

Massimiliano Ivagnes

MATTERS OF CONSCIENCE



Albatros



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info@gruppopalbatros.com

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From “The Sun, the Rain” – That day, when I stepped into my office on the third floor of Modena courthouse, I didn’t know that I would face the most complicated case of my life, which would make me take painful and difficult choice.

(...)

It was March 25th and, as usual, I withdrew into my poky room after giving instructions to my secretary and taking from her the folder of my next preliminary hearing. I turned on my computer and opened my certified email: “Dear Raffaele Rizzo,” I read impatient, “your transfer request to Lecce courthouse has been approved. Therefore, starting from August 1st, you will perform your duties as GIP judge at the above-mentioned office.” The letter forced me to make a series of bureaucratic requirements before the transfer.

(...)

On August 18th at 7:30 a.m. on a scorching day, I entered my office in Lecce. I was feeling nervous, without a good reason. It wasn’t the first time I had been assigned to that bureau, but I immediately realised that things were different in comparison to Modena. The fact that in Modena they had no sea nor tourists made things easier. I removed the dissatisfaction from my mind and prepared to write an attempted-robbery verdict moti-

vation. “Things will be better in September,” I tried to convince myself.

All of a sudden, my secretary stepped in. She had knocked, but she hadn’t waited for my reply. I realised that something bad was going on. She was holding a freshly printed folder, panting. “Confirmation hearing!” she said, “Attempted murder.”

I grasped the folder annoyed, not because of the amount of work I would have to deal with during that sweltering summer, but because of the seriousness of the crime. As Miss Adele kept talking “20-year-old boy. He stabbed his girlfriend twelve times...” my blood froze. I recognised the culprit’s name on the folder cover: Luigi De Luca, born in Lecce on January 1st 1999. “That’s him,” I thought as I instinctively put my right hand on my sweaty forehead.

(...)

It’s strange how life can unexpectedly turn a bright and sunny morning into a grey, rainy day. Sun and rain take turns in everybody’s life, moving like a crazy and unpredictable swing. I sentenced Luigi to nine years in prison, almost the most severe sentence for that kind of cases. Nothing can justify violence against women. Nevertheless, with that sentence – which I believed fair – I erased a part of my life (...) I realised that life can give you happiness, but at the same time it can punish you, just to remind you that you can’t always get what you want. It is something beyond your willpower.

From “Roberto’s Diary” – August 4th, 2038. Sometimes it seems impossible to survive in such sultry days. Our dormitories are as hot as furnaces. Only at night, you can have a break if you go out in the street, but the siren sends us back to those glass-covered rooms too early, and it’s like entering a sauna after an entire day absorbing the heat. Last night I lingered outside for fifteen minutes after the siren, daydreaming about the past, and the Executors immediately surrounded me. “Serial number 75699, what are you doing outside the dormitory?” Nobody calls me by my real name, Roberto Raho, not anymore.

(...) The lack of water - except half an hour a day, at dawn, when it’s available – gives rise to suffering and diseases. A few days ago, we buried a twenty-year-old boy in the mass grave. He used to sleep in the bed next to mine. He had hurt his hip working in the NL construction yard, and the lack of a proper treatment and hygiene had led to a necrosis.

(...) When I woke up this morning, I craved sugar, like when I was a kid. Back then, though, there were no limitations for us, for the masses. I wonder if Fabio will be able to give me another chocolate bar for Christmas. I still remember its sweet taste. I would really love to taste it again. I can still feel it melting in my mouth.

(...) February 23rd, 2039. This is probably my last letter to you, my son. A man from the third floor, who was a doctor last century, told me that I have pneumonia and with my physical conditions and without medicines, I

won't live long. I feel my strength leaving me and I want to talk to you, tell you what I feel as your father, before it's too late. I hope you will find my diary, because it's my legacy and it's yours. You might think that a mass serial number's diary is not important, but it is important, my son, because this diary is full of ideas that inflamed people during the twentieth century. And it's full of love for you, my sweet child. The NL took you from me when you were still a baby."

From "Ghosts from the Past" – The brass fireplace shovel hit her head violently, bewildering her as a stabbing pain made her close her eyes. She fell on her back, instinctively raising one hand to her forehead, panting and moaning. She turned on her right side, trying to grasp the door handle with her left hand in order to run away from her violent attacker. She felt numb, and another blow on the parietal lobe made her unconscious.

(...) Detective Alessandro Bulla felt lost, like in a blind alley. Every time that hoarse voice in his head would say: "Run, run, run!" he felt uncomfortable. Alessandro could not explain that, but those words made him strangely anxious. Who was the person calling him? What did he or she have to do with the murder of Rosanna De Robertis. Why did the voice urge him to run, to hurry up?

