

A Young Director: Mr Heart

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Translated by Anna Gadd Colombi

DAD

In me you will leave a void made of unvoiced words,
Those unshed tears, held back by a slow sigh.

In me you will leave the memory of the cold impact of your blue eyes,
Custodians of a sought for love, rarely reached,
Lost in bad memories of confused days and sad nights of solitude.

In me you will leave a void of love,
Of words that I for you have supplied with love felt,
Sensed by sweet and full eyes.

In me you will leave the memory of a boy who suffered
Unfairly
Leaving my brain and spirit mute, for fear, not for guilt.

I have always, always loved you.

*We love our children, we give them freedom, not as a concession, yet rather as a choice.
Merely listening is, at times, far more important than unsolicited advice.*

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INTRODUCTION

Here I am. Sitting at a cheap old little table, bought in a second-hand shop for a few Euros and repaired somehow or other, by investing just a few coins, my scarce experience, and a lot of love in it. My beard is shaggy, on the same skin that, only a few years ago, was glabrous and smooth. I'm thinking.

I'm thinking about my life, what it was and what it will be. There's an old typewriter in front of me, an Olivetti that was my *nonno's*. I have observed it since I was little, got close to it, touched it, pressed the keys. I keep hearing that sound that's always fascinated me, then I stop and I see it again, without daring. I used to. I would even insert some white paper and write short texts, until I'd use the last drop of ink on the tape. It was some sort of a muse to me, my inspiring painting. If today someone asks me who I was, I wouldn't know how to respond, how to give a precise definition of myself. I can do almost nothing, even though I like to say I can do "a bit of everything." In any case, I know what I want to be and I know that I write, always have, without consistency, sometimes without logic or verse or study, but I have always written.

And I write because I love communicating, because I want someone to read and be moved, no matter what kind of emotion I generate. I want to be the sentence that comforts you, the one that pushes you, the one that makes you think, dream. I want to be the poem you dedicate to someone you love, as you would with a song, just without the music. I want to be the silent music of the soul, the words that ignite music even where it doesn't exist. I want to be the growing curiosity, the memory that resurfaces, the missing piece, a snatched smile and a wiped tear. And I want to be that on a sunny day or a rainy one, in summer, autumn, spring, winter. For an instant, for however long it takes to create a union between me writing and you reading. Then I'll smell the perfume of the ink I use to soak these words of mine, now yours, breaking free and reaching me. It will be a bond between strangers. It will be the magic of the written word.

THE GRAND CITY

Rome is beautiful, magical, immortal, and when you think about it from far away, it takes the form of a dream you don't want to wake up from.

A life that leads you away from her, Rome, is a bitter life, an existence which will be spent constantly seeking the singularity of astounding scenery, characteristic smells and flavours, vivid glimpses of a charm with the uniqueness and essence of a seemingly immortal soul.

To make a comparison, it's similar to falling in love with a woman whom you lose and you then find yourself spending your entire life looking for a hint of her eyes in those of every woman you meet.

Rome is like that: it's not a "simple city," nor is it *grande*, big, as the Italians say; it's not even "one of the most beautiful cities," it is merely "the grand city."

Do you wonder if love at first sight exists?

Well, you've never been in Rome at twilight.

You've never strolled down Via Vittorio Veneto until you reach Porta Pinciana, crossed the gardens of Villa Borghese finding peace two mere steps away from the epicentre of confusion and chaos. You've never sat down on that bench in Piazza del Pincio, right behind the statues of Javier Martin's knights, that point towards what once was the centre of an empire, and fiercely project their armour-shaped shade on domes, squares, basilicas and slick hills.

At that moment, you would perceive history amalgamating with nature in a song that has been alive for centuries. In the red and orange nuances that bathe the clouds, you would feel the blurring of your emotions, distracted and enraptured by the song of a kestrel or western jackdaw, by a blackbird whistling, or the light wing flapping of a young robin redbreast.

Where does Rome end?

