

# Mail from land

ENRICO MATTIOLI

Translation by

Emilia Maiella

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## NOTES

*It's the solidarity that thing that unites human beings.*

*Omar Mumba tells us a story of deep introversion. Born in Rome from an Italian mother and a Kenyan father, he learned from his parents, both doctors, not to conceive work only as a personal livelihood.*

*Omar divides his salary of hotel clerk on small donations to non-profit associations operating in poor countries. In his letterbox arrive mails from structures of those lands, where every need is absolute, and he can do nothing but sadly witness the contradictions of the society in which he was born, grew up and lives. The activity towards others in need makes him uncompromising towards other people's carelessness, further isolating him within his own existential bars. On a daily basis, every person pursues a prophylactic distrust that allows him or her to live without entanglements.*



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## DEDICATION

I'm a lucky person with his heart at ease: fate gave me the chance to  
show what I had to, to people I care about.

Enrico Mattioli



## CHAPTER ONE

Night time, humidity is a merciless killer. I stay on the terrace staring at the moon, fickle, worshipped, feared, a target that cannot be hit. She's there affecting our lives, without an address to send complaints to. I wonder if one day someone will manage to shoot her on behalf of us all. Life does its dirty work.

Among the stars I blend the lights of a plane approaching the land. I would like to go far away, but where? The world is so small and varied as well, I would end up in another place watching the sky, which is the same in every corner of the universe.

In the dark of the night, humans are all alike. It's day time that shows the traits of our differences. The stroll of humanity through time is an inventory of lost opportunities. Past errors and horrors become a tradition to be faithfully respected. Everyone recognises themselves in one's own supreme entity and for many this is a kind of Mr Wolf materializing from a movie, knocking on their door to solve problems.

We don't know what will happen a minute after our passing, but we will still manage to make one last selfie. We will be there, with our square or triangular heads staring into the darkness, each one different for the other looking. Will we still have that "I'm number one" grin? Will we sing our lame songs to the sky in the moment we will seem to be touching it?

Man seeks traces of life on other planets and cannot find closure on their own. The only certain presence on the Moon or on Mars or Jupiter is Coca Cola. Everything in which we recognize ourselves is in

that red can with silver wings.

Earth is a hotel on the verge of a cessation of activity. The sun will eventually stop shining, water will retreat and the soil, infected, will rot, but my hope is that the end will happen painlessly, and that a moment later only smoke and ashes will be left. This extreme process is having a development concealed from everyone and forged in the form of aesthetic appeals: I download the last file of U2 from the computer, but the speed got stuck two steps till the end. History is infamous when you are in a hurry and need to go.

The workshop closes in twenty minutes. I go down the stairs and arrive in front of the mailbox. I collect all: letters and advertising that I will read during my break. I leave from the front door and I'm on the street. Two hundred meters and I will have my car back. A defect in the fuel pump releases a noise similar to the mechanical tool used by dentists.

*- Hello Omar: I didn't change the pump. It costs one hundred and seventy euro. Instead, I replaced the fuel filter and now it can run, but if the noise is still there, bring it back here within the week 'cause it'll need to be replaced.*

*- And the blue seal?*

*- Done... and also the MOT test that will have expired tomorrow.*

*- What? But didn't it expire in May?*

*- No, Omar. It was the day after tomorrow. Check the booklet.*

I pay in the meantime. Eighty Euros: filter, inspection and seal. And if the noise remains, I'll bring it back in within the week. I changed a red gas Ford for a Lanos on unleaded fuel and I pay seals and I don't drive on Thursday when it's the turn for license plates with odd last number to drive. The inspection was in May, I'm sure, the mechanic has tricked me. I control the booklet: it would have expired the day after tomorrow. Everything expires, in some way. Like patience on this planet. Earth asks a euthanasia for itself and you have to please her. Don't let her suffer.

Before going to work, I pay a visit to sor<sup>1</sup> Gaetano, an old man I take

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<sup>1</sup> Abbreviation Roman dialect of Signor (Mister).

care of when I have time, and even when I don't. He has several serious aches, among which there is his back that prevents his mobility, but when he can sit at the piano every ache is over, even if only for a few minutes.

- *Who's there?*
- *Gaetano, good morning, how are you?*
- *Omar, why you didn't come yesterday?*
- *I was busy.*
- *I see.*
- *Did the new bags give you problems?*
- *No, they're great, I don't even feel them.*
- *Good. I'll come back as soon as I can, so that I'll change you.*
- *Okay, good work, Omar.*

I start the engine. It's paranoia. The noise seems stronger as the torture of caries. I'll have to come back for sure, as you always come back to the dentist. It's a blatant subscription, but why isn't there a public health service even for cars? They get sick often, they are designed to break down. You have to buy them with financing with blocked or discounted rates, then they break, and if you still can drive, they stop you with the number plate and the urban centres with limited flow. It's the smog, the smog, the fucking smog, *the world jumps and the Earth jumps*<sup>2</sup>, everybody on foot on Sunday, the planet is blowing up, boiling, it's a sphere with a raging fever, seasons lose sync, your bones spoil, companies produce dehumidifiers for the summer, air conditioners for the winter, and you have to shave: you do make a lot of dough creating problems, don't you?

I turn right, I enter on the main street. I have already stopped after fifty meters and I have to run to work, this time I won't survive, I have subscribed to delays and at the hotel they are waiting for me at the door.

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<sup>2</sup> Central verses of Italian version of the kids' song "*Ring a-ring o' roses*".

A sector is the reflection of a whole system and when I look around, I only see sectors in crisis. There's traffic, roads are jammed. All directed toward the city centre to see live the advertising they usually watch on television.

The Polish guy at the traffic lights wants to wipe my headlights, a Senegalese wants to wipe my windows, a gypsy wants small euros because she's got a kid in her arms. A black guy from Bangladesh wants to sell me handkerchiefs or at least a lighter and all of them would have any right on my paltry euro because they breathe this same air in the street and inspire even mine. I'm late and I do not have change and what I have, is for the workshop, then for the garage instalment (because there is no parking), for the green fuel I get at the beginning of each week (to stop on Thursday for the odd-numbered license plates) and this month, even for a fire theft insurance that any new legislation ensures will intervene and decree against wild raisings.

I look in my pockets and I offer to the Bangla guy a crumpled flyer.

- *Dude, you only leave me a sheet?*

- *Yes, but I hadn't read it yet.*

I swear that, if it finished downloading the complete discography of U2, I would have made a cd and I would have given it to him, but it always happens that when you're running down on downloading a file, the system slows down, and today I have no time. I have to rush to work and if they see me on delay, there will be two poor people on the road, that is one more than now, and for what: for *bonovox* and U2?

I don't mean to discredit him, because a *bonovox* cd has a moral value even if counterfeited, they should totally give him a Nobel prize; when I listen to the music of *bonovox*, I seem to read all the mail that I don't have time to check because I have to run, run again among the steaming city, polluted, chaotic and counterfeit such as the CDs that I download with a click from my pc.

I get to the centre. I find parking in front of the hotel; I tick the parking tickets that are six for one euro each. The director of the plan

is already there. He welcomes a group of Japanese tourists with their latest generation photo cameras. This time, however, I still have a good ten minutes before getting on service.

I enter the lobby. I pass the reception. I meet Baresi, the manager at the floor, a big guy, bald but hairy, big fat with an obsessive wife and three monsters as offspring.

- *You're on time today, Mumba: what's going on?*
- *I had some delays but they I'm on time, generally, let's not make a case of it...*
- *It depends on you... by the way: they gave me a flat tyre again, did you know?*
- *What a world!*

I go down to the locker room, Baresi wipes his sweat. The moisture is a good excuse for him. His wife washes the jacket of his uniform once a month, and doesn't want to hear about the shirts. Baresi takes them to the laundry room since the management has ceased to pass us the cleanser. Our continuous up and down to the stairs makes the shirts sweep under the moleskin jacket after only one flight, and for him it results in a white ring under the sleeves.

The group of Japanese's was assigned to the fourth floor: the mine. I serve them welcome drinks while Marta, the interpreter, is engaged with bowing, scrapings and smiles. I distrust her, I have not forgotten when she refused to sign the repeated requests of technical expertise regarding the construction of the building. *Traces of asbestos* were suspected, and she was in the front row to foment the assembly, to then disappear and tell everything to Baresi, whom, in turn, reported it to the top brass. And to say, they seemed sisters, Sara and her. Sara Ferro, the one who took care of cleaning, from the lobby to the third floor, and that cancer has reunited with the Almighty in six months.

One of the new groups, our *guest* of the room one hundred and four, asks two Mr Bacon with fries and a coke and I have to kick off, to run at the fast food around the corner. I go out and it starts to rain. I come back. I take the cloak of the hotel. In this city, just two drops of water and it seems that you have to sail around the block. Traffic swells, overflows like a river: one starts to honk and the other responds, like a code of communication that concerns only those who are mired in the jam. Scooters pass from the street on the sidewalks, and at least keep away the rats that emerge from their

sewers. The fast food is empty at five o'clock in the afternoon. Everything is sparkling, festively decorated, clean, and there is a peaceful atmosphere. I stare at the shimmering menu above the fryer. Fried is the opposite of calm, makes me tense, but rain will sweep away the stench in which the cape is soaking.

Behind me, the workers are preparing the baby area, likely soon the usual little party for kids will begin. The essence of *fast* may be discussed, but when I'm inside here, I get hungry. Due to *bonovox* I didn't have lunch, I'll take two Mr Bacon for me too. I go out with the bags. A boy with a sweatshirt and hood leaves me a flyer: *Read, black guy!* he says, giving me a high five on the neck, something in between to a caress and a slap. He runs in the rain. I put the flyer into my pants' pocket and I realize that there is an a stamp too. I go back to work.

With the client satisfied, I take refuge in the conference room behind the staff's dressing rooms, downstairs. The arabesque carpets on the floor are decadent. The room, like of a hundred square meters, is equipped with computers for videoconferencing. This morning we hosted a business briefing. It makes me sad to see those young scrupulous-looking managers, constantly threatened by the snake's bite. When they stop here, foreigners spend their time on cell phone to talk about work. You feel that they have nothing to say, repeat the same call, the same words to colleagues on the other end of the phone that are not hearing them. It's always them who talk, and if they make questions, they don't listen to your answers and come back to their initial topic.

While I try to relax, Marta comes in.

