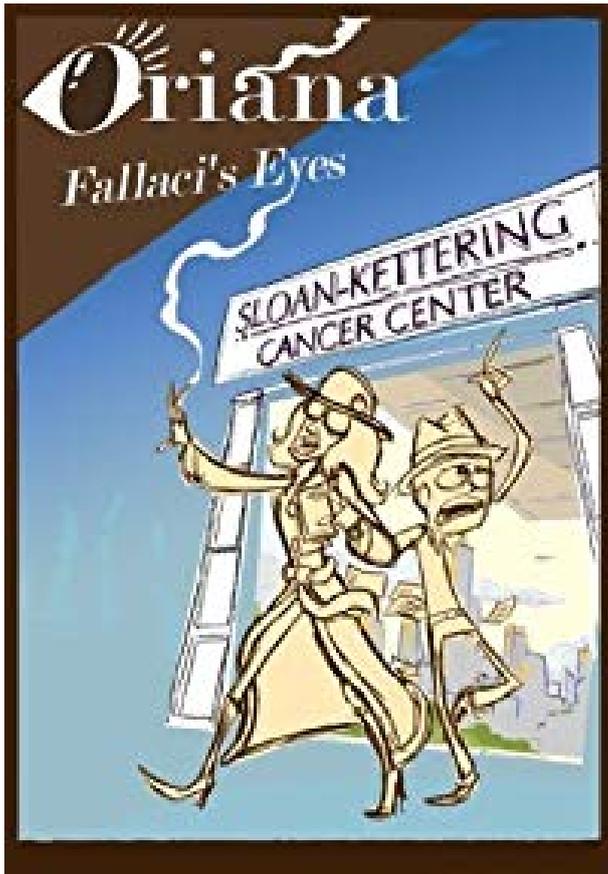


ORIANA FALLACI'S EYES



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It is the first bitter cold day of the season—as if winter doesn't want me to forget it's here. For more than a week I have gone to the Rizzoli offices each day, sitting there at a cheap metal desk waiting to hear word that Oriana Fallaci is arriving. I have been called in as her assistant. "Only for ten days," they have told me, "then Ms. Fallaci will return to Italy." But she hasn't called and I am waiting, day after day, with nothing to do, beginning to think I will never work for this literary giant—a woman of fierce contradictions, famous, infamous, rebellious, worshipped and hated around the world: the woman who famously ripped the veil from her head in gesture of feminist solidarity during an interview with Ayatollah Khomeini; the woman who was responsible for what Henry Kissinger, himself, described as the single most disastrous interview of his career. □ Finally after a week of anticipation in the mundane office, my cell phone rings. It is Rizzoli's accountant. "Hurry Sandro, she has arrived. She didn't give any warning, as usual. You know, for security reasons. She thinks the Arabs could blow up the plane she is on. But now she's here safe. Go! Get moving. She is waiting for you. She needs your help with some errands." □ Suddenly my sinecure is a real actual job.

Lee, a stout Jewish woman employed at Rizzoli as the accountant gives me the address out of huge rolodex.

She seems to be only person whom Fallaci trusts. "Miss Fallaci has arrived. She needs some help from you. Please go to the following address." The main office of Rizzoli in New York is located on Fifty-seventh

Street, not far from shiny Fifth Avenue. To reach Fallaci's home I follow 5th as it stretches northward, and then I turn east, crisscrossing through the streets that at a brisk pace -- a route that I will follow every day of what ends up being, it turns out, a very long winter. I get closer and my hands start to sweat. In moments I will meet the most famous Italian journalist in the world. How will she greet me? A picture flashes in my mind: tall, imposing, severe as I think most Italians imagine her -- the wide, piercing eyes painted with 60's Cleopatra-like thickness, that magnificent, haughty expression. It is the photo of her by Francesco Scavullo. For years now, it accompanies every article about her. She is perhaps the most famous journalist in Italy, if not Europe -- her confrontational interviews of Castro, Ayatollah Khomeini, Henry Kissinger, the Dalai Lama, among others, burnished her reputation as a dogged reporter, a defiant interviewer, an angry soldier of truth, but in extremely fashionable clothes, perfectly coiffed hair and a cigarette perennially lodged between manicured fingers.

Perhaps that face is no longer this way—maybe the alien, in her words, has changed her. “Alien” is what she has called her cancer in her articles and books. A testament to her cultural importance, everyone in Italy associates the word “alien” with Fallaci's cancer, which she has battled in different parts of her body, since 1990. Cancer of the breast, the esophagus, and now the eyes.

I continue to walk. Her features: those stern and oriental grey-green eyes, circled with eyeliner. My head is filled with images of her face. Oh god, what do I say? Hello, Mrs. Fallaci—no. Hi my name is Sandro. No...that's not right. When I was a child, in Sardinia, my sister would read to me parts of her books. I especially remember her reading “Letter to a Child Never Born,” Fallaci's letter to her own aborted child.

She has dwelled in my consciousness ever since. Moving to New York from Milan last year, it seemed like a vivid illusion to know that I may be working as her assistant.