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Author | Donato Corvaglia

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Youcanprint

Via Marco Biagi 6, 73100 Lecce

www.youcanprint.it

info@youcanprint.it

Made by Human

Milan Central Station, Commissioner, Liliana

At home, Cecilia had already packed a trolley with pyjamas, a change of clothes each, and a few other things; we had no idea what awaited us.

«Did they call you back?» I said, breathless from running up the stairs.

«No, Luigi, I tried to get in touch, but the line is always busy.»

«Alright, I'll take a shower, and then we'll go.»

From Gromi to Milan is about 60 km, and traffic permitting, you can get there in an hour and a half. That day, I think it took us no more than an hour.

The central station loomed in the background, immense and motionless, like a mountain. Its might now weighed not only on the ground but also on my heart.

What would I find in there?

At that moment, I remember that although I was walking alongside Cecilia, it was as if I were alone. The large entrance arches and immediately afterward the half-light, the buzz of

people, the announcements of train arrivals and departures, engulfed us, sucking us into an inexorable vortex. We interpreted the symbols and arrows, the signs meant to show us the way to the railway police, but we began to go in circles, reeling from the chaos and fear.

I saw a cleaning vehicle sweeping near the ticket machines, so I rushed to ask where on earth the railway police were.

The attendant, without looking at me, pointed in the direction with a hand twice the size of mine. I looked up and saw the sign. They were thirty metres away; I grabbed Cecilia's arm, and we went.

I rang the intercom, and it felt like an eternity. Can time be so cruel? Can even a few seconds last a lifetime?

An ambulance was parked outside, engine off and flashing lights on.

«Mr. and Mrs. Bozzi?»

«Yes,» we said in unison.

The office where Liliana sat was small, and the whirring of a wall fan was the only sound besides the clicking of keys on the officer's keyboard.

«Jesus Christ Almighty, my love, what happened to you?»
Cecilia burst into tears and, after uttering these words, ran towards Liliana, who remained seated, offering only a detached, mechanical embrace.

«She was given Tavor intravenously. Your daughter is sedated now, ma'am. Please, sit down.»

I realised then that I was still standing in the doorway.

I remember my daughter's dirty fingernails gripping Cecilia in that puppet-like embrace. I didn't recognize those hands. She looked like something out of a gypsy camp.

With a firm grip on my elbow, someone guided me to the chair. I obeyed like a trained dog. I kept staring at Liliana, unable to speak or breathe.

She was looking at the wall and occasionally at Cecilia, who had been invited to sit next to me, but it was as if she wasn't really looking at anything or anyone.

«The report is finished,» the officer stated abruptly.

«Well, Settembrini, let's read it then. Mr. and Mrs. Bozzi, your daughter is doing better now. The ambulance is outside and has provided excellent first aid. As soon as we're done here, she'll be transported to the hospital for a complete checkup.»

When I was a kid, I particularly loved one carnival ride: the flying chairs. I was always the one who would launch my friend into the air. I had an infallible technique, and we would spend whole evenings going around and around because I could always send someone up there to grab the ring and win a free ride.

But at the end of the evening, when I got off, I would have to sit for several minutes because my stomach would be in knots. I would lie down on the bench and let the world spin around me. I would wear a foolish grin and wait for the dizziness to stop. Now, I was experiencing that same feeling, that same state of mind. I was waiting for that cramped, worn-out room to stop spinning around me, but it didn't.

A voice, perhaps from that distant past that was my youth, or maybe from a present I wanted to ignore, called my name.

«Mr Bozzi, do I have your attention?»

Someone with my voice intoned a sinister yes.

«Then allow me to begin,» the Commissioner said. «The girl was found inside the station in a completely disoriented state by the patrol guards at 6:10 this morning. She was approached and, when asked for identification, walked by as if she hadn't heard the

request. This scene repeated itself three times. At that point, the officers, fearing for her safety, had to intervene by grabbing her arm. As soon as she felt the contact, she started screaming and struggling with absolutely disproportionate strength; the station's CCTV cameras can testify to this. Having ascertained the situation, the guards had to intervene more forcefully to restrain the obviously disoriented girl. Medical support was promptly called and, upon arrival, confirmed the guards' observations. The girl was administered a sedative and, after it was established that she had no wounds, fractures, or other injuries requiring urgent hospitalisation, she was transported here. Some personal effects were found in the girl's backpack.»

Liliana's things were in an envelope on the Commissioner's desk. Then he added: «We traced you back through her ID. She didn't have her mobile phone with her." After giving this sterile and cruel account, performing the task without batting an eyelid, he stopped talking and looked at us.

He had round, black eyes and kept staring at us, expecting a reaction while our lives had just been shattered, derailed like a runaway train. Now everything was still in that cubicle. I could hear Cecilia sobbing, she was holding her hand tight over her

nose, clutching a paper tissue; I could hear her crying and wailing. It was a distant lament, a litany coming from the hidden caverns of her soul.

I think that was the moment when her body decided to lower its defences and let itself be overwhelmed by some kind of illness. What she saw and heard was too much, even for her, and that was how she surrendered, but she didn't know it yet.

