters. He hands some documents over to the woman, saying, "Here ma'am, these are the papers. If you see that he won't make it..." So Giovanni has decided not to put his father in the rest home, but rather to leave him in the care of this lady.

"It's no use," she says, "We'll need to put him in a rest home." The woman believes that if the man doesn't stop drinking, he'll have to go to a nursing home.

A man in the room interjects, "If you take the satisfaction of a glass of wine away from him, what's left?"

We return to the carnival, Giovanni has found a dance partner. She's wearing a black mask that covers her entire face. He asks her, "Where are you from?"

"Catania. How about you?"

"I'm from the north."

"Poor thing, he comes from the north. So far away. I'll give you a little kiss to console you."

He tries to lift her mask to get his kiss, but she stops him. "No, it's prohibited."

"Then it isn't as nice," he protests.

"You'll see," the woman reassures him, "It will be wonderful."

Finally, Giovanni is starting to enjoy himself.

CAPTION: Some scenes at the carnival.

Returning from the carnival, Giovanni is in his room alone. He walks into the bathroom, turns on the light and stares at himself in the mirror. He starts to put toothpaste on his toothbrush, notices the confetti still in his hair and bends over the sink to brush it off. Turning on the faucet, he lets the confetti flow slowly down the drain.

Suddenly he hears voices and he goes to the window to see what's happening. Two horse-drawn carts are slowly approaching. Their passengers are throwing confetti and yelling.

The carts pull into the gates of the hotel. Giovanni turns off the bathroom light so that they can't see him. Then he goes back to the window and continues to watch as the passengers disembark, leaving one of them to pay the driver.

Giovanni is dreaming. The scene fades to his old dance hall, which is decorated for a party. Couples wearing party hats are dancing and confetti falls through the air.

Liliana sits alone at the side of the room, confetti on her hair and her coat, which she is still wearing. Giovanni dances around the room with another woman, seemingly having a very good time.

Giovanni sleeps, but someone is standing at his window and looking in. Suddenly, there's a loud crash. It's a prank, evidently.

The culprits run away along the hallway, back to their room.

Laughing, Giovanni goes in his bathroom and fills a glass of water, but then he has a better idea. He fills a basin, takes it to the door of his room and waits for the pranksters to return.

They return and fiddle with his lock, trying to get in. So Giovanni slowly turns the key to let them in. But they run away.

Giovanni tiptoes out into the hall, carefully balancing the water-filled basin. "Hey!" he calls out. "I saw you! Where did you go? Come out if you've got guts. Come on." Meanwhile, he returns to his room, and hesitates outside his door.

While Giovanni is standing in the hallway with the basin in his hand, another door flies open. "Do we want to finish with this bullshit?" scolds the man, "Aren't you tired of making a racket?" "They're the ones fooling around," Giovanni responds sheepishly. He seems like a little boy. "It's them? It's time to go to bed!" replies the man angrily before slamming the door. So Giovanni does not get his revenge.

It's a bright, sunny day. Carrying two suitcases, Giovanni walks up a street in town. He walks by some shops that sell sacred objects and postcards and then he opens the big heavy wooden doors of the boarding house where he will be staying.

He starts to get settled in his room. He takes his slippers out of his suitcase. Opening the door of the night table to put them there, he sees a chamber pot and quickly closes it.

The landlady comes in saying, "Here are the keys. This is the one for the door of the house and this one is for the gate at the street."

"Good," he replies, "Excuse me, ma'am. The bathroom door doesn't open."

"It's a little tricky," she replies, "Come and I'll show you."

Back at the plant, Giovanni is wearing a hard hat. He puts on safety gloves and a protective mask. He picks up a torch and begins welding.

Welders are at work throughout the structure, on many levels. Sparks fly everywhere.

It's nighttime. Everything is peaceful. The city's lights shine in the dark. Boats rest in the still water. Church bells ring.

And now it's morning. The streets are still quiet. Some men ride bikes. Others walk to church.

At the boarding house, as Giovanni is on his way to his room, the landlady calls him. A letter came for him two days ago. But he didn't realize where the mail was and she forgot to tell him. The woman shows him how he can check for mail in the future.

Giovanni goes into his room and closes the door. Then he closes the window and the curtains.