- *Oh, you are here!*
- *Yes, I brought some food to room one hundred and four.*
- *Look Mumba, could you do me a favour?*
- *What?*
- *Can you take my mid-day turn tomorrow?*
- *Tomorrow?*
- *Mumba, please, don't say no...*
- *All right.*
- *Omar, you are a sweetheart.... what were you reading?*
- *Letters.*
- *Oh, the usual stuff. You really have a fixation, huh?*

- *Yeah, a fixation...*
- *No, do not take it wrong, I got it. Your parents are from the third world, right?*
- *The "Third World" is not a nation, and my mother, by the way, is Italian.*
- *Well, I know, you're a fry-up!*
- *A fry-up?*
- *Italian Mother and father from the Third World. A fry-up, but you don't have to be offended.*
- *No?*
- *Omar, I feel you being aggressive and touchy with me.*
- *Ah, am I aggressive?*
- *Yes, I never know how am I supposed to speak with you. You're overreacting.*
- *Ok.*
- *Here, you see? I came to you in friendship and you're offended.*
- *No, you came to ask me to swap turns!*
- *It's the same! I came to you because you are a friend and you would do me a favour, but I see that you are already throwing it back in my face.*
- *I'm just clarifying how things went.*
- *Mumba, I came to you because I consider myself a friend of yours.*
- *Stop it with these blabbering, Marta.*
- *Ugh, you're making me feel bad for asking you a favour!*
- *I already told you I'll do it, what else do you want?*
- *Then I'm counting on you.*
- *Yes, I said yes.*
- *By the way, I'd better go, if anyone sees us in here alone, who knows what they would think... then we agree, uh? You tell to Baresi.*
- *Yes, I'll do.*

She goes out. Lying on the carpet, I eat the fast food meal. I carry with me the mails from home that, for masochism, I started collecting.



## CHAPTER TWO

*Dear Mr Mumba, we rely on the generosity of many people whom, like you, allow us to produce big and small projects.*

*For the next two years, many economic resources will be directed to the reconstruction of our first Foster Home, well known to many of you. It was the first family structure the Institute created in the early 80s. Now, to be in line with the safety regulations, it requires fundamental interventions. The total cost of the work will be about 1.1 million euros. To begin the work, there are already available 720,000 euro, as it's clear from the 2004 Annual Report published in the supplement to the third issue of our newspaper. This sum too is the result of your generosity and allows us to confidently face the project.*

*We just passed half way; the conclusion will be a source of pride for all those who have helped us to make the lives of our children more secure and serene. And your joy will be greater when, coming to our land, you'll see a completely renovated house.*

The second one.

*Dear Mr Mumba, the Angolan population is affected by a human tragedy and by an unprecedented destruction. At the end of a major conflict and in severe insecurity conditions, another infinite sorrow has befallen on the people: the cholera. Over thirty-eight thousand cases, one thousand three hundred and seventy people died. Our health system was not prepared to deal with such a huge inflow*

*of patients in critical conditions, requiring a rapid treatment. The health services of the country are in constant siege: in Luanda, five million people in difficult hygienic conditions mean that when there is an epidemic, the situation collapses. We cannot say exactly whether and when the outbreak will end, because we don't know where it started. The population is simply the victim of everything, and does not know what is going on, and even less how to behave.*

*It's urgent to support the work of Doctors with Africa Cuamm, who remained close to this people, hurt in so many moments of great suffering.*

*We demand for a future of peace in Angola. On behalf of all our doctors, thank you for what you will be able to do.*

The third.

*Dear Mr Mumba, when I received a letter from father Larem, the friend of everyone, I immediately left for Layibi, where his church is. I have known father Larem my whole life, with whom I shared most of my missionary life in Uganda, and I knew that he would never have asked for help if not in major emergency. I will never forget the first night spent in the Layibi church. Around 7:00 p.m., children began arriving, wrapped in shredded cloaks, with mats under their arms and eyes full of fear on their emaciated faces.*

*The parents had sent them to seek a safe place, remaining to defend their few belongings from raids of the rebels, and the children had come alone from their villages, walking for hours. The little ones clung to the hand of the bigger ones, barely dragging themselves.*

*In the church they moved desks, the children laid out the mats and lay down on the ground. Those who didn't find a place in the church were placed outside, under the porch. Meanwhile, it started to rain, as almost every night happens. Outside, the military had their rounds. It all happened in silence, in the chilling silence of fear. Many of them had to flee in a hurry to avoid being taken by the rebels. Because of the war that is tearing the north of Uganda, the fields cannot be cultivated. Before dawn, the children were back on their way home, without even a piece of bread for breakfast. They will return at dusk to spend the night safe. The desperation of children escaping from the war cannot leave us indifferent. For this reason, I beg you to show your solidarity with these innocent people, saving*

*them from the terrible injustices of our time. Thank you so much for what you will be able to do for us.*

The Japanese group goes out for a hike on the streets of the capital. Outside, there is a bus that will take them to an afternoon trip to Roman Imperial Forums, assuming that the bus will be able to safely pass through all the traffic that those smiling tourists shoot with their video-cameras: they should be used to traffic, or don't they move at all in Japan? Rome by night is just preparing.

Baresi calls me on the phone of the corridor to inform me that the next day the delegation of an important Canadian company will come and that they will need the first conference room of the ground floor. I ask him, because I've almost completed my turn, if I can get off an hour earlier and recover tomorrow, when I will replace Marta in her mid-day turn.

*- Marta said that she will replace you in the morning, because you have an appointment.*

*- No, Baresi, it's not like that.*

*- Okay, that's the same, an even change is not a problem. And if you have to get out now, go.*

*- Thank you.*

*- Listen, Mumba: you know who's the one who got me a flat tyre?*

*- I really don't know, Baresi. I'm sorry.*

*- Where are you now, Mumba?*

*- Why?*

*- Have you finished hiding in the empty rooms or do I have to take measurements against you?*

*- Sorry Baresi, it won't happen again.*

*- Mumba, you know I always come to know everything, right?*

*- Yes, Baresi, I know.*

*- Good.*

Marta the interpreter has struck again. I get change. I come out from

the locker room, pass the concierge and I'm out. It's almost dark, and it stopped to rain. I get to the car, throw the parking tickets away and start the engine. The gasoline pump repeats its growl. The U2's discography file is waiting for me, provided that the weather has not damaged my computer.

I can say I discovered the secret of life. It's the xylophone. After a day of work, I get in the car, I light up a cigarette and I put an old CD of Milt Jackson and Wes Montgomery, titled *Bags Meets Wes*. I'm not keen on jazz, but I like it, and I love this cd because there's the xylophone. No one will make me upset now, in the middle of the evening traffic. A scooter comes out of nowhere, I avoid it by a whisker, a bike rides in the middle of the road, no sign of stepping aside; I get its rhythm and enjoy the trumpeting of the row that I imposed on my back. After all, I offered a service: what would have people done at home? Off from their jobs, everyone is in front of the television with quizzes and games, or a football match. It's not my fault if they don't have a CD with xylophones and listen to shitty music, if they buy speedy cars and cannot speed, *if perpetrators exist, if imbecility exists... engagez-vous, contemporary music it shoots me down*<sup>3</sup>, that's why I play *Bags meets Wes!* where there is a xylophone, because it's really nice to feel relaxed in front of all these poisoned people. I mean, they won't have you.

The cyclist turns, so I keep the right and the row of car passes my car, swearing at it: yes, go ahead, back in your beautiful homes, on your nice cars, in front of your satellite dishes, take your newspaper, remember to keep the holidays holy before they end, buy and spread, sell and spend yourselves, pay new boobs for your wives and the rods of trannies you hold in the contacts of your new PDAs, park your big SUVs in front of the access for disabled, as roads are too small. You guys, you are the masters of the world.

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<sup>3</sup> Quote Up Patriots to Arms, a song by Franco Battiato

Home, finally. I prepare the sauce for the *arrabbiata*<sup>4</sup> and heat water on fire. I hope to eat soon. I sit and wait. I toss in my pockets and pull out the flyer of the guy in front of the fast food: forest heritage depleted in favour of pastures for cattle to be slaughtered, the devastating consequences for climate and oxygen, underpaid and exploited employees, it all features as counterpart for the well-known global brands and the advertising spells on children.

Water is boiling. My head is boiling; the Earth: everything. I bung some pasta in the pot and light up a cigarette. Who smokes has made a deal with death. I recently bought an ashtray like the ones in doctors' offices (or at least, in that of my doctor) with the opening metal nozzle for the cigarette to fall down in the container. I empty it every week, and so I check how much tar is over my lungs. It seems that the multinationals of tobacco also put some ammonia in, to foster even more addiction. Everyone does it, even for mortgages and loans: aren't they a form of addiction?

I try to relax and I get a text from Marta.

- *Sorry if I ran away so quickly. Thanks again for the favour!*
- *You are welcome. And thank twisting it around.*
- *What?*
- *Never mind. This is so like you.*
- *I don't know what you're talking about.*
- *You told Baresi I needed a favour.*
- *No, maybe he got it wrong.*
- *Sure. And who told him I was in the living room?*
- *Do you think it was me?*

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<sup>4</sup> Pasta with tomato and chilli

- *Yup.*
- *You are wrong.*
- *Stop it...*
- *Why do we always end up fighting, you and I?*
- *Because you're a piece of shit!*
- *You keep being aggressive.*
- *Shut up!*
- *Asshole!*
- *Are you even in service right now?*
- *Why?*
- *Because it's time to go back to work instead of breaking my balls!*
- *I just wrote to thank you...*
- *No, you wrote just to be sure I didn't find out your shit.*
- *Well, if that's what you think of me...*
- *No, this is just a part.*
- *Anyway... goodnight.*



## CHAPTER THREE

I made the sauce for the *arrabbiata* with chili peppers planted in a pot on my balcony. Red, some take the typical sharp shape of the chili, some come out rounded, similar to small tomatoes. I love the *arrabbiata*. I leave all to cream on the frying pan and then I add a handful of pecorino. It's not good for the liver, but many of the good things we eat are bad.

I like Italian food, after all I was born in Rome despite the colour of my skin that would make you suppose the opposite. From Kenyan cuisine (Kenya is the country of my father) I love the *ugali*<sup>5</sup>, a cornmeal mush served with meat or fish. In honour of my mother, however, I don't disdain Roman cuisine, but at home I was accustomed to eating continental food. My parents, however, did not meet in a kitchen, but in hospital, as they are both doctors.

I'm a half-way black, as Daniele<sup>6</sup> sang, not a fry-up, like Marta said. Under this sky, my life burns to the eye of the Divine and I roll with the punches like a boxer, daily developing a technique of self-flagellation.

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<sup>5</sup> Kenyan dish

<sup>6</sup> Pino Daniele, italian blues man who died in 2015

My parents are people of science, and they let me free. They gave me the keys of my life and got me a fascinating and elusive dream: to live and work for integration. They taught me to consider work not only as a mean of personal existence but as far as possible, as a supportive tool.

I light another cigarette. It's estimated that the brand's best selling cigarettes in the world kills seventy-five thousands Americans a year. I keep on smoking; I'm not even American!

I wash the plates. I prefer to take them off right away. It's one of the most disgusting things, to take the dishes where you ate and watch all the remnants of the food ended up in your stomach. Really, think about it: just repulsive.

I have been a soldier too. I think I was one of the first blacks in the Italian army. I mean, the government took me and then I spent a year of my life in the officers' mess to wash pans, which is a different thing from washing dishes. It's less nauseating, because someone has used those tools to cook.

Washing dishes is a little like cleaning someone's ass. I mean: washing your own is already disgusting. Surely it's better to go to war. I let dishes rinse from liquid soap. I remember a letter that I keep in the big yellow envelope, along with all the others. It regards the issue of water privatization. Water as the highest good for everyone. Water as a vital necessity and not as an economic asset. I don't like slogans, but they often say more than any disquisition.