Then a question burst out of me, the first and most natural question a parent could ask in a situation like this; I am not usually arrogant and I don't use vulgar language, but I felt an uncontrollable urge to stand up, grab the Commissioner by the collar of his uniform, shake him, punch him in the face and make him tell me what had happened to my daughter.

So I said in one breath, «What the fuck happened, Commissioner?» He shifted a little nervously in his seat but recovered his composure.

«What happened, how she ended up back here at the station, if she was alone or with someone - we're trying to find out through the surveillance camera footage. We're reviewing the tapes. What we know so far is that Liliana arrived here in Milan on Thursday at 1 p.m., on a direct train from Bologna, then went

straight out to the tram stop, a sign that she had a specific destination in mind and that she knew the way there. This makes us think it wasn't the first time.»

Cecilia, like me, was watching a film she never wanted to see. She shook her head, as if to say no, this wasn't our daughter they were talking about. As he continued his account, Commissioner Rivola saw my unease grow, I was demanding answers that his words weren't providing. So, for the first time since we had been sitting there in front of him, Rivola lowered his round, black eyes and said these exact words: «We strongly suspect that Lilitiana was drugged and that someone, taking advantage of her unconscious state, abused her. The hospital tests will tell us exactly how things stand. I'm sorry, Mr. and Mrs. Bozzi. At the moment there is nothing more we can do or know.»

I don't know what happened next, but my legs hoisted me up instinctively, I grabbed the pen holder and hurled it at the wall; pens and paper clips scattered across the room, and I don't remember exactly if the punch I landed on the glass was enough to crack it, but what I do know is that it was almost enough to fracture my metacarpal bone.

"Abused! Drugged! What the hell are you saying, commissioner?" Each word was punctuated by a slam of my fist on the desk and the pain my hand felt with each thud. "What are you saying? Where are we? In a goddamn movie? Liliana, say something, for God's sake! Tell the commissioner he's wrong."

But Liliana said nothing.

I felt the warmth of Cecilia's hand on mine, she tried to meet my gaze, but I was unable to hold it, my eyes fixed on the desk, waiting for her to at least say something, that everyone here had lost their minds and that it couldn't be true. But she didn't say it. She was always a step ahead, in every situation, and I clung to her strength, as I did on that damned day.

Then she spoke, just a few words, simple, but hard as rock. You can't argue with a rock. You just smash against it. You lose, it wins. "Luigi, that's enough now. Liliana needs us, and you're just making things worse. Look at her. Stop it." Then she continued, "Commissioner, please, forgive my husband and tell us what we need to do." I was defeated. A volcano without lava, an empty punching bag, useless. I started pacing back and forth like a caged lion, head down, as if sniffing the ground for an escape route. Which didn't exist.

We got into the ambulance with Liliana, who had been secured to a chair with straps. During the ride to the Mangiagalli clinic, no one spoke, except for the doctor and the nurse, who whispered instructions and opinions to each other.

The tiles were small, square, and blue, and aside from the white baseboard, there was no distinction between floor and wall. More than a gynaecology ward, it felt like an aquarium. I suspected that all the floors of the hospital and their respective wards must give the same impression: we were fish that had fallen into the net, waiting for the fisherman to pull us up and put an end to the agonising wait.

Liliana had been inside for over an hour. I asked Cecilia if she wanted water or something to eat, she shook her head. I went to the coffee machine, but before I could insert the coins, I heard the clack of the push bar behind me and quickly turned around: it was the doctor who had been treating Liliana.

Cecilia was already on her feet, and when I reached her, she looked at me as if seeing me for the first time in days.

"Liliana's parents?" the doctor asked, adjusting her glasses. We nodded.

"Liliana was subjected to violence for several hours and remained unconscious for most of the ordeal. Tests confirm she was given the so-called date rape drug, also known as liquid Ecstasy. When slipped into drinks, it renders the victim pliable and subdued, sometimes causing loss of consciousness. Its characteristics make it particularly suited for malicious purposes: it is a colourless powder or liquid with a salty or slightly soapy taste and is virtually odourless."

She paused, coughed, and then continued in the same medical conference tone: «The substance is water-soluble and can easily be added to drinks surreptitiously. As early as fifteen minutes after ingesting it, the victim feels as if they are drunk, to the point where they may lose consciousness.» She said "drunk," mimicking the quotation marks with her fingers, then continued: «Furthermore, from the moment it is metabolized, this drug causes anterograde amnesia: the victim has no memory of what happened following the ingestion of the substance. Victims may become aware that they have been assaulted, but cannot remember the details or the perpetrator. From the vaginal swab, we obtained several pieces of information.»

«What kind of information?» asked Cecilia. I wasn't sure I wanted to keep listening any longer. And I was right.

«The abuse went on for hours, and in addition to her physical state, her psychological state also worries me,» the doctor added. «I have the impression that at first, she must have trusted the man, and the state of shock she is in is also largely dependent on this. Let's wait for the sedative effects of the Tavor to wear off, and then a psychologist will go and talk to her; then you can come in.»