How far does the cradle of the evolution of a country—the development of a philosophy, a culture with epochal roots—expand beyond its borders? How far does the idea of this enormous pack, originating from the love of a wolf for two children with no future go?

In the grand city you can get lost, walking through the *vicoli* of Trastevere, ending up in squares full of life where market days mark the passing of time.

And you walk around aimlessly, purely to bring joy to your eyes, to admire the unique combination of the greatest magnificence of nature merging with the evolution of human Arts.

Layers of eras, layers of attempts, layers of ideas, of revolutions, of changes. Pine forests which give breath to the frenzied city and the eyes of the sky; palm trees which take you towards the thought of a sea which bathes the nearby coast and which brought winds and wise ships, full of opulence and knowledge, sometimes

bloodstained, heaved with slaves and items conquered in the most remote places of the world. Transformations. Culture becoming sculpture and challenging the perspective, lights up the minds, going from hand to hand of immortal geniuses who, like Bernini, left traces almost everywhere and whom, like Michelangelo, gave greatness a divine attribute.

Rome is death and rebirth, the continuity of memories from a far away past to nowadays, a place that saw the birth of piazza San Pietro from the ashes of the Christians massacred by Nero, until it became the symbol and epicentre of the catholic faith.

Rome is a whisper without peace; a football kicked by stray kids of the *borgata*, the disjointed community in the outskirts of the city; a glass filled and emptied in an afternoon spent on the hills, in the echo of a guitar which accompanies traditional songs.

Rome tests those who live with her, she makes you curse her and love her at the same time, she penetrates within your blood becoming a drug you cannot live without.

Rome is much more than four words which may define her...

...she's a feeling: she makes you feel awkward, when you try to express her.

PREFACE

I'm about to tell you the story of a man I met some time ago, while sitting on a bench in a *piazza*.

I went there, as I often did, to find inspiration to write. It was a gorgeous April day, with nice spring weather. Armed with pen and paper, I was waiting to get a brilliant idea for the book I was working on.

I don't think I realised that a man had sat on the same bench as me. I simply heard his breath not far from mine and I turned to greet him. I saw a man in his seventies, eyes blue but with green flecks. He had a light tremor in his right arm and the area between his eyebrows was a bit irritated, in between his brows, exactly in the middle. He was wearing a dark green gentleman's hat on his head, from which two white 1970's style sideburns came out, and was wearing glasses with a very fine grey and blue frame.

He greeted me back, slightly slurring his words, but smiling.

Then he asked a strange question: "You're not my son, are you?"

I responded very promptly that, unless my mum had had some strange teenage affairs I wasn't aware of, I didn't think so.

He started laughing and said I was funny. Then he apologised, explaining he was ill, he didn't remember things well because of his Alzheimer's disease and that, in any case, I looked very much like his son.

"He left, you know? He went his own way; he's talented" he said. "We used to come here when we went on our walks."

I asked him if he missed him, and if he was sorry his son had left and was now away.

Smiling, he said that when he remembered that he didn't live there anymore, he missed him, but he was happy he had taken that path.

"It's important not to have regrets." He whispered with seriousness and with slit eyes.

"Do you have any, Sir?" I responded immediately.

"Oh, I had many" he answered. "Then my son helped me to accept life."

"What do you do young man?" he asked, curious.

I began to explain that my passion was writing and my wish was to see my book mine published one day, even if it gave me no profit. I explained that I felt the need to communicate and that I had always inexplicably felt that I had something important to say. To my surprise I realised that the man didn't seem to have listened to a word I had just said. He didn't move for a while, staring, with a blank look on his face, then suddenly he turned asking if I wanted to listen to a story. Obviously, given my curious nature, I accepted immediately, but before beginning the old man asked another question, apparently crucial to him.

"Can you cry?" he asked.

"What do you mean?" I answered astonished.

"I mean that if you are not able to cry, you can't let go, be moved and plunge into the depth of what I am about to tell you, we might as well end our conversation here."

I assured him I could, I was very in touch with my emotions and I wasn't ashamed of crying. "I think that holding things in is one of the most senseless things you can do in life." I exclaimed in the end.