I get in my living room and turn on the computer screen. The discography of U2 is still standing. The application has downloaded only one hash through all day. I really needed *bonovox's* voice, tonight. I have to settle for his words.

*In the 80s, I was proud to be a part of that spoiled generation that produced Live Aid, Band Aid, We are the world. It was amazing that moment in which Bob Geldof gathered a group of pop stars who collected two hundred million dollars to*

*alleviate the consequences of famine in Africa. All this has tickled my pride. We felt that we opened a road. Musicians could succeed where politicians have failed... two hundred million dollars! Then I found out that Africa spends two hundred million dollars a week to fill the public debt towards the West.*

*Bono Vox*

This morning I did my usual tour of pharmacies for various ailments. Going downstairs, I stopped in front of the box. They must have done a mistake in the letter I'm reading, because I am a lodger, and not the owner.

*Dear Mr Mumba, do you want to know how much is your property worth? Our agency, affiliated with the national level leading group in the real estate sector, has already successfully managed the sale of some real estate units in this area and is searching, always in this area, apartments of various sizes, also to be restored, to be proposed to our selected customers.*

*Given the particularly interesting and lively market right now, we want to attribute the highest importance to your property. For this, we are at your disposal to provide a free advice for evaluation.*

*We are also available to submit you attractive loan terms at discounted rates that we agreed with major banks, and if needed free estimates for the renovation of your property, plus the opportunity to use our agreed upon movers.*

*Contact our local office, you'll find our consultant, whom you may request a real estate advice. All without commitment on your part.*

*Waiting to meet you, Thank you for your attention and Best regards.*

I went out from the front door. Bins were overflowing and garbage reached the sidewalk: *Are garbage collectors on strike?* - I asked the porter. - *No* - she responded - *they're late.*

I run crossing the street because it seems that to get on the other side of the sidewalk, the green lasts every day less and less. I turned the corner. Workers were emptying garbage bins: - *At the opposite door, they*

*are flooding!* - I reminded them. - *There's traffic* – one responded.

I arrived at the orthopaedic centre. I had to take a dynamic examination and a static for the foot. All day up and down the stairs of the hotel, my plants are begging for orthotics.

- *How much do you weight?* - The technician asked.

- *Seventy five...*

- *Let's say eighty* - he sentenced – *Do you practice sports?*

- *Yes, and...*

- *Let's say rarely. Go up on the platform and move only to my commands.*

I finished the visit and I booked the orthotics. I got out and I arrived at the pharmacy. An annoying infection on my tongue (thrush) tormented me for some days. I explained the problem to the doctor and he gave me some tablets. In the instruction booklet, the drug company explained that *you have to apply it under the tongue without sending their saliva*. I kept the thrush and I promised myself to download the music of *bonovox*, who at least did something good. Here's why I did not finish the sandwiches of fast food: because the disease haven't made me eat for days. Eventually, this explains why I have such a big hunger and I go into traffic with poison in my mouth!

Before getting home, I found another mail.

*Dear Mr Mumba, from perspectives and with different purposes, everyone - self-employed, employees and companies in the private sector - must address the issue of supplementary retirement: to decide their own future or to propose solutions to employees. However, additional security will involve each category. It's fundamental to start in time and begin to become familiar with terms and concepts that will become recurrent in the coming months.*

*From our investigation, we found that you are one of the few that still has not chosen a supplementary pension.*

*Knowing what will be the retirement size from your last salary, is important to reflect on your future and, therefore, on whether to have a supplementary pension.*

*The relationship between the pension paid and the last salary depends on the retirement calculation system that is applied to the employee. The transition from the pay system to the contributory system reduces the amount of pension paid by the public system as it involves a change in the basis for calculating the pension. Which system is applied?*

*Pay system: concerns workers with at least eighteen years of contributions at December 31<sup>st</sup> 1995. Contribution system: for who began working after December 31<sup>st</sup> 1995.*

*Mixed system: for who began working before 31 December 1995 and at that date had not yet reached eighteen years of contributions.*

*What is the Employee leaving indemnity?*

*The leaving indemnity is the amount that the employer pays the employee in the private sector at the time of termination of the employment relationship. How is it calculated? It's the sum of provisions of a portion of the salary for each year of service, appropriately revalued.*

*What is an open pension fund?*

*It's a tool that aims to provide supplementary pension benefits to members of the compulsory system. Membership of open pension funds is voluntary and is available to both individually and collective bargaining basis. Both employees and self-employed can join the open pension fund.*

*What is a FIP? It's a supplementary individual pension scheme implemented by means of a life insurance contract. It aims to provide an integrative life annuity revaluation, provided by the statutory social security system.*

*Our agencies and our staff are at your disposal for any information and clarification, assured that among the various offers, you will find one that fits you. Best regards.*

After all, aren't they all waiting for your death? After our mental degeneration, a real estate institute will take your home, the government will spare on your retirement, the insurance agency will take your car. Your co-worker fucks you, one must surpass you on traffic lights and then throw you off the road or they will key your shit-hole car in a parking lot; the tenant of the flat above yours piss on your pots and even pigeons shit on the sheets you hung out to

dry: isn't earth a giant torture chamber?

Then you have to defend yourself and attack. Let your foot tracks into the hall, swap places of the condominiums' mails and give your boss a flat tyre.

At the end of the day, exhausted from my sterile daily resistance, I go pay a visit to old Gaetano.

- *Tell me – he asks me, lying on his bed – did you do as I told you?*
- *Yes, yesterday I pinched the front right. In a few days I'll pinch the back left again.*
- *Good job. I don't like your boss, we have to give a lesson to that villain.*
- *Yes, Gaetano, although sooner or later he'll discover me.*
- *No, don't worry, you won't be discovered. You do as I say and you'll have fun for a while. After all, he deserves it, doesn't he?*
- *Oh, yes, of course.*
- *You know – he asks chuckling – how much new tires cost?*
- *I think he has an insurance against vandalism.*
- *Ab ab ab, aren't these satisfactions, Omar?*
- *Yes, of course they are...*

I pass the spray to remove the adhesive residues on his skin. I slowly take off the bag from the abdomen and clean the part with lukewarm water. I clean the skin from the mucus that builds up and spray yet another spray for the stoma.

Gaetano turns on the radio with the remote and tunes on Jazz Radio.

- *Listen to this trumpet, it's the end of the world.*
- *Yes, but don't move: if you don't give the adhesive time to attack on skin, in half an hour you'll have your pants soaked in shit...*
- *I know, but this is Clifford Brown. Poor boy...*
- *Why?*
- *He died in '56. A car accident. He was twenty-six.*
- *Oh, that Brown you made me listen long ago?*
- *That's him. Are you done?*

- *Still a moment, I'm controlling the adhesion of ostomy and you can get up.*
- *Come on, take me in the living room, I want to play a little boogie.*

I help him get up. I place the walker near his bed. He grabs the handle of what he calls *the damn tricycle* and slowly comes into the living room. He blocks the wheels and sits on the seat. His back is shabby, but when Gaetano presses on the piano keys, suffering fades and wrinkles of pain carved on his face get softened.

- *With this I used to close all my shows* - he says.

Its just boogie-woogie, the best way to go to bed.



## CHAPTER FOUR

In my city, the chain of hotels I work for, in twenty-seven years has reached the count of eight four-star hotels. Half of them are newly constructed buildings, others were built around forty years ago.

Sara Ferro had been in charge as a cleaner for twenty-five years. She lived in the suburbs, and when she had to pass from the evening shift to that of morning, she used to prefer to rest in the hut behind the hotel.

Out from the garage, there was a shed of tin and concrete, where the gardener usually put his tools away. It was comfortable because it was well-appointed with an electric stove and an oven, a cot and even a small TV with a portable antenna. When we were late for work, we used to pass by, knowing that we would get some tea or hot coffee.

The owners were aware of it and let it run. Sara was the classic big sister for all of us, always ready to cheer you up. Her only flaw: she did not interfere at all, the union matters barely touched her. She only thought about working, content with the affection of her four nephews. All she asked was to be able to come home on Saturdays and Sundays every fortnight. Her requests were often satisfied.

She had been sick on her respiratory tract for a while. Quick investigations did not left many hopes. She passed away in six months. In a previous work experience, I was involved with terminally ill and oncological patients, and so I took care of Sara too.

Her doomed fate: her disability check was recognized by INPS a year after her death, and served to compensate her relatives of the funeral expenses rather than to cure Sara.

Three specialists were not able to explain the causes, if not for fatality. Only a fourth one, a young doctor that my father recommended me, asked a question not new for us: *were there traces of asbestos?*

No evidence, nor certainties, only suspicions that were balanced by the magnanimity of the direction concerning the night accommodation of the employee. Then, our passion of young workers with a yearning for solidarity, beyond the sorrow of those who loved Sara. We advanced demands for an investigation on the construction of the building. We realized through the union that we could not ask further. We poured out and gained some dislikes that some of us would have fed over time.

We passed from paper to magnetic badges. After a few months, some of us noticed that on the payroll the overtimes did not correspond to the ones actually done. I wrote two letters to the staff chief, in which I stigmatised the event. Then I inquired around and discovered that with the magnetic badges it was possible to cut off any excess hours. All it took was accessing with a password to the system that managed our schedules and then deducting.

After my two letters, the system remained out of order for a week and needed to be reset while Baresi went on vacation. At the time, he was our floor director and felt powerful. He was sure that the facts related to Sara Ferro had scarred us.

We made contact with the trade union federations who rushed to the site. We threatened to call fiscal police. In this way, I had the honour of a call from the union leader.

- *The Fiscal police? Mumba, you know where they start and don't know where they get to. Do you want this responsibility? There are seven other hotels in this chain: you want to put other jobs at risk?*

- *But then what should we do?*

- *We need proofs, my dear, not guesses...*
- *Overtime payment is gone. Isn't it a prove?*
- *These computer systems must be tested better... or it could have been a human error.*
- *Human error? But the magnetic badges were introduced precisely to eliminate counting errors!*
- *You have to be reasonable, all of you have to be reasonable. Missing overtime payment? Fortunately you noticed it, and everything will be put back in place. We'll send a message to the commission to check on what happened.*
- *But the commission you speak about is that of our company, what can possibly happen?*
- *We'll take care of it. Soon you'll have insurance from the chief of staff. Mumba, this is the way things work.*
- *Sure...*

To calm down the situation, the staff chief assured us that he would have opened an internal investigation. We, in return, should have calmed down, retreating that pandemonium. By that time, the story had become exclusive domain of the union and the hotel group. They would have taken care of it.

Marta the interpreter, after having stirred up our minds, backed up. During a protest action, you must count on how many you are, join the others and it is not pretty to note that you are a few people. Those few, all full of fear and indecision.

A month passed. Then two. Three. One day, the staff chief enjoined three colleagues, including myself, for some occasional delays on shift starting that he defines as *terroristic*. I name-called him as an *unfair person*, because only an unfair person could overlook what had happened before. From that time, I began to collect mail in my mailbox.