«But how drugged was she?» I had the strength to say.

«Yes, Mr. Bozzi, I'm so sorry, substances used to facilitate rape can have sedative, hypnotic, dissociative effects and can even cause amnesia. Normal dosages can cause nausea, general malaise, dizziness, drowsiness, and other ailments, and higher dosages can lead to convulsions, loss of consciousness, and in the worst cases even death. In Liliana's blood we detected an amount that I would describe as very high, so we can say that she was in serious danger.»

Blackout.

«There's more,» the doctor added. By then, my vision had blurred and I could no longer make out her face. It felt like

someone was whipping me bloody, intent on making me die of pain.

«What?» I asked.

«We need to run some more tests to rule out the possibility of pregnancy.»

I had to sit down. I buried my head in my hands. I suddenly found the tips of my shoes fascinating. Maybe I was dreaming.

I kept staring at my shoes. I thought I needed to get rid of them once and for all. They were a dead giveaway. You could tell I was just a poor, desperate worker from a mile away. After this brief, absurd reflection, a feeling of inadequacy washed over me. I positioned my feet so that they were perfectly parallel and aligned with the grout lines of the blue tiles.

I needed order.

I was doomed, waiting for a fisherman to pull me out of that blue swamp. I wanted to die and end up on some fish market stall. But I wanted to do it in new shoes.

«When can we see her?»

«The medical examiner is still examining her. Afterward, you'll meet with the psychologist. We'll call you. You need to stay strong and be patient.»

Cecilia was crying as she tried to stammer out a thank you to the doctor.

I remained silent and continued to stare at the floor.

"We need to know who did this," I burst out, clenching my fists though I favoured my right, given the pain it was causing me.

"Liliana will tell us. Luigi, please try to calm down."

"Liliana? It's likely she was having an affair here in Milan with someone, and we didn't even know she'd ever set foot in this damned city, Cecilia!"

"She'll have to tell us."

"She won't tell us a thing. Anyway, I already have an idea who it might have been. Remember that pig of a professor? The one who was sleeping with his students?"

"Luigi, stop talking like that."

"Remember that filthy pig of a professor at her academy who was having affairs with his students?"

"Yes, I remember perfectly. His name was Tullio Lauro."

"That professor is from Milan."

"Fine, the professor is from Milan. So what? It doesn't mean anything, Luigi. Nothing at all."

"It means a lot to me, Cecilia."

The next day I returned to Commissioner Rivola, who didn't seem too happy to see me.

«Commissioner, I need to talk to you.»

«Good morning, Mr. Bozzi, how is your daughter?»

«Liliana will pull through, but I want to know if you've found out who did it.»

The Commissioner smiled as one would at a child who claims there are ten days in a week.

«Mr. Bozzi, we have to start from scratch, reconstruct your daughter's movements, it will take time and it won't be easy.»

«I know who did it,» I declared, searching within myself for a courage I didn't possess.

«I beg your pardon?»

«What I said. I said I know who raped my daughter.»

«Then tell me.»

«Tullio Lauro.»

«And should that name mean something to me?»

«Maybe yes, maybe no. Depends if you've been watching the news lately.»

«I always watch the news.»

«So you must have heard about that professor in Milan who was fired because he had, not one, but several affairs with his students?»

«No, I'm sorry, but it doesn't ring a bell.»

«Well, then do your research and bear one thing in mind.»

«What's that?»

«Tullio Lauro was one of Liliana's professors.»

«Mr. Bozzi, you know better than I do that this would be nothing more than unfounded conjecture. We will make some checks, but investigations can't be based on this kind of deduction.»

«Promise me you'll find out where Professor Lauro was the other night,» I said to him, holding out my hand, which I believe was shaking at that point.

«I promise,» he reassured me, shaking my hand in turn.

We spent another twenty days in Milan, and every morning when I opened my eyes, I promised myself that would be the last time I would set foot in that city. It was the emptiest promise I

could make myself; I couldn't have known it then, but in those moments, in that hotel room, lying between those sheets, on that carpet, all I could do was hope that it would all be over soon.

Cecilia stayed by Liliana's side, even at night, and in the morning, when I went to bring them warm croissants and something to drink, she would tell me how restless our daughter's sleep was. Confused and dreadful feelings would constantly appear in her mind, especially at night, in the form of images, thoughts, perceptions, or nightmares.

«Sometimes her mind unconsciously relives the violence she endured; her unconscious state didn't allow her to form clear memories or images, and that is increasing her distress, Luigi. I have good news and bad news: which do you want to hear first?»

«There's no such thing as good news for me, Cecilia,» I muttered.

«Don't be such a pessimist, Luigi; there is good news, and that is that the latest tests show that she isn't pregnant.»

I didn't say anything. It was an outcome I had evidently ruled out from the start, so it didn't make me feel any better.

«Alright, what's the bad news?» I simply said.

«The doctors, Luigi, say that if she isn't treated properly, she risks developing a chronic disorder.»

«What do you mean?» I asked.