"Good then if you want to, after listening, you could also write this story. My story. The story of how it was and how I would have liked it to be. The story of moments in my childhood that oppressed me and scarred me for years, making me limp but not bringing me down. The story of how life fools you when a disease can delete your fondest memories, and only leaves the tragic events that you have tried to

forget for years. And the story of how I fooled life, recreating those events how I should have lived them, looking at them through my heart.”

We spent hours on that bench, sharing smells, flavours, voices, sounds, pain and joy and today I want to share them with you too. This is Paolo’s story.

I

DIRECTED BY MR HEART

With his eyes shut the world was silent for a while.

Slowly its colours were revived, enriched by a new life.

The sun emanated a warmth which radiated tenderness, while a lukewarm wind seemed to caress his face with a delicate and generous breath.

In his brother’s hand, a small transparent marble, a precious trophy of a memorable game played a few days earlier, was reflecting the light. You could see he was missing a tooth. He had a sardonic smile, his face was all dirty and he looked awkward and goofy. He was only a year older than him.

They were standing in front of each other, locked in a sweet test of strength, measuring their abilities and deciding which one of them would dominate. The third brother, the youngest, would cheer for one or the other according to whom was winning.

The clear voice, humming dreamy melodies, was his older sister’s, Chiara’s. It radiated, together with her fruity perfume, carried by the wind, bringing peace and reassurance to them all.

Laying down on the cornice of the terrace was the hazel kitty, a new addition to the group, who seemed to enjoy that simple and sincere sunny afternoon. In the meantime, he was sinking his nails into the wooden sticks which held slim strands of worn out wire. That’s where his mum hung the laundry.

The wires were still empty then, and they marked an imaginary border with the sky, framing that moment of joyful life just like the best picture of a great painter.

Six storeys below them the doorman’s head shone bright as ever, how fun it would be, when no one was watching them, to lower a rope thrown together with a feather on one end to tickle it!

He started to get uncomfortable, mumbled something, then became suspicious and finally, once he discovered their little trick, yelled furious, swearing at them.

“You little rascals. I’ll tell your father!”

Then the father, returning from a long trying working day, coming in with a serious dark face, summoned them around the table, all four of them. Staring at them with one of his best serious looks ever seen, he created a silent state of tension. Then, with all the love and understanding of their young age, he burst out laughing, accomplice of that moment, of their attempts, discoveries and harmless entertainment, typical of children their age.

“Stop doing it, though. You know it’s not nice.” He would add at last while messing their hair, lost in an affectionate gesture.

With his daughter on his lap and his wife next to him, he would then proceed to tell the tale of his unexpectedly astonishing day.

Imagination, what a gift.

REALITY, HARSH REALITY

There was an enormous building in a small suburb of Rome. An innocent soul lived there, hosted in the body of a child at the time.

There were six floors and the coin operated lift served fifteen flats. The condominium accommodated a total of twenty-six adults, sixteen children and teenagers, two dogs and four cats.

In the top apartment, on the sixth floor, a child was holding his breath, filled with bitter emotions.

The same cheek that, an hour ago had held an excited smile, was now only left with the memory of the iron’s cold impact. The taste of blood came from a cut on his lip, his eyes were full of fear and in the air lingered the smell of sulphur which he hated so much.

He was tied by his wrist to what he called the “suffering-well.” Too high a price to pay for an innocent.

Behind him, two other wheezy breaths were disturbing the unsettling silence.

There was no difference between the sound of the dripping radiator and the pattering of the tears falling from their cheeks to the floor, which together marked the passing of an interminably long time.

Away from them, you could barely smell a woman’s perfume. Hidden, powerless, clung to the mum’s soft neck.

From under her mum’s dress, a small teenager was prematurely learning the art of passivity: she was silent and submissive.

To save her own face she had to sacrifice someone else’s.

Paolo was the middle child, the second son, the third of all, only older than Mario.

He wasn't as enraged as his older brother, nor did he feel as much pain as his younger brother. He lived and thought without moving, almost as if he wanted to lock away every emotion within his little head.