*Dear Mr Mumba,*

*hereby we contest that You, because of Your behaviour, failed on following the disciplinary rules provided by the current C.C.N.L. category and the article...*

*In particular, You, on November 23rd at around 11:15, in the course of your employment, with loud voice in the presence of colleagues and customers of this hotel chain, railed against the staff chief, addressing him as unfair; at the request for clarification by the latter, You claimed You claimed not to want to talk, and indeed invited him to leave.*

*Formally contesting you on the said offense, please submit any justification in this regard within five days from receiving this.*

Baresi, a skilled mediator, reminded me that in previous communications I used the term *stigmatizing*, from their point of view more serious and detrimental to the word *terrorist*. So, I contacted the union delegate.

*- Listen: I talked with them. They have calmed down. They don't give a shit about you. They just want you to admit that "unfair" is more serious than "terrorist." That's all. They are bastards, I'm with you.*

*- Are you telling me that from their position, not only they can deduct hours at will and in peace, but also intend to subvert the literal sense of words?*

*- Omar... it's all bullshits... I told you: they are bastards. But, what's the big deal? Agree with them, apologize and everything ends there... it's not for you that they do it, it's only for everyone to understand. Only this.*

My apologies did not arrive and I took a fine of eighty euro in the following pay check, so that others could understand. After that, it actually ended there. I calmed down because I had already lost a job in the non-profit association where I practiced assistance for serious and terminally ill. When the association closed for lack of funds, I had to find employment in the hotel. Because of the employment crisis, already high in those days, there was no need to be too picky.

Baresi, about two months after my letter of protest, became director of the floor. According to our calculations, that hasty promotion was a reward: he was the arm of the property. Why did the system go out of use after my complaints? Baresi went on vacation, or went to tamper with evidence? You could access the system from any PC, it

only needed the password and he had it. By the system, it was possible to verify whether something had been tampered, but we were not allowed to control, and the commission was not required to inform anybody but the ownership: in short, it was a slippery slope. When a number of people put themselves in charge of the judging role, when they are to be judged, all logic disappears and only the law of the strongest is left. Their attitude becomes more rigid and it does not include indulgence. If after a standoff they began to be more accommodating, wouldn't you say they do it due to guilty conscience? Baresi, new director on the floor, assumed that behaviour. None of the staff, in their heart, could forget the old issues with management, but an organic team is composed by different people and it's not that simple to join them for a common purpose. Cowards, spies and saboteurs that wouldn't be faithful to riot and to reaction either, are used by those who manage to get to know the mood of the environment and represent a futility that becomes necessity. It's difficult to flush them out, they know how to be nice but indistinctly use the same business card: they are sincere and *say things face to face*. Now: has anyone ever admitted that they talk behind someone's back?

Federez had my same tasks on the second floor, a pointed nose and eyes sunken in their sockets. Exasperated by the omnipotent delirium of Baresi, he took me aside one day and said: - *I know people...* During breaks, he courted me for complicity: - *You know, Omar, we should think about it. We put in contact with those guys that I know, stretch two or three fifties... we must involve Veleno too: Baresi doesn't let him live anymore, he counts his steps.*

Veleno was a chubby colleague with a stubborn character. At first, I lingered to take time, but I wasn't favourable to the action of intimidation towards Baresi. I clearly told it both to Veleno and Federez. They demanded my silence, at least.

The three of us did not meet a lot in the past, although we have

worked together for about five years. Regarding the matter of Baresi, I didn't attend my share and Federez commented that he understood my point of view, since I'm a cheapskate Jew. The fact that I was not did not matter. Those who didn't think like him and anyone who thought about money matters, was a Jew in the opinion of Federez.



## CHAPTER FIVE

It's a beautiful sunny day. A light wind sways the clothes hung out to dry on the terraces.

I get out to go to the tobacconist to take parking tickets and cigarettes. I withdraw the mail and remain in the yard, enjoying the smell of fried that fills the air. Someone has already started cooking, and if my sense of smell does not deceive me, it must be tomato sauce with tuna. If I could give an advice, I would suggest striped *pennette*, they hold the sauce better. The traffic noise coming from the street arise me from the magic spell. The annoying sound of a siren strikes my nerves. I start going. As usual, I go to Gaetano's. I have the keys and open the door. He's in the bed.

- *How are you today?*

- *Bad. Everything hurts.*

- *Did you have breakfast?*

- *No.*

- *You have to eat, Gaetano, you lost too much weight.*

- *I'm not hungry!*

- *I know, but you have to strive. I'll make you some tea and bring you cookies.*

I go to the kitchen, I put a small pan on the stove. I take the box of cookies. The cupboard is full of homogenized, because in his

condition, by now, Gaetano only eats products for infants.

- *Come on Gaetano, eat so I'll make you the injection.*

He sits at the end of the bed and with a suffering face, starts dunking his cookies into tea. I wait for him to finish and turn him back to make the injection. He has lost so much weight that he impresses even those who, like me, are accustomed to living with serious sick ones.

- *Do you want me to turn on the radio?*

- *No.*

- *Don't you want some jazz?*

- *No!*

- *All right. Go to sleep, if I manage I'll come back when I finish my turn.*

- *Who sleeps doesn't catch sleep* – he tells me simulating sarcasm not to let me worry about him. It's one of his nonsenses, he always says that one day he will explain me what it means, but I think he has yet to find a meaning to his word game. As I leave, he asks: - *Have you listened to the CD of Milt Jackson and Wes Montgomery?*

- *Yes, Gaetano.*

- *And what do you think?*

- *They were over it.*

- *Yes, they were over it. Listen, Omar.*

- *Tell me.*

- *You have to take care of my accompany allowances. The retirement is not enough, I need a check.*

- *I've heard them. They say that soon INPS will send notice to the lawyer you're dealing with.*

- *Then go back to him to solicit, ok?*

- *Okay, when I'll have time, I'll go.*

- *Thank you.*

I say him goodbye. I go out and arriving at the car, I open a letter.

*An eagle without wings is still an eagle? A turtle without a shell is still a turtle?  
A hornless rhinoceros is still a rhino?*

*Dear friend, if you don't recognize the Chinese shadows reproduced in the photo above, it's probably because you don't know leprosy: in fact, the hands that have tried to make these shadows are the hands of a person who has contracted this disease. Progressing in the body, leprosy creates nerve damage and deformation, hopelessly defacing the appearance of the patient and causing progressive disability. But a man without hands is still a man.*

*Leprosy today is a neglected disease that delivers to social death the people who suffer from it: in fact, not only it creates serious problems at the physical level, but also fear and isolation.*

*The stigma that surrounds the patient is still too strong. Millions are the leprosy patients who suffer from the physical consequences of the disease and those of marginalization. Millions of leprosy patients still living in the shadows. But now-a-days, you can heal from leprosy.*

*We helped millions of people to recover from their illness and to get out from the shadows but there is still so much to do, and we can do it together. With your help.*

Another one.

*Dear Mr Mumba, every day dozens of people knock on our door of Luzira mission, on the outskirts of the Ugandan capital, Kampala. They ask for help because they have no money to buy medications, or because they need a doctor and hospitals are distant and overcrowded. For us in Italy, it is normal to have basic drugs and medications in our houses, we always have dozens of still full packs that we often throw as they expire. In Uganda, medicines are a luxury for few!*

*It is heart-breaking to see those faces in anguish, those desperate mothers with their babies, knowing that for them even the most trivial disease can become fatal.*

*In Uganda, medical care is inaccessible for most of the population and often who pays the most are the children. Tomas, for example, one of the pupils of our school, was a lively boy and full of energy. He would have had a life ahead of him, if he had been diagnosed earlier of malaria, instead, he was struck down at just*

*twelve years.*

*In front of tragedies like this one we are discouraged. But that's not what God expects from us. We should not be discouraged, because we have a concrete opportunity to alleviate these sufferings. Just a charitable gesture on the part of everyone is needed to get great results. After all, God does not ask us the impossible, but only a little of our good will and our love.*

*Since 2000, this association helps us to welcome children and young people such as Tomas, to take care of them and help them build a future, especially through education.*

*Since last year, we started the project "solidarity for peace", to spread the Christian value of solidarity among people and lead more and more people to support who in the so-called third world lives in absolute poverty.*

*Only through the help of everyone, you can build peace! It is a great project that you too can help achieve!*

The third.

*Dear Mr Mumba, it's said that, from birth, we are all equal. The reality is, some of us open their eyes to a life already marked by disease. Children who are HIV positive, or that are born with mental illness or develop it early in life.*

*Children like Sara, who is HIV positive, and was born in the spring of 2004 and immediately placed in intensive care for her dramatic health conditions. Or like Mark, who at just eight years already has to face many difficulties and sufferings, and that now has withdrawn into himself, his world, and doesn't speak or play with anyone.*

*We could tell many similar stories, but the life of these children is worth more than a thousand words, it deserves facts. That is why our association exists: to help Sara, Mark and all the kids in their conditions to grow, play, smile.*

*We are dedicated since 1991 to the best thing and at the same time the worst thing in the world: children and diseases, with exclusion and discomfort accompanying them.*

*Today, thanks to our three offices in Milan, Rome and Florence, to the shelter houses, to the cooperation in Costa Rica, Kenya, Zambia, to our over three hundred trained and sensitive volunteers, this association helps and assists many*

*children and their families at home and in hospital, in Italy and in developing countries by donating their time, energy and resources.*

*You can do much or a little too. Giving, depriving yourself of something to offer it to someone else. Words seem out of place in a historical moment in which frauds and scandals occupy the pages of newspapers. But we also read that many people think, aside from the business, about the good of the neighbour: then perhaps not everything is so disheartening. This fact is called Social Responsibility and you may want to express it with us.*

When I am in the central shift, my day is inauspicious because it occupies part of the morning and part of the afternoon. It's not the work itself that stresses me, but the thought of having to do it. Still, I'm not convinced of having to accept sacrificing my good time to earn enough money to live along.

I come to the hotel. I park. I get to the lobby and Baresi is already operating: - *Always with the mail under your arm, eh, Mumba.*

The Canadian group, meanwhile, ends his stay. Baresi precedes the luggage cart I'm pushing. I leave Baresi dealing with the last pleasantries towards the Canadians, and I go back inside. Marta entertains a group of German tourists and Veleno, on service, asks me to leave the luggage cart to him.

I carry out the cleaning on the floor and then escape, breaking away from the Baresi's clutches. On floor five there is an empty room left, I sit on the armchair and tune on MTV. There is a special on U2 and their short US tour, they're playing on a board truck passing on the Brooklyn Bridge. In the meantime, I open the other letters.