«I mean, she could be like this forever.»

«Like this forever?»

«Forever, Luigi.»

Then one rainy Monday in October, Liliana was discharged from the hospital. That aquarium of a place spat us out, along with a diagnosis of severe post-traumatic stress disorder. The treatment? A cocktail of psychotropic drugs and tranquilizers, and the strong recommendation that we find our daughter a good specialist, especially for the first few months. We drove along the A7 towards Gromi almost in silence. In the rearview mirror, I observed Liliana. I think I spent more time staring at her than I did looking at the road; it was her, but at the same time, it wasn't. I was looking for my Liliana in the black eyes of that girl sitting in the back seat, where I could only make out a faint, steady, but vacant light. Cecilia, who was gazing out of the window, was also pale and looked as though she'd aged, which, in fact, she had. Her body had already begun to surrender to life; she, who had always been my rock, strong, steady, and unwavering, had begun to

crumble from the inside. I could only watch, powerless, as it happened. I peered at Liliana and pictured Commissioner Rivola and his team of policemen breaking into that goddamn professor's house.

«Tullio Lauro?»

«Yes, that's me, what do you want?»

«You're under arrest.»

I imagined the headlines. Milan Professor Is a Monster, Rapes Former Student. He couldn't get away with this; he had ruined my little girl's life, Cecilia's life, and mine. October flew by, and November was upon us like the wicked witch from a fairytale, standing at the gates of a village of oblivious inhabitants, her cloak heavy with misery. Liliana wasn't getting any better. My wife had frequent consultations with the doctor who was treating her in Milan, but there was little to be done apart from continuing with the therapy, being patient, and praying, Cecilia added.

We would spend many nights lying awake, awoken by Liliana's screams or her whimpers, unable to fall asleep again, plagued by thoughts and the growing certainty that we would never go back to the life we had before. Towards the end of November, I attempted to ask Liliana the question for the first time.

I had prepared myself. It was lunchtime, and Cecilia was at the stove. I was sitting at the table, pretending to watch television. When she joined me at the table, I looked at her and tried to smile. I don't think it was my best smile. I cleared my throat. Cecilia knew what I was about to do. She didn't turn to face me, but she stopped what she was doing, and I think she might even have stopped breathing. I gathered my courage and said to her, «Liliana, my darling girl, Mummy and I are so happy to see you here with us, but we're also very worried. We know that you love us, and that's why you need to help us, my love. Tell us the name of the person who hurt you that night, please.»

Her big, black eyes were fixed on mine. She wasn't just looking at me; she was listening intently. For a moment, my whole body trembled at the thought that she might answer me, that she might put an end to the torment that had plagued her parents day and night, that we might finally be able to shed light on what had happened, get justice, and find that bastard. For a split second, I thought I saw a flicker of something in the depths of her black irises, like an astronaut lost in the vast, silent emptiness of space.

The moment was broken when she lowered her gaze and began to fiddle with her fingers. The tightrope snapped, and I fell,

utterly defeated. It was a silent, suffocating fall. I reached for Cecilia's hand. I couldn't face this alone.

I wasn't ready to face this alone. But I would soon have to learn to be strong. In the end, Lilitana didn't say a word. Cecilia brought the plates of food to the table.

I couldn't understand how our daughter could possibly be protecting that creep. Had he threatened her? Had he threatened to hurt us, and was she covering for him to keep us safe? There was nothing I could do. Cecilia, for her part, had never given any credence to my theory about Professor Lauro; despite his being a pervert, we had no evidence to incriminate him, and that was a fact. But I sensed that there was more to it than that, and I knew that Commissioner Rivola would soon prove me right. I had no doubt.

Milano, the return

I got off the A7 near Sant'Ambrogio and looked for a café to take a piss, grab a coffee, and ask for information.

«A long coffee, please.»

«Anything to eat?»

«A cream croissant.»

«Alright, coming right up.»

«Excuse me, Ma'am.»

«Yes?»

«I'm looking for a cheap hotel nearby, do you know any?»

«There are loads of places to stay around here, but if you don't want to go too far, there's the Boston, a couple of blocks away. It's a three-star hotel, if I remember correctly.»

«Fine, I'll try there, thanks.»

Room 104, en-suite bathroom. First floor. The first thing I did was plop down on the bed to test out the mattress. The wallpaper was yellowed, but I couldn't expect anything better, the window was quite generous overlooking the main street. The Boston

Hotel had definitely seen better days, no doubt about that, and even the receptionist seemed to match the rundown vibe, but for me it was perfect: it was cheap, I had a roof over my head, a bathroom and a bed. I didn't need anything else.

I opened my suitcase and grabbed the soap. I needed to freshen up before going out. When the phone rang I was already in the bathroom. There he is, I thought. As I was drying my face with the towel, I glanced at the screen, it was him, it couldn't be anyone else at that hour. I took a deep breath. I decided to call him back to face him immediately without delay, he answered on the first ring.

«Luigi.»

«Aldo.»

There was a pause, long enough for me to suspect that the line had dropped.