He was ready.

When the door opened, some light came in from the landing.

It reflected on the nasty man's white hair, turned yellow from the excessive use of hair gel. A single gust of clean air would precede the intense stench of alcohol and smoke. The stench would diffuse instantly around the entry, bringing with it fear and despair.

At that stage, the "boogie man" would start screaming and the woman crying, followed by the little one, who would look for shelter under her mum's skirt.

The screams hit the walls, the blows hit the faces and everything that wasn't visible hit the heart.

For a little joke on the doorman it was too high a price to pay. That's why, if he had to look, Paolo would look with his heart, keeping his eyes closed.

2

HOPE, ALWAYS HOPE

That was his music. The only music he could afford, the only music that relaxed him, comforted him, appeased him. In nature there was more than he could see and perceive. He was under the impression that behind that simple existence laid the foundations of life itself.

Sitting comfortably on a rock, he could enjoy the symphony generated by the rustling leaves. Brushing against each other, they were the basis of cheerful concerts sung by nice birds flying over his head. Breathing! That's what he needed to do. Or, at least, that's what the doctors and nuns of the *colonia* (an Italian holiday camp), recommended. That way he would have healed. He would have cured the lung disease that restricted him to that place: remote oasis, far from his family, a few hours away from the city.

He wasn't the only one there. Some other children were staying there with him, and shared that confined solitude, the distance from home and the clean air they could breathe.

He missed his siblings and the unique taste of Rome. He was afraid he would have been there forever, abandoned in a place which a few months earlier, he didn't even know existed. It was the first time he was away from his family and even if at times it felt like a blessing in disguise, on other occasions he felt a big lump in his throat. His heart would go crazy at the mere thought of not seeing home anymore.

Visitor's day was getting closer. Just like spring had brought new flowers and renewed colours, that occasion would bring the affection of his beloved family. Even if only for a moment, it would have alleviated that incredible sense of restlessness that was oppressing him.

His family never called. Paolo would blame the financial problems of the family for it. He knew exactly how expensive calls between different regions were, whereas he didn't understand the absence of letters, cheaper and traditional, not even to respond to those that, every weekend, he would bother sending. He wouldn't lose heart, though, and nothing stopped him from keeping mum and dad updated on how he spent his days away from them.

The nuns were very demanding. They expected discipline and rigorous respect of good manners. Often their way of obtaining it was brusque, cold, almost dictatorial. Sure, it was nothing compared to what Paolo was used to, almost ridiculous. What disheartened him most, though, was the intolerance he would see wherever he turned.

At the end of that day he went to bed immediately and even if sleep failed to come, he kept his eyes shut to fall asleep as soon as possible.

When he slept, time would pass quickly. Upon waking he would have finally hugged those who his child heart kept seeing as a source of love.

He started counting sheep: "One sheep jumps over the fence, two sheep jump over the fence, three sheep jump over the fence..." Good night little Paolo.

8:00 AM everybody ready. Lined up waiting for the bus carrying the relatives. Breakfast done, teeth brushed, hair combed and hearts beating wildly.

It was almost time, and his gaze was looking towards the horizon. Towards the corner which marked the arrival to the *colonia* and which, that day, would have brought him the love of his beloved family.

How many times had he imagined to suddenly see his parents from the canteen window. How many times had he looked at that last stretch of road, and imagined their car coming in, announced by booming horns and, his father standing with the aura of a paladin in an elegant suit.

With brisk step and whistling, his father would have shot up the four large granite steps at the entrance of the building. Arms and doors wide open, he would have been ready for his little son to dive into his arms, who would hurry downstairs not caring about breakfast and everything else.

The hug would have been sincere and reassuring, then an imminent sentence, “my dear son, I’m taking you home with me, I have missed you!”

Paolo wouldn’t have held back his tears of joy, but would have let them out with all the love they could carry, until they would have drenched the collar of his dad’s shirt. He would have fed on that closeness with the same impetus of a man who wanders the desert for days and finds himself drinking water in an oasis.