*Dear Mr Mumba,*

*This night, while many of us will be in the warmth of our own homes, someone will be alone in cold and darkness. Just like Mario C., whom last Christmas Eve died on the streets, with no one near him. Not even one that has brought light and salvation in his desperate life. It is terrible to think that so close to us, these tragedies can happen... and yet a hundred thousand men, women and children, live*

*on the street alone and marginalized, especially in big cities: there are more than fifteen thousand only in Rome and Milan. Begging on the subway steps, rummaging in bins, looking for food and reusable waste. At night, while we rest in our homes, they sleep on benches, under bridges, in the subways.*

*When you touch the bottom, it is hard to find the strength to recover, if no one holds out a hand. Here's what our project have been doing for over twelve years: open the door and heart to those in need. Just like Elisa, twenty-six, who, after living on the street of Milan for eight years, thanks to our intervention has finally been able to start a process of reintegration.*

*In our centers of Emergency Services and Night Hospitality, through all the days and nights of the year, we welcome homeless men, women and children, marginalized, often addicted to alcohol and drugs.*

*In Milan, in the center of Night Hospitality, operating since 2000 - the only one of its kind in the city - our Project has managed more than ten thousand interventions, providing shelter and assistance, a bed, a hot meal, clean clothes, and above all listening and human warmth. We have always done this, every night, even on Christmas Eve. But today we must do even more. The Institutions support our initiatives and many volunteers offer us their availability, but we have to face many extraordinary expenses for the new center and collect 30,000 Euros, necessary to ensure our interventions.*

*For this, we need your help!*

U2 on TV, between Manhattan Brooklyn districts, hit it hard. You can see people chasing them with cell phones trying to immortalize them, someone calls someone else to tell them that the Irish band will be at the traffic light of the seventh or the ninth road. On Brooklyn Bridge it is the apotheosis: the camera cuts the truck from above, then focuses on some boats that, down the East River, are launching water jets. The group goes down and starts playing the latest songs on a stage under the bridge.

Often, as in this moment, I happen to remain hostage to Federez, who joins me planning to keep me company and with his inopportune speeches ruins my siesta. Actually, I think this is only a perverse way of him to rush me and go on break on my place, so that

his rest lasts twice.

- *I don't have anything against you Jews – he says, distracting me from the video – but, about concentration camps, it wasn't told the truth. Winners write history.*

- *I am not Jewish, Federež, and anyway, how can you speak of winners, addressing to people who suffered the Holocaust?*

- *Oh well, if you are not a Jew, what race do you belong to?*

- *I was born in Rome, my mother is Roman.*

- *And your father?*

- *My father is Kenyan.*

- *Kenya, Israel... same area. Israel is a kind of border. Who is beyond it is Jew, who is over here, is not.*

- *Yes, totally... however, regarding the Jews, they all come from Israel, but almost all of them get away from it more than two thousand years ago.*

- *I think otherwise.*

- *But it's not a matter of point of view, it's just like that.*

- *See that you are not democratic? You don't agree on the fact that I hold my ideas!*

- *Bah, keep them if you want...*

- *Omar, doesn't the colour of your skin embarrass you?*

- *Nope. May I know the reason for this third degree?*

- *We have often played football together and I've seen you in the shower.*

- *That's strange that you remember it now, seen that you never passed the ball. So?*

- *You are circumcised!*

- *Yup.*

- *And you tell me that you're not Jew?*

- *Come on, Federež, are you saying that being a Jew is based on circumcision?*

- *Well!*

- *When I was little, I had trouble urinating, and therefore, my father, who's a doctor, took me to his colleague and decided it would be better to do a circumcision.*

- *Oh, fuck it! Tell me, tell me...*

- *But I don't remember much, I only had six, maybe eight or ten years!*
- *Oh my God, unbelievable!*

Silence and chill only for good five minutes. Federez looks into the air, stunned. Then he concludes: - *You said your father is Kenyan, right?*

- *Yes, Kenyan.*
- *Ah, Kenya: Safari. The jungle. The tribes. Beautiful.*

Someone's knocking. Federez escapes to the opposite side of the room, fearing the arrival of Baresi. I turn off the television and crumple the mail. Those entering, those leaving, those who flee, those who hide: it all seems a farce.

I go to the door, it's Marta: - *Baresi delivers you week program.*

- *Uh, again a Sunday on service!*
- *Don't make such a fuss, we are lucky to have a job!*
- *Try to develop your own thoughts and not those of Baresi...*
- *Baresi always tries to meet our needs....*
- *Especially yours!*
- *Maybe because I don't always complain!*
- *And also because you're a good cook...*
- *Again with that story of the lasagna I brought? It happened only a couple of times...*
- *Sure. When you make a tart, you bring him a tart.*
- *I make this working environment more human.*
- *Confusing pandering with human relationship...*
- *All of this because I know how to treat people?*
- *What a phenomenon!*
- *In short, I manage to get along with everyone except you, but why?*
- *Because you adapt to the needs of others. Indeed, you adapt when it's appropriate.*
- *Ah, I understand that you want to offend me, but I don't bother. And then, that's life.*
- *Oh, yes, life...*
- *Good, be witty... do you know what I think?*

- *Enlighten me...*
- *That you have a tendency of victimization that doesn't allow you to emerge.*
- *Oh dear, what a concept!*
- *I think you have the qualities but you get lost in it...*
- *Sure...*
- *Yes, it's the instinct of wanting to be against that creates this tension, frustration, dissatisfaction, Omar: You can't change the world.*
- *Well, social justice is worth the loss of personal peace of mind.*
- *Oh yes? And you want to spend your whole life like this? Just to figure out some day that you threw away your best time?*
- *Well, if your alternative is adapting...*
- *You can call it as you want. But you could also say: living without too many problems in head, leaving behind troubles...*
- *Sure. Who's in the front row always says that things are going well.*
- *You could gain from it.*
- *What do you mean?*
- *Sex.*
- *Oh, you've changed your tactics, now.*
- *No, I'm not using any tactic. But I can see from a mile away that you don't get laid. And it's a shame, you talk too much, Omar...*

She comes dangerously close. She caresses my face, encircling my shoulders. Her hand inside my shirt and my earlobe between her teeth.

- *No, Marta, this is not correct...*
- *Uh no?*

She touches my lips with hers. I grab her by the hair and forcefully kiss her. I take her uniform off, she kisses me on the neck. We land on the carpet to continue the lifetime issues. That's to be expected, one should stop before the final insult.

The cages are opened and the masks fall. There's something perverse in the heat exploding between people who don't like each other. We

are two parts of a single device and I work with all the resentment and strength that comes over me.

*Nigga! Nigga! Nigga!* she screams at the climax. Its just life that puts a stamp on your ass and says it's okay.

The TV is still on, *bonovox* warbling covers our not so quiet moans. No woman has ever pulled my hair so hard. On the bed the scattered letters of the associations, on the outside flows the world that doesn't want to be changed. We stay still catching our breath on the floor, staring at the ceiling.

- *What time is it?* - I ask her.

- *We finished the turn* - she says.

- *Good. I'm hungry. Let's go eat pizza.*

- *No - answer - I'll take a shower and go to sleep.*

- *As you want.*

I freshen up and go down to the locker room to change. Federez comes to me: - *Oh, Mumba, you know if Baresi looked for me?*

- *No. I didn't see him at all. I think he went home.*

- *Better - he says - I fell asleep in the conference room.*

- *I see.*

- *What are your plans Mumba: what about a beer?*

- *No, I'll get home, I'll take a shower and go to bed.*

- *All right.*

I say him goodbye and get to the car. I get inside, roll the window down, and remain there to smoke. I turn on the stereo, start the engine and head for a pub. A pizza and a beer, as I already decided.



## CHAPTER SIX

Baresi is unaware of it, but he is living a second life. Too bad that it is so similar to the first one. It is strange to talk to someone who was already dead. About his *punishment*, things went this way. Federez had made contact with people he mentioned to me. Veleno and he went to the appointment. It was in a bar, one of those where every detail, even the sign, even though it's only of three single letters, is reticent, and the bartender smokes in your face to hide his connotations in a cloud of smoke.

Veleno waited outside, because police often came there. Sometimes, when they found something, they loaded the suspect, and sometimes they loaded anyone just to have a suspect. These were the drawbacks of the trade.

Both Veleno and Federez seemed seraphic and quiet. I was surprised by their coolness, because you can't drawback the agreements, especially when the contract you signed is with those people.

Federez had been clear and said that he had recommended it: *only a sauté*, which translated is just scaring him a lot. He had precisely indicated his car and schedules, as well as three photos of the subject. No more little to add. It was not fixed a precise day, obviously it was not possible. The subject was checked, and then any day could have been the right one. Moreover, *they* usually let it pass a bit of time, at least to justify the five hundred grand agreements. It had to look like

a robbery.

June. Thursday was the usual number plate day and I get to work by public transport.

The metro seems a purgatory. It's full. People stink, on June. You sweat, it is impossible to breathe. You can sit in front of a guy with chronic bronchitis who coughs in your face the bacillus of his existence. There's the one who drops the *deaf-mute*, a silent fart you feel only moments after its release and that leaves in the coach symptoms of a liver transplantation, not to mention the looks of the passengers insulting each other.

Out of the metro, I made my way to the bus stop and then on the bus I even found a seat. Once over the bridge, the bus was about a kilometre from the hotel and then it stopped. The road was blocked. A long line of cars, scooters and public transport planted the brakes on asphalt. Iron under the sun, a neurotic honking in the air. Someone was coming out of his car and getting up holding onto the edge of the door to peer at what was happening. Then police passed, inviting to calm down. People was clinging to their cell phones to inform of the delay. From the opposite direction, a little boy on his scooter was going down the street. One asked him what happened. He replied: - *They killed a guy!*

- *Where?*
- *Close to the hotel.*
- *But... are you sure?*
- *So they say: there's a mess!*

I went off the bus and tried to walk away. I picked up the phone and dialled Federez' number.

- *Where are you?*
- *At work. Baresi's not here. At home his wife said he went out to come here.*
- *Shit!*
- *Mumba, be cool: we have nothing to do with it.*
- *How can you be so cold!*
- *If something serious happened, there is no evidence that leads to us.*

- *What did you say to your friends?*
- *Friends? I don't know anyone.*
- *And where is Veleno?*
- *He went out a moment ago, trying to see if there is news.*
- *I'm coming.*

I hung up and immediately made the number of the hotel to inform that I was coming by feet. I asked about Baresi, just to keep the mask on. They told me he was late. I told them I was too and that the road was blocked. Finally, I arrived. Federez face was that of someone who didn't give a fuck. Veleno was drinking a beer and seemed at ease. There was no work for the afternoon. There was no Baresi controlling. Tourists who came out could not come back, those who were to arrive, could not reach, but above all, there was no Baresi.

The weather was as blocked as the traffic column. The three of us were locked in a room on the third floor. Veleno was looking out of the window whistling. Federez was reading a sports newspaper and I went to the bathroom to take a shower and try to calm myself down. None of the staff suspected or imagined, I was the only one in a state of absolute panic.

Veleno got down to the bar to take a coffee. I finished drying off and I sat in front of Federez.

- Mumba - he says - I have to ask you to do something really important.*
- *What?*
- *Whatever happens, mind your own business!*

He did not need to add that I would risk my safety instead. His look and his finger pointed were as evident as a threat. Twenty minutes later, we got distracted by the hustle on the corridor. Federez got up to open the door, but Veleno, from outside preceded him with the key and almost slammed the door on his face.

- *He arrived!*
- *What?*
- *He's down in the lobby.*

We rushed down the stairs. We got to the lobby. He was there. Baresi was sitting in the chair with a glass of water. He was sweaty and

exhausted.