«Where are you?»

«Where did I tell you I was going?»

«Why?»

«You already know that too.»

«Tell me where you are and I'll pick you up.»

«Absolutley not.»

«We can find another solution. You have tuition to pay, don't forget that.»

«As if I could forget. The thought is eating me alive, Aldo.»

«Luigi, you're right to be angry, but you won't solve anything this way.»

«I have nothing to lose, Aldo.»

«That's not true, Luigi, and you know it.»

«Aldo, I've never done a single good thing in my life. If it wasn't for Cecilia, I would have been a complete failure. If it wasn't for Cecilia I would have been a complete failure. Now I'm alone. She's gone. Liliana is stuck in that clinic, and that bastard is out there enjoying his life. It's time to do something about it.»

«Luigi, there is nothing you can do but try to help Liliana.»

«Yes, instead, I have to get revenge. That's something I can do.»

«Cecilia would not want that.»

«You didn't know Cecilia all the way, she was a fighter, she would approve of my plan instead.»

«Don't talk nonsense. Cecilia would never have even let you think such things.»

His words hit me hard. He was right.

I hung up.

I slipped on my coat, grabbed the money and went out.

The receptionist remained in the same position and expression as before; I left him the room key on the counter, but he did not move a muscle.

Milan greeted me with a somewhat grey morning. A light rain was falling, and the passing cars kicked up a fine spray from the road.

I hadn't thought to bring an umbrella and I didn't even have a hat or a hood. Idiot.

I needed to find a place with a computer and internet access, but my only strategy was to walk until I stumbled across one.

Wandering around like a lost soul, I noticed a newsstand with no one inside.

«Let me see... No, it's hard to find one around here. They're usually downtown or near the university.»

«I see, and are they far away?»

«Well, yes, if you have to walk. You'd be better off taking the 98 bus. It stops right here and goes to Via Giambellino.»

«Via Giambellino.» I said back.

«Yes, Via Giambellino, do you need to write it down?»

«No, thanks, I remember.»

«Do you have a bus ticket?»

«No.»

«How much?»

«Two.»

«Here you go.»

«Thank you.»

«Here you go.»

The bumpy road and the rocking of the bus were almost lulling me to sleep when I reached the last stop. The driver turned off the engine, opened his door, and got out. I followed him shortly after, and as soon as I stepped off the bus, I realised the cityscape had changed. Gone were the large green spaces and fast-flowing roads, replaced by a vast expanse of concrete and seven-story buildings.

I walked for about half a kilometre and found a run-down sign that read "Service Centre, internet point" on my left. It was a tiny place, no more than twenty square metres, crammed with computer stations. I paid for an hour and sat down. I racked my

brain trying to remember which icon to click to open the browser, just like Aldo's son, Giacomo, had shown me. I stared at the blank page of the search engine, waiting for my instructions.

The cursor blinked.

I cleared my throat as if I was supposed to give it verbal instructions, or talk to an actual person, moved my chair closer to the keyboard and with my right index finger I started typing: l e o n a r d o u r r i and then pressed enter.

Here we are. We meet again, I thought. The first search result was the website for his foundation, *The Happy Children*. I remembered Giacomo telling me to move the pointer over the page I wanted to open and click on it, but I couldn't remember if it was once or twice. I clicked twice, just to be safe.

I had not seen many websites in my life before that morning. Anyway, a photo popped up of a smiling man with a Black child on his shoulders and a blond one in his arms. That had to be him.

The recipe against poverty is YOUR generosity, the slogan proclaimed right below it. Sure thing, Mr. Urri. I'll be very, very generous, as soon as I figure out how to get you this damn money, I muttered to myself. Then I saw a button with an unmistakable

meaning: *donate now*. All I had to do was click it. I had the money in my pocket. How was I supposed to donate by clicking a button on a screen? Luckily, it turned out to be easier than expected.. How was I going to donate it by clicking a button on a monitor? Fortunately, I discovered it was easier than expected. The page had the IBAN, the account name, and the payment reference. I asked for a pen and paper and carefully copied down all the information. Once I was back outside, I set about finding a bank. I wanted to make the deposit as soon as possible, and I found one a few blocks away.

«I need to make a deposit, actually, it's a donation.»

«How much will you be donating?»

«Here. Five thousand Euros.»

The bank teller looked at me, then slipped the money into the bill counter.

«What should I put for the reference?» he asked.

«Liberal donation, Luigi Bozzi, and please add this telephone number.» I showed him my number written on a slip of paper.

«When will the receipt be available?» I asked.

«No later than 48h, so within a couple of days at the most.»

I walked out of the bank with a strange sense of vertigo. I was a little dizzy, so I went to sit on a nearby bench. I had practically cleaned out my already meagre bank account.

There were some old people shuffling along with their caregivers, some pigeons, and me. I instinctively patted the pocket of my jacket where I kept my phone. I was already anticipating the call, even though it hadn't even been an hour since the donation.

I thought about how I was gambling everything, but this time it wasn't some damn slot machine sucking away my money, this was a wager with myself, and maybe, just maybe, I could do one good thing in my life: avenge Liliana.