He was thirsty. Thirsty for pure love.

THE QUICK DEATH OF AN ILLUSION

Three honks in the distance! Finally, the time had come. The children started buzzing excitedly, while the nuns called them back to order and composure.

The excitement was uncontainable and the moment unique. They hadn’t seen their families since the Christmas holidays and after this visit they only had two months before returning home once and for all.

Drum, drum, drum. His heart was beating like a band announcing the arrival of someone important. Another moment passed and then the reflection of the sun blinded him for a second. By the time he recovered, the blue bus was there right in front of him.

He thought he was going to faint, but he didn’t want to show it in any way. His eyes were scanning every window hoping to recognise a familiar face, a recognisable nose, a long-awaited smile. He was too agitated to see well and his shortness did not help either, so he decided to stare at the point where mums and dads were slowly getting off the bus. There were children running around frantically and clinging to their parents’ clothes, with the most spontaneous love in the world. Shouts of joy, hysterical laughter and tears of happiness, accompanied by generous embraces and surprised words.

“Not that one, neither that, there, maybe, ah no!”

He was running through them one by one with his heart racing and his eyes wide open, and he kept doing it until the very end, until he fell on his knees, disappointed, humiliated, with eyes full of tears, alone.

He wasn't there, they weren't there, no-one was there.

A thousand questions crowded his head:

"Did he misbehave?"

"Maybe something happened to his family?"

"Or maybe they forgot about him?"

"Were they going to leave him there forever?"

"What could have happened?"

"Why was he the only one without visitors?"

"What was he guilty of?"

He tried to answer, while dense bitter tears dropped incessantly and dug deep creases on his face. With all the strength he had left, he decided to get back up and started walking slowly back to the entrance gate. From one to ten, his anger was a ten. From one to ten, his disappointment was a ten. From one to ten, his desire to disappear was a ten. Just as his little hand was about to land on the handle of the street door, he suddenly heard a familiar voice:

"Far out! You're such a cry baby! Why are you crying? It was a joke, aye."

He turned suddenly, looking as confused as someone who doesn't know if what's happening is real or the product of his imagination. From the veil of tears that was distorting images, he had just enough time to zoom into the figure to understand he was not dreaming.

He started to run towards the man who had just spoken. He threw himself at the man, holding a mix of anger and love inside him as he held him in a contradictory embrace, somewhere between affectionate and vindictive. The father, in response, prised him off, indifferent to the pain he had caused with his stupid joke, incomprehensible for a child, and encouraged him to calm down and not to be so dramatic.

It had been a lot of fun for him.

For Paolo it was yet another trauma.

He closed his eyes, once full of hope, now full of loneliness.

It would have been better if he had only imagined that day.

Suffering leads to the fine line between cure and addiction.

3

GROWING UP MEANS MAKING CHOICES

PIZZA NO. I

Time passed and Paolo grew up. Hope increased and fear diminished. His timid character made him lonely, a boy of few words. He would spend most of his time reading alone, in the shade of the big pine grove near his home.

He identified with the peace of the place: there, his blue eyes would get nuances of green, and his dreams, which earlier seemed impossible, would start to seem feasible.

He liked change in life, discovering new sensations, new words, new tastes, flavours, smells. He felt like he had feelers, ready to pick up the innumerable diversity which presented itself over the course of his days.

He was a dreamer; he walked with his head high and when he could he would look over to the horizon, where the sky became one with the earth marking a stark division.

He was fascinated by the trick of the eye, by the limits of the human sight which, not able to grasp greater depth, could not perceive the curving of the earth.

Almost as if at some point, the human sight was unable to distinguish the enormous gap between sky and earth, earth and sky.

He would then try to look beyond, imagining what laid over there, further away.

He would look over to the horizon and get lost.

And so he passed the hours, thinking, then reading, then reflecting again, whistling and relaxing. When he was satiated and satisfied, he would head home at a steady pace, and from time to time, he would pick his little brother up at the *campetto*, the little soccer pitch where he played.