*- Guys, excuse me. I was stuck. There's bell outside. Have you heard what happened?*

I went home in the evening. In complete silence. Little traffic, that time, only the streetlights. Arrived at home, I turned on the television. The regional news also told about it. On the screen, the four faces of the ones who beat a guy for spare change and send him in coma. It was not a case of mistaken identity, they only had a lot of work. Perhaps, he would survive. Night passed, doctors would have said their opinion on the matter. That was what the correspondent said, at least, that's what I grasped due to dizziness.

Baresi was unaware of all that could have happened. He will never change, forever faithful to the only mask he is able to wear. He is kind of a Sergeant Garcia, but not that funny. It is difficult to love him, he settles for your fear.

Now he's calling me for tomorrow schedule and he's more sarcastic than the previous days.

*- You're late, Mumba: I called you half an hour ago... were you reading your little humanitarian letters? This is the program I prepared for tomorrow. Go, now, Mumba: go go go. You have to take the luggage of room twelve...*

I get the luggage at room twelve. Tomorrow Ludovica Adinolfi, the actress, will come. She is a theatre one, but has three or four porn DVDs to her credit. Four rooms on the fourth floor, for her, her secretary, her agent and someone else of her entourage. She was born in Marche but she is resident in Monte Carlo, she will shoot a commercial and release an interview with Channel 5. Baresi will completely devote himself to her room, and Veleno and me will follow our director on the floor.

*- One night with Ludovica and life would be really better – Veleno says.*

*- Yeah, she's remarkable.*

*- Eh, Mumba, admit it: you're advantaged in these games.*

*- We?*

*- Yes, you niggers are more gifted. You are not a believer, Mumba, and yet Our Lord did something in your favour, a historical imbalance!*

- *You mean I'm ungrateful for it?*
- *Yes, Mumba, you are.*
- *Well, just to clarify: I am not an atheist, I'm just undecided...*
- *Bah... Listen Mumba: the other night, surfing the web, I came across some old movies with Ludovica Adinolfi, yeah her...*
- *You have the narrating skills of a prophet... The other night you came across...*
- *Let me finish. Ludovica was having fun on the couch with a white and a black guy, but they were hurting her so she rejected them. Then she went to knock on the tenant, upstairs, a kind of teacher, a little guy with glasses and an effeminate face.*
- *So?*
- *And then I had an epiphany.*
- *What?*
- *That women like the feminine side of men, but men do not like the masculine side of women.*
- *Then?*
- *Well nothing, it's just like men don't like the masculine side of a woman unless she's a whore.*
- *An optimistic and left-wing bitch, perhaps, as Dalla sang.*
- *Oh, that's right, Mumba...*
- *Veleno, you give me mental hernia with those speeches; in my opinion these are your personal clichés on sex, and even a little childish, if you let me...*
- *What do you mean?*
- *The feminine side of a man is not defined by wearing glasses or being physically frail, as well as the masculine side of a woman isn't defined by, well, you know. And then gifted niggers, you know you forgot dance and sport? ...but well, let it be...*
- *Can you keep a secret, Mumba?*
- *No, Veleno, I actually don't want to know your secret!*
- *Federez and I are organizing something for Ludovica.*
- *Are you talking about Ludovica Adinolfi?*
- *Yes, Mumba. Some bugs in the bathroom, in her room...*
- *They'll kick you out, Veleno. This is bullshit!*
- *I see, maybe you're just a little frightened black girl, Mumba. Be careful to go around alone at night, ah ah ah*

I get anxious at the thought of having to work with Veleno and take care of Adinolfi's staying. Federez and Veleno are excellent at getting into trouble, and when it happens, they are even more excellent at putting colleagues in trouble and save themselves from measures.

I finish my turn. I get out, I go into the car and go. There is not much traffic, in half an hour I am home. I stop in a rotisserie, as I often do.

- *Pizza or kebab, tonight?* - Mohamed asks.
- *Pizza, tonight. Bufala, cherry tomatoes and anchovies!*
- *Good choice. Fifteen minutes and it's ready. A beer, Omar?*
- *A comforting beer is always a good idea.*

I go out with my dinner box and I get to my house. I refresh and smoke a cigarette, I let the pizza cool down to make the flavour better. I turn on the PC. My e-mailbox is full of junk mail. Lately, I get a lot of mails from religious groups. I concluded, paradoxically, that if I were forced to choose between religious practitioners and the rest of others, I would be with the first group. Expressions as secular, non-believer, agnostic, atheist, are confusing with the concept of the middle class or bourgeoisie. The middle class, without ethics or principles, with an unlimited freedom, and without respect for others, remains the great reservoir of the ruling classes. Most people do not practice faith but are football fanatics, and their religious feast turns into social event.

These two figures have only one thing in common: one believes itself as ruler of heaven, the other as ruler of Earth.

Those who practice are strict, uncompromising, sometimes expressing their intolerance in the hard way, but I don't put them on the same level of those bourgeois who, despite not practicing, reach them in church for religious holidays and try to copy their steps when necessary; when the time of the peace sign comes, they wink and whisper *hello*.

In my email box come some new ones. One of an anti-Christian group that has managed to gather evidence that Christ never existed, and wants to sue the Vatican. Now, eluding the strictly religious discourse, the Gospel tells about the life of Jesus and I consider it as a great biography; if Christ did not exist, the Gospel is a great novel. Stop.

Faith is a concept that I never managed to grasp and tackle. I prefer to call myself a *fleeing spiritual believer*, which is one that believes in the idea of the presence of a god and the promise of a better life in the afterlife, but that cannot get close to a doctrine. It is a thought that

crosses me and bothers me often, affecting the course of my day. Can one be so assailed by feelings of guilt for not having religious references? I cannot believe that a god can get upset for so little.

Now pizza is cool. A light batter, sweetness of the cherry combined with salty anchovies, over a bed of hoax mozzarella. If I had a last wish, I would ask for a pizza from Mohamed.

Eaten the pizza, I relax, finishing my beer. A sip. Two sips. I drain it. I sigh and a message from Marta appears on my mobile: *I'm out here, can I come up?*

While she comes up, I try to freshen up, sometimes there is no worse thing than a surprise. I leave the door ajar, and I turn on the light in the hall. I hear the elevator stop at my floor.

- *Good evening* - she says, kissing me. Skirt, jacket and low-heeled shoes. Loose blonde dyed hair with chestnut shades.

- *You like it?* - She says, swaying her set - *I've darkened it today.*

- *You look good.*

- *Did you like the surprise ... or did you expect to see Adinolfi?*

- *Uh, you got to know she'll come tomorrow?*

- *Well, they don't talk of anything else in the hotel, you all have hormones all fired up!*

- *Indeed Veleno and Federež are thrilled...*

- *Just them? Well, I decided to come and check for myself.*

- *Would you like a beer?*

- *Don't you have some white wine?*

- *Yup.*

I take the bottle, she hugs me from behind, stroking my abdomen. She takes the bottle off from my hands and bends over me, unbuttoning my trousers. I stroke her head; we end up on the couch, exchanging our souls and each other attitude, dodging inhibitions and reprisals for a while.

She moves onto me, whispering things, then, screaming my last name: *Mumba, Mumba, Mumba... oh yes, you're my black guy, Mumba... Mumba...*

We remain lying on the sofa, the window ajar, and a light wind caressing the tent of the living room.

Mail from land

- *I'm hungry again, why don't we go get something to eat?*
- *No, I'm tired, better if you go down and get something.*
- *What do you prefer?*
- *Well, you... - she laughs - but no, everything's fine.*



## CHAPTER SEVEN

In the morning, Marta had breakfast and went to work. I have the afternoon shift. I go downstairs. Something is in the mailbox.

*Dear Mr Mumba, the small and simple bracelet you will find in this brochure is, for us, an incredibly useful tool. In emergency situations, it can immediately diagnose the degree of malnutrition of a child. Try it. Take one end of it and pass it through your toes, then string up to the red zone. When the diameter of the arm of a child of five years is that small, there is not a minute to lose: he can die at any moment.*

*There are hundreds of thousands of children around the world in this condition. It's hard to imagine that, even today, someone could die of hunger. And often, it's even harder to keep hoping. Yet, thirty-five years now, our Association continues its work in more than seventy countries around the world, intervening in many crisis scenarios, without discrimination of race, religion, political ideology. Rebuilding destroyed hospitals, curing the wounded, taking care of the sick in refugee camps. Restoring the hopes and lives of many.*

*There are still so many forgotten crises in the world, every day we are faced with so many children on the brink of death. Yet it takes so little to save them: just a little of milk, flour, sugar and oil, as well as a lot of attention and patience, because too much food all together could kill them.*

*Despite the size of this tragedy, your help, however small, can make a difference, it can really save many lives. That is why we say that this bracelet not only measures the degree of a child's malnutrition, but also the generosity of those who, in the face*

*of suffering, do not close their eyes but open their heart.*

The second one.

*Dear Mr Mumba, I am immensely grateful for your donation of 5 Euros we received.*

*Your contribution allowed us to do some good to the children in Uganda, who pay the consequences of an immense poverty and a more and more worsening healthcare situation; how many times I saw children of a few years die for not receiving the medical care that would have healed them. Any bad, even an infection or an anaemia, in Uganda may become fatal for the little ones.*

*One day, last month, a student of our school came in a rush to call. He was agitated because Katharine, his companion of ten years, felt sick and had fainted.*

*Immediately, I went to see what had happened with Jolly, our medical assistant: her companions had laid Katharine on a bench and tried to help her. We took our car, because there are no ambulances in Uganda, and we rushed to the hospital.*

*Katharine was simply anaemic, but her anaemia had reached a level that removed every kind of force from her, even the slightest energy just needed to stand up.*

*Now Katharine has taken her iron cure and she is well. But she could have died of anaemia if we had not rescued her immediately.*

*Cases like this in Uganda occur daily. Not to let this happen again, we must be able to get regular vaccinations, examinations and analysis to ensure the health of children. Otherwise, when they will get sick, it will often be too late to treat them.*

It is an errand morning. Gaetano asks me to go around the Roman libraries to give them his jazz CDs so that when he will be departed, someone will remember him for his music.

Even if I am used to dealing with seriously ill people, the emotional investment is devastating when someone you know feels his forces fade away. Life is unconceivable. Few people have been so unfair in life to deserve to suffer from cancer. Priests try to bring consolation, after all it is their job, but no one can offer a valid explanation to so much pain.

I go doing my good deed. I have a list of libraries to visit and a dozen

of CDs recorded by Gaetano when he was healthy. First, since I have the free morning, I go to the headquarters of the local tutelage institute, where Gaetano lodged his procedures. Half an hour in a row, as planned. When it is my turn, I sit and wait that the employee finishes her phone call.

- *Good morning* - she tells me.

- *Good morning* - I reply.

- *Tell me...*

- *Well, I take care of Mr Gaetano Volta. He had a fiscal visit for the attendance allowance, you told me that his lawyer would have had communications these days...*

- *Yes, a moment, I so check... no, nothing. Now I'm writing to ask if there's any news. Could you come over tomorrow for the answer?*

- *I don't know, I have to run some commissions.*

- *Then can you phone me?*

- *Okay, the number is that on the flyer?*

- *Of course, always the same. See you tomorrow, then.*

- *Goodbye.*

I go out and take my car. It is hot and there is a lot of humidity. And there is traffic. The first three libraries are in my neighbourhood, I find them and finish the ride in an hour. A black guy who brings a jazz CD is considered a guarantee. Then I get to the library in San Giovanni district. It is closed, so I head to the Prati district. Finding parking is a titanic mission, and after three laps around the block, I find a parking spot on the nearby square.