I realised all I could do now was wait. I had Milan spread out before me, and I had no idea what to do with it. I could wander aimlessly and give myself all the time I needed to think: what would I do if Urri didn't call? What story would I come up with? Would I have to admit Aldo was right? Then I thought about what the hell I was doing in Milan. Why had I come to Milan? I could have found an internet point in Gromi, made the donation at some bank in Gromi, and waited. I felt like an idiot. I'd already paid for the hotel for a week. What was I thinking?

Urri wasn't waiting for Mr. Luigi Nobody Bozzi and his paltry sum. What a fool I was!

I decided to grab a sandwich and head back to the hotel. My desire to wander around Milan had vanished. Good thing, too—there were already enough idiots roaming the city streets. Back in my room a little while later, my back confirmed that the bed wasn't half bad. My eyes closed. The idiot needed his rest.

When I woke up, it was no longer daylight streaming through the window, but the glow of the streetlights. My mouth tasted like cotton. I was starving and thirsty. More than getting out of bed, I dragged my bare feet across the carpet; it kind of grossed me out. After a shower, I slowly came back to reality. And the more I did, the more I realized how much that sudden, deep sleep had recharged me. I glanced at my phone. No messages, no calls. I needed to grab a bite to eat. I hit the streets shortly after and started walking briskly. A few hours earlier I'd felt like an idiot; now I was a well-rested but hungry idiot. The situation hadn't changed. The feeling of unease clung to me like a tattoo. I was a nobody, out of place, wandering through completely unfamiliar streets, waiting for a phone call that would most likely never come.

Way to go, Luigi. You're a real piece of work.

It was my sense of smell, before sight, that snapped me out of my thoughts. It was the unmistakable aroma of pizza—not just tomato, oregano, mozzarella, oil, and dough, but the alchemical fusion of all those ingredients and more; it was the smell of wood burning in the oven. It was almost cathartic. I went inside and immediately ordered a quattro stagioni with double mozzarella and two beers.

I lingered over my second beer at the table.

"That pizza was really good," I said to the guy who continued to churn them out.

«You liked it?»

«Yeah, it was great. How long have you been a pizza maker?»

"Two years.»

«Where are you from?»

«I'm Senegalese. I've been in Italy for five years.»

«My name's Luigi. Nice to meet you.»

«Ali.»

I was glad I'd discovered Ali's take-away pizzeria.

I bought a third beer and left.

I had an unusual urge to walk. I was drawn to the flashing red light of what looked like a nightclub. It was on the opposite side of the street. From afar, it had looked like the illuminated outline of a glass with a straw. When I got closer, I realized it wasn't a glass, but some kind of pin-up with a cigarette. I stared at it for a few more seconds, then found myself pushing open the door. I'd heard about these places from the younger guys at the factory. I'd always judged them harshly. They stayed out until dawn, wasting their money on booze and women. Now I was inside, and the pounding bass of that strange music was shattering any guilt I might have felt. The club walls were decorated with posters and photographs with explicit content, while screens played erotic videos to stimulate the imagination. There was a bar in one corner, and on the small stage, a burlesque show was in full swing.

"Give me one of those," I told the bartender, pointing to the third line down on the menu. I had no idea what it was, but I was sure it was alcoholic. I took a greedy gulp and started looking around. The club started spinning. There were nearly naked girls wrapped around poles, simulating lewd acts, men inches away from them, awkward, with goofy grins plastered on their faces. I must have had that grin too, I thought, feeling my face. I stayed

there, sitting for hours. I didn't even try to get off the stool, because I doubted I could stand. I ordered another drink—it would be my last.

«Sir. Hey, sir.»

«Yeah?»

«We're about to close up. You need to drink up and head out.»

It was one of the bouncers, but at first, I had the impression it was a billiard ball talking to me. He had a perfectly shaved, shiny head, the lights reflecting off it. I stared at his gleaming head while trying to mumble through my cotton-dry mouth, "Okay, I'll get going now."

I staggered towards the exit. Outside, dawn was breaking, and my ears were ringing so loudly that I could see the cars going by but couldn't hear them. Even the voices of the last few people leaving, like me, seemed to be coming from a room with a closed door.

My bladder was about to burst. I had to get back to the hotel, but I had no idea how. I started walking to see if I could manage it without faceplanting on the sidewalk.

Morning seemed in a hurry to arrive that day, and the more the light came, the more the shadows in the night of my mind began to dissipate. Stupid and perverted too, I thought. When a cab finally came by, I was lucky to flag it down.

Sitting in the back, I tried to loosen my belt without the driver noticing. I was really about to piss myself.

Stupid, perverted, and incontinent.

«Where to, sir?»

«The Hotel Boston.»

«Do you know the exact address?»

«I don't remember. Just take me near Sant'Ambrogio, and I'll figure it out.»

«Not to worry, I'll find it on the GPS.»

The roads were still relatively clear, and I found myself back in front of the hotel about ten minutes later. I paid the fare and went inside.