That mid-September day, exactly six months after turning seventeen and only five months before becoming of age, he decided to return home earlier than usual.

He was going to cook something different to eat for dinner with his family.

Once he arrived, he had found only his mother waiting for him, who enthusiastically offered to help him in the preparation of his “Dinnovelty,” a creative name he had invented putting the words dinner and novelty together in a fun way.

During the preparation he realised the huge limitation of the kitchen in his house, a lack of ingredients. They couldn't afford to buy fancy ingredients, so he decided that he would use all his creativity to create the dish with what they had. Then he had a flash of genius: tomatoes, mozzarella, oil, flour.

Pizza! He could make pizza.

Elbow grease and mum's grease. That afternoon they made six beautiful pizzas to show off to the rest of the family.

It was a memorable day, one that he would remember forever.

It was the pizza day, a simple day.

PIZZA NO. 2

Paolo grew and time passed. Fear increased and hope diminished. He stopped going to the Parish youth centre, or *oratorio* as they call it in Italy, after he had an argument with that presumptuous gorilla who was beating his brother up. The fight was as quick as lightning. Without thinking twice, Paolo threw himself onto the bully, he charged and threw him to the ground to get him off Mario. Once he got back up, Paolo punched him right in the face, breaking his nose and making it bleed.

He didn't even realise what he had done and hadn't at all thought about the risks he had taken. He had simply exploded in an uncontrollable rage, as if a hidden force had taken over his body.

His opponent was lying on the floor, dishevelled and bewildered like an old drunk knocked down by booze.

He stood back up after a few minutes. He walked backwards, supported by a friend and showing a mix of rage and defeat in his eyes.

As a result, since then, everybody started to respect and fear Paolo, flattering him with nice words or even trying to conquer his friendship by offering him a drink at the bar.

And he hated himself for this.

He loathed that form of respect, stupid and insincere, and even more the idea of him it sent out: the way in which it presented him to the world.

For these reasons, he preferred to keep to himself, daydreaming about what he would have done as soon as he turned eighteen. Where he could have gone to escape from that place of suffering and sad prospects.

He would go on long walks, head down and fast pace. He would walk around a few blocks trying to release tension. He did his utmost to scrape together some money for his departure.

That mid-September day he had decided to stay out a little longer, maybe have a pizza with his friend Matteo, but he had left his wallet home so he decided to return home to get it.

Halfway down the stairs he could hear the inhumane screams, they were his father's and brother's voices. He started to run upstairs and realised they were fighting, as it often happened, even though their tones seemed much more heated and in some moments their screams resembled piercing animal cries.

When he reached the landing of his house, the door burst open and his older brother ran out, bumping into him.

He only stopped for one second, turning to look at him. His eyes were full of withheld tears, his arms taut down by his side, his hands clenched in fists, and his knuckles stained in blood. Then he ran away.

On the stairs the noise of rushed steps, and whispering a goodbye full of hatred.

In a handful of seconds, behind him were only the door, left ajar, and a trail of perfume.

Paolo saw his father entering the house: bent over, leaning with his hands on the bedroom door. His hand on his cheekbone, open and bloody. In his legs, little strength to hold himself up; in his eyes, rage and defeat.

Paolo didn't know what to say and, most importantly, he didn't know if he wanted to do or say anything at all.

He rushed into his room, took his money from under the pillow and left immediately. He left behind a man destroyed by himself and the sobs of a weak transparent woman.

He went and ate a pizza, alone. When ordering, he didn't know which to choose: he chose margherita, the most common, the first he could think of.

He would remember that day for a long time: the pizza day.

A day of decisions made and not made.

In the future, at the *pizzeria*, he would have always chosen margherita.

ELABORATING A DREAM

In the silence of the *vicoli* of the centre of Rome, only the noise of frantic steps.

Everything was confusing. A few seconds ago Paolo was walking along the river, while now he was running at full speed.

He felt a threatening presence behind him. A brown coat, shiny black moccasins. He had already seen that ambiguous figure and felt he had been stalked for days.