I get in, the place is in the courtyard of an apartment building. I pass through the porter's lodge, but a message on the door informs that the library opens in the afternoon. Damn times, no one updates pages on Internet, no one cares if someone gets through the city only to find things closed.

I reach the car and head to Valle Aurelia. I get into the library and ask for the music section. I leave a CD to a secretary, begging her to

include it in the catalogue. I say goodbye and get out. I return to the car park, but I find a car parked on double row in front of mine. To exit I would have to exceed the laws of dynamics. I honk and honk, and wait. From a nearby bar, an old man, the owner of the car, looks out and tells me he is having breakfast and he will come as soon as possible. I light up a cigarette and consult the list of the remaining libraries. The old man comes, bringing me a coffee to apologize. I thank him and depart. I have to reach Portuensi Hills district, a place I do not know at all. I turn my tablet on, I let myself be guided by the navigator, but it leads me to Roma Fiumicino railway. I stop in a rest area, I must have typed the path wrong. I control it, but there is no error. I go back to where I started, and open a second application, linked to a satellite. I restart the engine and, just after one traffic light, the two applications come into hardware conflict. The male voice tells me to turn right, the female voice on the left. I decide to follow the second one, but the two voices overlap.

Somehow, I don't know how, and in the grip of a strong headache, I reach my destination. I bring them the cd, I get out and rest, smoking in the sun, pleased to have completed my daily mission for Gaetano. A few hours of breath, then my day back at the hotel will start.

Ludovica Adinolfi is staying at our hotel, but only Baresi is allowed to approach her and to make her stay pleasant. Federez and Veleno are all fired up because they feel their plan fading away and yet they do not give up. Baresi, however, is an impenetrable wall: in fact, the director of the floor is present h24. His confidentiality is not linked to a professional matter, more like to the exclusive role that raises him from the ground compared to his subordinates. He drives away anyone who comes to him to ask about the girl, merely smiling to the envy of others, pleased to the *mission* fate gave him. The afternoon passes between mystery and an industrious silence.

Morning. Today I have a day off. I will go to the post office because I decided to donate my *five per thousand* to “Begonia”, an association for the free care of the incurably ill. The administrative office of a work place, since it is a company, is also a withholding agent, and it is

required to hand over your envelope to the State Agency of Revenue. Baresi said no. After repeating my concept that a company is a withholding agent and must hand over my envelope, he stayed still on his point of view, refusing to make contact with the administration, adding that the office sure cannot be bothered for every issue.

Now I am at the post office, because even (and especially) a post office is required to deliver your envelope directly to the Revenue. I realize that in my home area there is no information centre, or maybe there is and I still haven't found it, and in any case there is no one to ask information. I stay in queue. As usual, some people ahead of me, there is the one guy who has to send about twenty recommended mail. My turn comes. The postal clerk is not aware of the practice concerning the *five per thousand*. He has to ask his manager. I wait. He comes back and tells me that they cannot accept the message envelope written by hand, so I have to take the right envelope in a or stamps store.

I exit the postal office and go to a stationery store, I ask for the right envelope. The clerk does not understand. I explain that it's the envelope to donate the *five per thousand* to association's chosen by the registrant, but since I don't deliver the *module 730*, but only the Cud model, the latter model doesn't include the envelope I need.

The clerk tells me that then, unfortunately, I have to buy the entire file for the tax return, the *module 730*. I tell him that I only need the damn envelope and he replies that maybe he has some, but in the confusion of the store, he would not know where to find them.

Noticed my disappointment, he suggests me to look at the shelf on the wall. After a careful look, I find it. The clerk is surprised: *then we had one!*

I pay. Exit. Again, back to the post office. I take another number. I diligently remain in line. My turn comes. The clerk tells me that it has, again, the first time that an envelope for the *five per thousand* comes in his hands, and has to ask, again, to the director. I wait, he returns. He informs me that they have to find the folder where to put that kind

of papers, otherwise, how can they do it?

I still wait. Five minutes pass, he returns. He tells me that they found it, and now they are taking it. He returns. They took it. He explains that I must do the receipt because it's - again - the first time that a similar case happens. I fill out the receipt. I deliver it, and get out. While on the road, I call the girl of the Tutelage to ask about the answer regarding the allowance of Gaetano.

*- Good morning, I came yesterday and you asked me to call you.*

*- About what?*

*- I take care of Mr Gaetano Volta's practices, it's for the accompany allowance, I wanted to know if the lawyer has had communications.*

*- Oh yeah, I remember. Wait, I control.*

*- Good.*

*- So, the lawyer replied that the report was delivered three months ago.*

*- Ok. And what does it say?*

*- Unfortunately, this is not the written.*

*- Ma'am, listen to me: Mr Volta is worsening. He needs money. I want to know if the request will be accepted or not, because in this case, the patient has to submit an application for aggravation with home visit, because walking is becoming complicated.*

*- I see. Can you tell me your contact information? As soon as I have news, I'll promptly inform you.*

*- Yes, you can call me at this number.*

*- All right. We'll let you know!*

*We'll let you know*, as if it was an audition. That is all the National Institute of Social Security, through an operator of the Tutelage, manages to tell to an invalid. Bureaucracy is the infamous enemy for a seriously ill person who needs care. An infirm has no patience, and often does not even have time.

I get to Gaetano's. I go up and open the door. I yell from afar.

*- Gaetano, it's me, Omar.*

- *Hello, come in, I'm in the bathroom!*

He comes out and appears in his underwear on the corridor - *I would like to take a shower. Give me a hand.*

- *All right.*

I help him undress and get past the step of the shower box. I soap him on his back: - *Don't look at my ass* - he smiles.

Finished it, I wipe him: - *I handed all of your cd* - I say.

- *Well, well, a job for immortality, you know?*

- *But you must not think about it, Gaetano!*

- *Why? That music is what I've done all my life. When I'm gone, music will continue.*

- *I just wanted to say that you shouldn't think of...*

- *Of death? At my age and condition, I must think about it.*

- *As my father always says.*

- *By the way, how is he?*

- *Oh, the usual aches and pains. Today is his birthday.*

- *Then you must go greet him, and bring him my best wishes.*

- *Yes, I'm going. See you in the evening?*

- *Why don't you come for dinner? We can listen to a Charlie Parker live!*

- *Well, okay.*

- *What will we eat?*

- *A pizza from Mohamed's?*

- *Exactly. A party with the wonderful Mohamed pizza!*

- *Good. See you tonight. Bye Gaetano.*

I get to the wine shop and then in a pastry. Today is my father's birthday. My parents live two subway stops from my area. I get down, pass through two intersections and arrive at the door. I take the elevator. My mother must have seen me from the window, because she opens the door before I ring.

- *My handsome!*

- *Do not call me like that!*
- *Oh, well ...*
- *How are you?*
- *Oh, my bones.*
- *I know, with osteoporosis it takes patience.*
- *Eh, but what have you brought here?*
- *Pastry.*
- *Oh... you know that your father can't eat them...*
- *C'mon, today's a holiday ...*
- *Give me your jacket.*
- *What is this fragrance: lasagne?*

I look in the oven. Two trays. - *What's this?* - I ask her.

- *That's for me and your father, no milk sauce or meat sauce... you know, triglycerides.*

The radio sends classical music, the passion of my mother. The portable TV is on, without volume. My father enters.

- *Happy birthday, Dad.*
- *Hello, what have you brought?*
- *Pastry... but mom says you can't exceed.*
- *Don't listen to her.*
- *Good. Then? Did you have to tell me something?*
- *Later, later, we'll eat first.*
- *Look, you have to be careful...*
- *Ugh, I can no longer eat or smoke: I'll soon die at this rate...*
- *Dad, you were a doctor...*

My mother prepares some portions. Only half for my father. He stares at her, upset: - *After, if you're hungry, you can get some more, but only a little* - she says.

With lasagne finished, my father puts on the table a sparkling wine and the pastries. My mother refrains from making accusations,

resigned. I light up a cigarette.

- *Have you changed your brand?*
- *Yes, it's a few days I smoke these.*
- *Are they strong?*
- *Dad, you can't smoke...*
- *Ugh, I know...*

He pours the champagne. My mother cuts the ribbon of the pastries.

- *Dad, I bring you the greetings of Gaetano.*
- *Thank him. I have to go see him one of these days.*
- *So, what did you have to tell me?*
- *Outside Rome, they are launching a new secular area - my father says.*
- *Uh, a club, an association?*
- *We already submitted the request, so we are waiting. Now they have received it and we have to decide - the old man continues.*
- *Yeah, we have to hurry - my mother says.*
- *Are you talking about a new residential area or a mall? But then what about the laity?*
- *Let us finish speaking - my mother says - it's a garden where each person will be assigned a flower or a plant to choose from. Professor Ramella, that old colleague of your father told us about that.*
- *Oh, a great surgeon - my father says.*
- *I'm getting out the way. I don't understand what you're talking about.*
- *A cemetery - my mother says.*
- *What?*
- *Oh, we have to think about it; and then, in the countryside, fresh air... - he says.*
- *But who cares about the fresh air - my mother says.*
- *Listen, I still didn't think about it, you catch me off guard...*
- *Aren't you glad to have already a place?*
- *Oh, sure... really, really happy, right!*
- *Okay - my father says - we just wanted to tell you. Do as you want, but then*

*don't say we didn't told you so.*

*- Ok, Dad, don't take it bad, I really don't want to make programs...*

*- All right, do as you please...*

I find an excuse to go and get out. While mom kisses me goodbye, my father pulls off the cream from a paste with his finger. He realizes that I saw him, and turns to the window pretending to blow his nose. That's it. One thing is to talk about the end of the world with open-mindedness, another is to face your own demise.

Kenya is a country that gained independence in 1963, when my father had already arrived in Italy. Italian citizens in all respects, dad still feels strong ties with Africa. He has always said that more than his medical profession and P.h.D., his real degree is represented by the place where he was born and grew up because, in a land of struggle and civil war, where also Middle East issues have a bigger eco, his origins are an existential statement for any hostility and conflict.

I leave my parents' home and go back to the subway. I come home and call Gaetano: *- Hello it's me, what pizza do you want tonight?*

*- The usual one: cherry tomatoes, mozzarella and anchovies. And ask for the grilled pumpkin flowers!*

*- Fried...*

*- No, listen, you have to say to Mohamed that Gaetano want grilled pumpkin flowers. Trust me, make him cook four portions, we'll devour them!*

*- All right. I'm going to rest. See you at dinner.*

Coming back home, I withdraw more mails.