He puts on his pajama bottoms and an undershirt and turns on the bedside light. Sitting on the bed, he reads the letter. He displays no emotion and we have no idea what is written in the letter, although we imagine that it is from Liliana.

He lies down under the covers. Some noise wakes him up and he turns onto his back, looking up at the ceiling.

A memory: There's a group at the beach wearing swimming suits. Giovanni walks with his arms around a woman. It seems to be the woman that Giovanni danced with at the dance hall in Milan when Liliana wouldn't dance with him. They laugh and have fun together.

Giovanni and the woman are alone and share an intimate moment, lying in the grass, away from the others, they kiss.

Next we see Liliana – actually just her back, which is turned to the camera. We hear Giovanni's voice, "Who told you?"

She murmurs, "Why are you so mad?" she asks, "It's useless for you to get angry. I'm the one who should be angry."

"You mean you're not angry?"

"No," she replies, "I'm insulted and disappointed."

Now we see Giovanni, his gaze lowered. She says, "Now I wanted to ask you something."

He looks at her, she goes on, "But you should answer honestly. Do you still want to marry me?"

"Now?" he answers, "How could we?"

"But I didn't ask you when. I just wanted to know if you still want to marry me," she replies, a tear running down her cheek.

In the boarding house bathroom, Giovanni turns on the faucet but no water comes out. He pulls the cord on the toilet: nothing. He starts to leave the bathroom and a neighbor appears. "There's no water," she tells him.

"How come?" he asks.

"They turn it off on Sundays."

The neighbor appears at his apartment door and asks, "Would you like a little of mine?"

"No, thanks," he replies.

"It's cool and clean," insists the woman.

"Thanks all the same," says Giovanni, "Don't bother."

"It's no bother. Come."

"I'll pour it for you," she says. They go to the bathroom sink. He leans over and she pours water on him. He uses the water to wash his face. "Luckily, I kept a little aside," she comments.

"It's so hot," the neighbor says, looking at herself in the mirror and opening the top of her robe. Giovanni seems surprised. "Shall I pour a little on your back?" proposes the woman while she pours some more water on his neck, startling him.

She continues to flirt, but he's not interested. "Thank you, thank you, that's enough," he stops her, closing the door.

Giovanni is sitting on his bed, bare-chested in the Sicilian heat. The curtains of the window move gently. He thinks of Liliana.

He thinks back to a time they went riding on his motorcycle over a country road.

Now he's looking at her letter again. In a voiceover, we hear the reply that he writes her: *"In the letter you wrote you send news only of my father and say nothing about you. How are you? How are your spirits?"*

Giovanni's response continues as we see him at his workplace: *"Why haven't you written?"*

"It's been fifteen days since I sent you my postcard, and you still haven't answered me. My address is still the same, the boarding house. Say hello to everyone, and for you: a kiss."

Liliana has finally responded and we see Giovanni sitting on his bed reading the letter, the envelope next to him on his neatly made bed. The curtains are open and tied aside today. Daylight streams in the room.

We see Liliana reading the words of the letter to him as if she is in the room with him, *"Dear Giovanni, I received your postcard and then your letter. I didn't write back straight away because honestly I wasn't sure you wanted me to."*

Now we see her walking by the mailboxes, letter in hand, and then running home through the courtyard.

"When I received your letter, I was a little scared. I wanted to open it right away, but I didn't have the courage. While I went up the stairs, I was excited and happy."

The letter continues, *"But then suddenly that happiness almost frightened me. I don't know why. I thought about everything. There were so many bad thoughts, more than the nice ones. I even thought this might be your last letter. I was afraid, I confess. I had lost faith and hope as well."* As Liliana speaks, she seems to be looking directly at Giovanni for the first time in the film. She actually looks happy. *"Now I'm sorry I thought ill of you."*

Liliana continues, *"I went to visit your father. He's fine, and he told me to send warm greetings. Now in the evening, he sits in front of Mrs. Seminari's door. The door is open because it's hot and this way he watches the television. Thank God, because for this reason he doesn't go to the bar."*

Giovanni is in class. An instructor gives a lecture from a desk under a crucifix. The room has a chalkboard and some technical equipment. The students sit at tables, side by side. As the instructor talks, Giovanni thinks about Liliana.