The inanimate being from the day before wasn't at the reception desk. Instead, there was a young guy, practically asleep on his feet. I got my key and practically ran up the stairs, as fast as someone can run when they can barely hold it in. I emptied my

bladder, and with it, I released that feeling of oppression I'd been carrying around since I'd left that damned club.

I dragged myself to the bed and, like the previous afternoon, stared at the yellowed ceiling.

I barely had time to say—or at least, I thought I said— Forgive me, if you can, Cecilia, before I drifted off to sleep.

It was a little after eleven in the morning when the vibration of the phone in my pocket brought me back to reality in the most abrupt way possible. This time it wasn't my bladder that felt like it was going to burst, but my head. I pulled out my phone. It was Aldo.

«Aldo,» I said, trying to sound like I was awake.

«Luigi, we were expecting your call last night.»

«Why?»

«We were worried about you.»

«Right, well, you know me. I left my phone in the room. Went for a walk, and by the time I got back, it was too late to call.»

«Were you sleeping?»

«Who, me? No.»

«Do you have a cold?»

«Aldo, I'm fine. I'm in my room, about to head out.»

«What did you do yesterday?»

«Nothing important.»

«What are your plans for today?»

«Nothing special.»

«And what are you doing in Milan, then?»

«You know why.»

«Luigi, you're just wasting time and money. Why don't you come back to Gromi? We'll talk, try to figure something out together.»

«Aldo, I have to go. I'll call you tonight.»

I hung up without waiting for a response.

I checked my phone to make sure there weren't any other calls or messages. Nothing. I needed a shower. I had to wash away the sweat and the guilt. Then I could try to think and take something for this headache.

The guy at the reception desk turned out to be chattier but also much more indiscreet than his inanimate colleague.

«Morning, Mr. Bozzi! Late one last night, eh?»

«Yeah.»

«Going for lunch?»

«Yep.»

«You got any place in mind?»

«Nope.»

«Take a look at this brochure. It lists a couple of little restaurants where you can eat well and cheaply. This one is very close. It's called Aldo's.»

«Aldo's?»

«Yeah.»

«Nah, I think I'll walk a bit farther.»

«Perfect. Well, about a kilometer from here, there's another trattoria, the King of Spades. They make excellent steak.»

«Great, I think I'll check it out.»

«Enjoy your lunch!»

The indiscreet, talkative guy at the reception desk was right. I had a veal chop, rare, like I hadn't eaten in ages. They were also kind enough to provide something for my headache.

I returned to my 104, which in the meantime was beginning to acquire some connotations of familiarity.

The telephone was silent, had the credit note arrived at the foundation? What was I to do? Wait. But where? It was worth going back to Gromi. What was the point of that forced stay in

Milan? Was I in danger of ending up again in some shiny signposted club? For the hotel I would have asked for a refund for the remaining days. The guy at reception seemed like a reasonable guy.

I tried to draw up a balance sheet, it didn't take long to see the big minus sign, flashing red like the pin-up on the sign the night before.

Meanwhile the phone started ringing. I thought it was Aldo, after all it was almost evening. On the display was not his name, but a number. I thought it was the foundation and hurried to answer.

«Hello, is this Mr. Luigi Bozzi?»

«Yes, it is me, Bozzi Luigi. Who is speaking?»

«Villa delle Margherite, Mr. Bozzi. I'll put you through to the accounting office.»

I took a deep breath. So deep that the stench of humidity entered all the crevices of my old lungs.

«Mr. Bozzi, good morning, I am calling because we saw that you received our reminder letter. Do you have any questions about it?»

«No, no questions at all.»

«Was the content clear?»

«Yes, completely clear, I have two months from the moment of receipt.»

«Perfect. Of course, we are ready to meet you with further installments, the important thing is that you show us your willingness to start recovering the debt.»

«Of course, I have the will, it's about my daughter.»

«We know that, Mr. Bozzi. But we do our work in this office.»

«Yes, I'm well aware of that.»

«Have you thought of a return plan yet?»

I thought for a moment that they were referring to the return trip from Milan.

«No. I have to discuss it with the consultant,» I lied.

«Good. Could you keep us updated, please?»

«Sure, I will.»

«Goodbye then, Mr. Bozzi.»

I threw the phone on the bedside table, and myself on the bed, and as Morpheus took possession of me, I decided I would return to Gromi the next morning. Yet another hole in the water of the stupid, perverted and incontinent man I had become.

The door opened without a sound. It was Liliana, walking barefoot and looking at me without a word as she came to sit on my bed in room 104.

«What are you doing here, sweetheart?»

«Waiting, Daddy.»

«What are you waiting for?»

«For you to call me.»

«Why should I call you?»

«Because I'm getting married tomorrow.»

«I forgot to call you, but I will come, who are you getting married to?»

«With the only man I have left, with you.»

It started raining.

«I have no umbrella, no hood or raincoat, how stupid of me. Come under the covers or you risk getting sick, Liliana.»

«But I'm already sick, Dad. Mama says I'll get well soon.»

«Where's mum?»