*Dear Mr Mumba,*

*Begonia is a name chose for many emotional and symbolic reasons. When a disease becomes irreversible and quickly leads to death, it often shows a complex picture of problems defined as "total pain": in addition to the physical problems, you may experience psychological and spiritual suffering, difficulties in interpersonal and social relationships, and economic problems. Taking care of the terminally ill means to deal with all these different aspects of human suffering.*

*This is the philosophy of palliative care, which World Health Organization defines as "total care given to the person suffering from a disease that no longer responds to therapies used to achieve healing". Palliative care: they affirm the value of life, considering death as a natural event; they do not extend or shorten the life of the patient; they provide relief from pain and other symptoms, also considering the psychological and spiritual aspects; they offer a support system to help patients live as actively as possible until death; they help the family of the sick to live with the disease and then with their mourning.*

An invalid must reorganize the house according to his new needs. Gaetano has changed the old living room couch with a motorized bed that raises his legs and back.

*- I can watch TV and eat sitting in bed with a simple click on the remote control. Raising my legs do me good for circulation and then I can lift my back without efforts and incorrect movements. But the real gem is in the bathroom. Did you see it?*

*- No - I say.*

*- Then you have to see it.*

He ordered an electric wedge for the toilet, equipped with a device that sprays water to wash his lower parts. Movements are guided so he will no longer need to be held. It is amazing what man can do with his talent if he uses it to actually improve lives. And the perfection of the human machine is even more incredible in his small and large acts, which you don't realize until physical functions are dramatically reduced. I get back to the living room. Gaetano is watching TV. He laughs.

*- Why are you laughing, Gaetano?*

*- Well, I've always hated TV, but now I admit it gives me company. It keeps me attached to the world.*

*- Yeah.*

*- See, Omar, my strength slowly leaves. My head says things that my body no*

*longer feels. Do you know how many old men I knew in my life I recently reminded? I share, although with delay, their same flag!*

*- Well, you know what? Let's enjoy Mohamed's pizza.*

*- Right. And let's taste the grilled flowers before they get cold.*

*- Let's taste them.*

*- So, what do you think?*



## CHAPTER EIGHT

Night shift with Marta. Baresi has gone and we are out of the clutches of the whole world. In the apparent stillness of the night, it is the game of avoiding the each other in front of our colleagues and customers that fuel the desire that will lead us to an empty room.

We are on the fifth floor, room two hundred and ten. Everyone is asleep at this time, we are two servants who enjoy moments stolen to the snoring master. A bottle of sparkling wine and something that has a flavour of sushi.

- *Tired?*

- *No.*

- *What are you thinking about?*

- *About you.*

- *About me?*

- *Yup.*

- *Oh, wow!*

- *Wow.*

- *And then?*

- *Then what?*

- *Which concept have your thinking mind produced?*

- *Nothing important.*

- *Really? You think of me but that's not important?*

- *Yup.*
- *Well, it is, for me. What were you thinking?*
- *Forget about it...*
- *No, come on, I want to know...*
- *Every time we're together, you yell things... you call me nigga!*
- *It's a hidden thought, I don't know; in those moments I feel uninhibited and: oh, but are you analysing our intercourse?*
- *No.*
- *So?*
- *I'm thinking about your sexual fantasies...*
- *Don't think, Mumba, and remember: the less you think, the better... at least in these cases.*
- *Ok...*
- *Ugh, fine... do you want to know? I've never been with a person of colour. You are the first one.*
- *Ah... I was the first.*
- *Yes. The first experience with a fried up - she laughs, kissing me on the neck.*
- *I get it...*
- *Uhm... when you say you get it, I tend to worry.*
- *We are two opposites... - I say with a bitter smile.*
- *What's that now?*
- *When you talk about experiences, it seems to me that you're writing a resume of your life. Fucking with a nigga: done!*
- *Well, this is not funny...*
- *No, it's not, but it's like this...*
- *You see? Here we go again: you start thinking and ruin everything.*
- *No, I just say things, as they seem.*
- *I try not to make sleazy those moments that could be just an interlude...*
- *I don't know, I like to call things the way they are.*
- *You mean it's just fucking?*
- *It seems so obvious. But that's the same for you, you only use other terms...*
- *No, Mumba, you do not have a monopoly or control over other's opinion. Things are not always black and white, there are shades that, unfortunately, you can't grasp.*

The mind sets barriers that usually the heart can overcome, but even the most essential muscle gets tired. Heart and mind, the eternal conflict, the same alternation with which day follows night.

Finishing our turn, we get ready and get out. Silence between us, trying to avoid complications. We have breakfast at the bar and then I offer a ride to Marta.

- *Leave me here, I arrived.*

- *Is that your door?*

- *Yes...*

- *Don't you want me to come up?*

- *No, Omar, sorry. I'm tired, I want to rest.*

- *Well, ok, bye. See you at work.*

She gets down the car. I stay awhile to watch her go. Marta passes a gate and proceeds to the next block. The road is deserted so I follow her from afar. She stops at a kiosk to pick up a newspaper and some fruit from a stall. She slowly continues and arrives in front of another door. She searches the keys in her bag and opens. I wait two minutes, I get down from the car and I stop to peek at the names on the intercom. Here is where she lives. She is gone in her cage, I am going indifferent toward mine, each one comforted by its bars, that make up a limit but also an armour, which, after all, we don't intend to give up.

I get to the garage and leave the car. I greet, I climb the exit and go across the road. I pass through the parking lot but it is closed.

- *Where are you going?* - A guard asks me.

- *I would like to pass.*

- *You must go around.*

- *Why?*

- *Circulation is suspended along the avenue.*

- *And why?*
- *Too many cars on double rows.*
- *Too many cars double rows and you shut the car park?*
- *It's Mr Paciullo's birthday. The district has granted him some public land.*
- *Don Paciullo, that Paciullo?*
- *Yes, why?*
- *Because it's right that cars do not stay in double rows, but their place is the public parking!*
- *Come on, I gave you all the possible explanations, you have too many questions, go, go!*

Don Paciullo is *the boss* of the district. Institutions close their eyes, it's difficult to determine whether a State does more damage being present or absent. I check the mail and stop in front of my box.

*Dear Mr Mumba,*

*Distance support is a concrete gesture of solidarity towards a child, his family, his community. But not only that. It is also a way to approach different situations, to understand how our state of wealth isn't shared by everyone in the same way, to learn and understand peoples and traditions different from our own. As a supporter, you will annually receive a follow-up of the project with a specific part on the child's progress, the objectives achieved and the actions concretely realized, also thanks to your contribution. In addition, every three months you will receive our newsletter, with information and updates on our projects in developing countries. The minimum contribution is to ensure that all children attended basic medical care, medicines, supplies and clothing.*

*Depending on the project, the contribution is also used to buy school supplies, to pay school fees, to organize professional training courses and recreational activities, and in addition to fund public awareness campaigns, for specific medical treatments, or to build the basic infrastructure necessary to ensure hygienic conditions and safe sanitation. Thank you for your attention.*

The other one.

*Mr Mumba, since 2003 our association is present in Shisong, Cameroon; thanks to its humanitarian intervention, every year dozens of children suffering heart diseases can come to Italy to be operated. The association covers the cost of the travel, the stay of children in Italy and the medical care. Through this project, many children were saved.*

*In Cameroon, sixty-three children per thousand die; every year five thousand children born with heart disease; heart disease is the second leading cause of infant mortality; there is not a single cardiac surgery centre (eighteen in Italy); health care is inadequate and deficient: the average ratio is one doctor for every million inhabitants; thirty-seven thousand children and young people are waiting for a heart surgery: most of them die before they access any care.*

*The costs to save ten children:*

*Airline tickets (two accompanying): € 10,000;*

*pre- and post-operative hospitalization in Shisong for fifteen days: € 5,000;*

*accommodation and hospitality of ten children for fifty days or so: € 15,000;*

*medications and follow-up visits: € 7,000;*

*Total: EUR 37,000.*

*His contribution is essential to save many children. Help them!*

*Dear Mr Mumba, for those affected by disabilities, it's more difficult to survive. It's estimated that in the world there live thirty-seven million blind people. 90% live in developing countries. About five million people lose their sight each year. 90% of blind children cannot attend school, gain skills, build a future. Almost 50% of the blind people is blind for cataracts, because of the economic impossibility to undergo a simple cataract operation. Twenty million people worldwide are blind because of cataracts; one hundred forty-six million people suffer from trachoma, an infection that can lead to blindness. A million and a half people have permanently lost their sight. Each year, the lack of vitamin A blinds over three hundred fifty thousand children. Many of them die.*

*Almost seventeen million people are affected by river blindness, an infection that spreads mainly among individuals who live near rivers and springs of water. Their hope is placed in those who save them.*

The last.

*Dear Mr Mumba, the Afghan girl you just saw in the photograph is not alone. She is in miserable company. There are twenty-five million refugee children because of wars in progress or recently completed. Forced to abandon their homes and to seek asylum in other countries, welcomed in the refugee camps. Waiting for them, however, there are dangers such as kidnapping for prostitution, exploitation, abuse.*

*Dangers that we are striving to prevent. How? Defending the rights of refugee children, beginning with that of security, and denouncing those who trample them all over the world, and you too, Mr Mumba. In the past year, we recorded that more than thirty countries have severely restricted or violated the rights of refugees, children and adults. And among these, there is also Italy, the country where refugees seeking protection are often inhumanely withheld in detention centres, running the risk of a forced return to the countries from which they were forced to flee.*

*Mr Mumba, these twenty-five million children are displaced or refugees because of war, forced to leave their homes to seek asylum in another country; three hundred thousand child soldiers are fighting in regular armies and opposition groups in many countries. The military education reserved to them is based on threats, rapes, physical and psychological terrorism. And drugs, so that they can kill even their own peers and family; child workers, between five and seventeen years old, are two hundred forty-six million, and one hundred and seventy million are involved in hazardous activities; six million are enslaved and forced to work. One million and eight are involved in prostitution and production of pornographic material; one hundred and forty million girls have suffered sexual mutilation such as infibulation or total removal of the external genitalia; about two million children, mainly girls but also a significant number of boys, are involved in the multi-billion dollar sex trade. About a third of the victims of prostitution in Cambodia are children. In Lithuania this percentage varies between 20% and 50%. In Moldova, 30% of people involved in human trafficking are young girls, victims of sexual exploitation for commercial purposes.*

*Any help you give will still be valuable and a concrete testimony of defending several human rights.*

I'm aware that I'm lucky being born in a developed country, yet, when I try to find my merits in all this, I don't find them, as I find it difficult to see the faults of those who are born in underdeveloped countries. It is the claim to pride in belonging to a class in progress the thing I cannot conceive.

Sometimes fate can be your friend. It can give you the opportunity to live away from turbulent places but, whatever your belief, your class, your colour, the most complicated challenge will be to escape from the cages you find around you and, above all, inside of you.

As a little boy, I believed that the heaviest weight was to being black. In the bathrooms of the school, the elder ones rounded me in a circle and slamming their feet on the ground, to show the first signs of being tough boys, they shouted: *Mumba, come on, let us see your black and circumcised dick!*

Even today, when I find no logic in things around me, I still feel that hysterical slam of feet in my brain.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Enrico Mattioli works and lives in Rome.

He wrote Best' generation, Super customer, Supercashiers, Rock n roll stars.

He writes articles on his blog

[www.enricomattioli.com/enrico-mattioli-3/](http://www.enricomattioli.com/enrico-mattioli-3/)

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