We hear him read a letter, *"Dearest Liliana, A terrible heat has come here, up to 140 degrees in the sun and 113 in the shade. It's only bearable in the rooms at the plant's school because they put in air-conditioning."*

"In the evening do you still go dancing? I've stopped going here. There are no dance halls."

"But it's not because of that. I felt so at ease dancing with you. With the others, I don't feel as comfortable."

As Giovanni's voice continues, we see him strolling along a road, holding a paper to shield his eyes from the fierce Sicilian sun.

"On Sundays, too, I don't feel comfortable. I go a little bit here, a little bit there. Besides, without my motorcycle, I don't know where to go. Write to me as soon as you can, because it pleases me to get home at night and the landlady at the boarding house tells me that mail has arrived for me."

He ends by saying, *"Regards to my father and everyone else. For you, a kiss."*

We see Liliana, alone. She looks pensive.

She replies, *“Dear Giovanni, So many days have passed since your departure. Over two months now. And since then, I haven’t wanted to go dancing. I don’t want to go to the Speranza. I didn’t want to see our friends again. Also because I was afraid they’d ask me about you. Maybe with those mean smiles – you know how the way they do. I’d be embarrassed.”*

“And all the memories we have there together. You could say that we met right there, when I used to come with my older sister. I was fifteen or sixteen do you remember? You were just back from the military.”

“I never told you this, but the first time you asked me to dance, I said no because I didn’t know how. And then I got my girlfriends to teach me at home almost every night. I hoped you would ask me again.”

As we hear the same theme music from the film’s beginning, we see the scenes in which the sweethearts remember their first days together, when they fell in love. And so, through their letters, they fall in love again.

CAPTION: *Together on Giovanni’s motorcycle.*

“And since then, so many memories...”

“... good and bad. Imagine that since you left, even the bad ones have become dear to me. And all together, sometimes they gave me a big desire to cry. But I did not want to cry, I wanted to make myself strong. And then I would try to resign myself, in case you would not want to come back. I tried to reject you and to erase you from my thoughts. But now luckily everything has changed. The sad thoughts seem to me already very far.”

“What beautiful letters you write to me, dear Liliana. How well you say the things you want to say. I’m not so good. And maybe I don’t manage to say everything. But I’m sure you understand me anyway. Because I see the things you write are the same ones I feel. You say it for me too.”

Liliana is talking now, not in a letter, “You know, Giovanni, perhaps this trip was good for us both. Maybe it was exactly this distance that helped us understand so many things. We’ve been sweethearts for so long, so many years. More than sweethearts, you know what I mean.” She smiles and looks down, “But we’ve never confided in each other. We’ve never talked to each other the way couples should talk. Each one kept their own thoughts.”

“And we were just satisfied being together. But perhaps our being together had become a mere habit. And we didn’t realize we were each alone again. We’re much closer now. I realized it when I thought back on all our moments spent together.”

“It seems to me that we’re starting from the beginning. Reliving the same things, but as if both of us were different, better.”

CAPTION: *We’re back in Sicily.*

Giovanni is calling, “Liliana, *ciao*. It’s me, Giovanni. No, nothing. I felt like calling you. How are you? ... But, nothing! I called you because I told you: anyway today is Sunday and it costs half. How are you? Here a storm is coming on. What are you doing?” We hear the wind howling and the roar of thunder. He continues, “I have to go to work now. My bus leaves in fifteen minutes.”

“But I don’t feel like going to work today,” he complains. *“I’d be happy to stay at home. Anyway, they could do without me for one day.”*

The operator interrupts, *“Three minutes.”*

“Thank you,” responds Giovanni politely and he continues, *“Maybe Sunday I’ll call you again. You write anyway! Please. Bye.”* His face, so animated during the call, suddenly looks sad and empty. He’s alone again. He hangs up slowly to the sound of the roar of thunder.

And now the rain is pouring everywhere: in the rural landscapes we have seen before; and at the plant, too.

CAPTION: *Rain everywhere*

A little girl looks up towards the sky. Since Giovanni arrived in Sicily, he's had to use his suitcase or a newspaper to shield his eyes from the sun. Now something has changed: in the movie's final image, we see him lift his briefcase above his head to take cover from the rain.