«Waiting for you to come back.»

«But I never left.»

«You're not here now, Dad. What are you doing here, Dad?»

«I'm looking for someone, darling.»

«There's no one here, Dad, answer the phone.»

«But no one is calling me.»

«That's not true, listen carefully. Mummy says I'll get well soon.»

«Where's mum?»

«Waiting for you to come back.»

«But I never left.»

«You're not here now, Dad.»

«But I am here.»

«You were never here, Dad, and now you can't make up for it, it's too late.»

«It's never too late, Liliana.»

«Yes, it is.»

«No, it isn't.»

«Do you love mum? I love her. She says I will get well soon. Do you know where Mum is? Waiting for you to come back.»

«Liliana, come under the covers, you're getting wet, it's raining up there.»

Then Liliana got up, the mattress moved and I shuddered like a baby in its cradle.

I opened my eyes wide: the room was still dark, the reflection of the street lamps penetrated the slats of the half-closed shutters.

I looked at the clock, 3.29. I had the feeling that the collar of my pyjamas was wet, so I touched it. It was not a feeling. I moved my right hand down to the level of my chest, wet. I flipped off the covers, got out of bed, crawled into the bathroom and turned on the shower without waiting for the water to get hot. This is what I wanted: to be hit. And whether it was someone or something I didn't care, it was the cold water that did it that night and I was grateful. Thank you, water. Now hit me. Listen to me. Here I am, I close my eyes, I lift my head, I let you submerge me. The important thing is that you are cold so that I can feel every single drop that hits my skin, the skin of a stupid, perverted, incontinent old man. I stood so still, long enough to start shaking. I went out. I dried myself. I went back to bed. My skin was cold. I curled up under the covers. I went back to sleep.

I did not dream any more.

When I opened my eyes again, it was daylight. I stuck to my decision. I would return to Gromi. What was I doing in Milan?

I packed my suitcase as best I could, I hadn't even touched Urri's books, they were just sitting there next to my socks.

Waiting for me at the reception desk was the indiscreet, logorrhic and polite boy.

«Mr Bozzi, good morning! Did you sleep well?»

«Yes, thank you, like a baby.»

«Oh, well actually the management recently changed the mattresses, our customers are happy.»

«I should leave the room,» I said to cut it short.

«Did you decide to leave early?»

«Yes.»

«But why? Did he not like it with us?»

«No, rather, it's for personal reasons.»

«I see, fill out this form, please, meanwhile I'll print you the invoice.»

«May I know your name?» I asked him.

«My name is Francesco,» he replied, pleased with the question.

«Francesco, the pen doesn't write.»

With a new pen I started to fill out the form and thought we were back to the same old thing. I had concluded nothing. I was recanting, like when the FiGromit union offered me the chance to be on the board: first I accepted, then refused. Cecilia was hurt by

this, she said I had the tough character to undertake that experience, but I felt unfit, exactly as I was feeling at that very moment.

«Here you go, Mr Bozzi,» Francesco said cordially. He placed the invoice on the counter, next to the form I was filling out; I was almost finished when the phone started vibrating.

Aldo was a stubborn fuck, worse than me. I snatched the phone out of my pocket, I was about to berate something like I'm going back to Gromi, happy? Now I'm going to close I have to pay the hotel bill. But I didn't. I didn't because it wasn't Aldo. But an unknown number. The clinic had already called me the day before: they were really exaggerating.

«Hello,» I growled in the rudest tone possible.

«Good morning, is this Mr Luigi Bozzi?»

«It's me, who is this?»

«I'm calling from the Happy Children's Foundation, Mr. Bozzi. You made a donation the day before yesterday, is that correct?»

«Yes,» I confirmed as I leaned against the reception counter.

«Very well Mr. Bozzi, we thank you from the bottom of our hearts. There is someone who wants to speak to you, can you hold on?»

«Yes, of course.»

I motioned Francesco to wait, stepped out into the street to make sure the phone was picking up properly and to take his curious eyes off me. I stood on hold for several minutes, listening in the background to classical music whose composer I was unaware of.

«Luigi Bozzi?»

«Yes, that's me.»

«Good morning, I am Leonardo Urri.»

«...»

«Hello? Can you hear me?»

«Yes, yes, I can hear you.»

«Mr. Bozzi, you did well to put your telephone number in your payment datas, the foundation is grateful and I want to thank you in person.»

«I'm glad, I didn't expect that.»

«Where are you? We are in Milan, but perhaps you already know that.»

«I am also in Milan.»

«Ah well! That makes things so much easier, so let me check my diary... tomorrow at 5pm is that OK with you?»

«Tomorrow at 5pm?»

«Yes, Mr. Bozzi, tomorrow at 5pm, do you hear me well?»

«Yes, I can hear you.»

«Then what about it? Do you already have plans?»

«No. I'm free.»

«Very well then, let's set it for tomorrow, my secretary will contact you again to give you the address.»

«Alright, I'll wait for the address then.»

«Yes. Goodbye for now then. See you tomorrow.»

«See you tomorrow, thank you.»