His heartbeat had accelerated, he did not even feel his legs.

He was escaping. But from whom? Why? What had he done to end up in that situation?

The more he looked for an answer the further away he would get from one. He had turned right on the wide *Via del Corso*. He thought he would find more people and take refuge in the crowd of tourists.

There was no one on the street, just some cars driving by slowly, quietly. It had also started raining. It had probably been raining for a while as he was drenched. He didn't notice, clearly being engrossed in that sense of anxiety that was pervading him.

Then the thud! The violent fall to the ground.

He had turned to check what had happened; he hadn't noticed that man following him, a man whose face he didn't know. He hadn't even noticed the end of the sidewalk. So, when his foot expected to land on the sidewalk, it instead found itself lingering in the air a little further. Broken balance and an inevitable fall. While falling, images of the Rome around him followed one another at a very fast pace.

For a few seconds he didn't see anything. Then he felt someone grabbing him by his jacket collar and pulling him up.

He thought he was done for, cornered. On the one hand he was scared, on the other, he was curious to see what this person wanted from him.

"What are you doing running around this early, boy?"

The decisive voice, which seemed familiar, reached his ear.

He turned suddenly with eyes wide open. When he recognised the man he heaved a sigh of relief.

"No, nothing, I was walking, then a man... I thought someone was..."

He couldn't explain himself, he mumbled some words but didn't finish off any sentences.

"Listen to me: go home and have a nice shower. Rest up. You seem strange today." Comforting words came out of Nino's mouth, like protecting embraces.

For a few years now, every Monday evening, he would go and get a pizza at Nino's restaurant. He looked around another couple of times, to be sure he really was

out of danger. He thanked the *pizzaiolo* and turned to leave. Home was only a few streets away.

When he reached the end of the street he heard his name yelled in the distance. It was still Nino, "Remember you can't miss the next train. You can change path, if you want to."

This time his tone was softer, almost like fatherly advice. He didn't really understand what he meant. He was tired, though, and wanted to get some rest. He would ask him on Monday. He waved him goodbye and vanished.

Walking up the stairs, his step became heavier and heavier. He couldn't use the lift. He had no coins left and didn't feel like doing his usual trick to swindle one from the box underneath. It would have taken too long; it was better to take the stairs.

Climbing up the stairs had never been as hard as that day. It was probably because he had run so much and got tired. He took a long time to arrive at the sixth floor and when he was about to set foot on the last step, he realised he was bleeding from his jacket's sleeve. Rolling it up to his elbow he noticed a cut on his wrist surrounded by an abrasion. When did that happen? Maybe when he fell? And even if so, why hadn't he noticed? More questions he couldn't answer. He needed to treat it. The cut wasn't deep, but a big bruise circumnavigated it all. He was already in front of his door when he was overcome by a very strong sense of anxiety. A pungent smell of sulphur reached him. That smell he associated with his most cruel memories. Suddenly even his lip felt swollen, while an acid taste pervaded his mouth.

It all happened in few seconds.

The door burst open. The sight weakened his legs. The voice of a girl started singing sad melodies. His head was aching, making him nauseous. The smell of alcohol and smoke pervaded his nostrils. He fell to the floor unconscious.

He awoke shortly after and immediately raised his head towards the entrance. He saw his shoes first, black and shiny. Then he caught sight of and recognised his brown coat, just a moment before seeing his face.

That's when his heart started beating wildly. They say when you get scared, you lose years of your life, your hair whitens, and you exhaust your share of heartbeats; almost as if time paradoxically both accelerated and stopped.

Paolo stared into the man's eyes: he saw blue surrounded by the bloodshot red of his broken capillaries. Bags, right under, heavy, swollen and depleted as if carrying the weight of all the bottles he had been downing. His beard was left unkept,

neglected, white and yellow. His thin mouth was by far the most devilish of his features.

He saw the man's lips start to move, even though he initially couldn't understand the words because of the background song and because of the confusion in his head after fainting.

Then his eyes moved beyond the man and onto the four figures in the shadow, enveloped in waves of darkness and terror.

That second he heard him clearly pronounce the sentence, "Welcome home, son. Come to daddy."

In a flash, a stick hit his temple, Paolo felt all the power of the blow hitting his face, before losing consciousness again, feeling that his life was being sucked away.

When he awoke his cheeks were wet with tears. He was sitting on a grey bench, in what looked like Roma Termini. A small backpack next to him. In front of him, a poster encouraged citizens to enrol in the army to defend the country. Reading it, he thought of Nino the *pizzaiolo*'s words, "you can't miss the next train."

He stood up shaking, his tears mixing with the rain. He hopped on the train. He just wanted to go away.

5

Ah! The powerful scream boomed along the walls and his rapid jerk shook the bed. Suddenly, the door burst open, the bedside lamp switched on. A boy was in the doorway, staring at him in the dim light of the room.

"I heard you cry and scream, dad. Is everything okay? Did you have a nightmare?"

Paolo couldn't speak; he was still shaken. He shook his head and mumbled a not very convinced "I can't remember." It was hard for him to look at his son.

While he was little, Paolo had been able to give him all his love. Then, as he grew older, something blocked him. The words that came out of his mouth didn't have the same flow as his gestures. He felt inadequate, unprepared, embarrassed.

He was able to deduce his son's profound disappointment caused by his behaviour in his son's rare responses.

Yet his son would always come rescue him, even now.

This made him feel good and at the same time contributed to making his sense of guilt even stronger.

In the silence of the night, his son sat next to him and embraced him. His body stiffened as usual, while his heart melted from the heat of that unconditional love.

He closed his eyes again, let his son go and went back to sleep.

Ten years later: Paolo, a couch, tired breathing, consumed body, intermittent memory.

The disease was slowly devouring him, from within, taking little steps. He had just finished his lunch and had immediately sat back in his usual spot, overcome with the breathlessness which characterised his days.

His son, now a man, sat next to him caressing his cheek. In a moment of lucidity Paolo looked at his face: he had really grown up. Proud of the man he had become, he gathered up courage and whispered the words he had never before pronounced:

“Forgive me, my son, if I have failed you. I couldn’t be who you needed me to be.”

His son stared at him for a few seconds, with two deep hazel eyes smiling, behind wet teary eyelashes.

“You see, dad, what you have or haven’t given me, doesn’t matter anymore. Right or wrong are reference points that don’t exist. They’re concepts, after all. We are all born in a world full of exchanges and, in the end, we can only decide for ourselves.

This is the marvellous, illogical gift of life. The undisputed possibility to choose who we want to be, in any situation. Even when dealing with the greatest pain or the unluckiest of events, our attitude is always in our hands. I’m all grown up now. I have re-elaborated my teenage resentment towards you and mum many years ago. I have forgiven and accepted you. Then I forgave myself and accepted my own limitations and recognised my own qualities. There’s never been wickedness in your actions, as there never was in mine... just weakness, human weakness.

We are the same.

We’re the offspring of dogma rooted in centuries, dogma that evolved in different times. You have suffered from having a *padre padrone*, an authoritative father; it was a time when you had to stay silent and become the subject of violent hands. Over the years, you’ve understood the ignorance of that man and how he was in turn a victim once, too. You’ve forgiven him for not wanting to change, for not knowing how to fight. You couldn’t, though, forgive yourself. You’ve substituted

violence with silence and rigidity, without knowing what to do next. It doesn't matter dad; I will try. Because I chose to love myself, love you and love the children I'll have.

Now stop crying dad. Be happy for the time together that life has allowed us. Hug me like only you can."

That day they went out together.

On their walk, Paolo and his son arrived at the bench of the nearby park.

They sat together for an indefinite time. Without speaking, in the silence of their breaths and deeply sharing a singular sense of peace. Then, they looked into each other's eyes and their colours melted into one.

So different, so far away, united in one unique unisonous breath. They were mirror images of two tears on smiling cheeks, tears that kissed in the most sincere embrace.