(...) That dream summoned up something belonging to Alessandro's past, but fear prevented him from focus-

ing that vague and tedious memory. What did his past have to do with the murder of Rosanna De Robertis? His instinct told him that there was an invisible connection between his life and that case, but he couldn't identify it.

(...) The smell of coffee woke him. Alessandro opened his eyes. The sunlight seeping in through the shutters was a positive sign. Detective Bulla knew his stomach ache would pass. He realised that he had to be brave to resolve the issues of his past, because the courage to look back can illuminate even the darkest corners of our lives.

From “Looking for the White Geranium” – Rodolfo and I have spent some beautiful days together. I remember every moment with him, his white and perfumed corolla, his warm and velvety petals, and his strong and thin stem. We would play all day long, and at night I would sleep in his corolla, cradled by the north wind. Then, I got carried away with euphoria and I started wandering from flower to flower, hoping to find somewhere else the same kind of love I felt for Rodolfo; but in vain. I went too far, and I can't go back to him anymore. I've been such a fool!

From “My Best Friend” – “Hello. It's Flavio. Is Stefano there?” he asked hurriedly.

“Hi, Flavio. Yes, he’s here. I’ll put him on the phone,” replied my mother gently.

“Hey, Flavio. What’s up?” I asked as I grabbed the phone.

“I haven’t seen you for a while. Are you going to come back to school?” asked Flavio in a whisper.

“You know, we have been banished from public schools. My dad spoke to the principal. Do you know what he said? He said that he had no problem with me, but the association is monitoring him, and he has a wife and three kids to take care of. He said that he can’t let a Jew attend his school, otherwise they’ll imprison him.”

“Coward!” exclaimed Flavio grudgingly.

“Now what? Have you heard the *Duce*?” I asked almost murmuring.

“They are going to kill us all!” complained Flavio anxiously. “What about you? You should run, hide. Go to Paris to your brother! Run, as long as you can.”

(...) As I ran toward the train station, I heard two gunshots. I stopped terrified and twisted round, trying to understand where they had come from. After a few moments, I started running again, my eyes filled with tears. I stumbled, but I got up immediately, with my hands scraped, and kept on running, trying to restrain the tears blurring my sight.

From “Marco and the Dolls” – Marco was lying motionless on the bed. Those treatments debilitated him. He could barely move a limb, provided that his brain could send the signal. That deep and grave buzz in his ears lasted for hours and even with his eyes closed those flashing lights astounded him. Every time that happened, he felt his will power vanish. He felt completely annihilated.

(...) The doctor stood up, walked around his desk and stopped by the window looking at the desolate courtyard. “If he is not recovering as fast as we expected, it’s because of you. It’s because you don’t follow the rules. Rules! Rules for a peaceful cohabitation, rules of common sense that your abnormal and twisted ego refuses to absorb.”

From “Like the Wind through the Sassafras Branches” – In winter, when it’s snowy, Stratford-on-Avon looks lovely. The tree branches are embellished with white lacework and the roofs are covered with pure white shiny cloth. Loreen Scott could spend all the day looking at the snowflakes laying down on the town alleys, on the fountain in front of her house and on the coaches on Brewery Street.

(...) “Would you lend me your dame for a waltz, Mr. Harris, before taking her to the hospital for multiple limb fractures?” asked Peter Winnicut from behind Loreen’s back.

“It seems that dancing is not my strength,” complained Kevin Harris pretending to be sad. “I think I’ll go drown my ambitions in a glass of scotch,” he said, taking his leave with a bow.

Loreen flushed, as it often happened when Peter showed up unexpectedly. She needed some fresh air, but she had left her fan on the table next to the sofa, and she could not just walk away to recover it; it would have been rude. “I’ll pretend that my face got red because of the waltz,” she thought, and she started dancing with Peter Winnicut, who was a much better dancer than her previous partner.

(...) Loreen was sadly looking at two mighty horses near the shores of a pond, when Kevin Harris’s voice reawakened her.

“Will I ever have a chance with you?” asked the young man suddenly.

“Pardon?” replied Loreen.

“Do you think you can accept to dance with me, after all the private lessons I diligently took with my cousin in Sussex, three times a week for six months?” asked Kevin embarrassed.

“Have you taken dance lessons?” asked Loreen astonished, opening her dark big eyes wide. Mr. Harris’s shyness made him look so sweet. His green eyes stood out on his slightly bearded face. “How could I not notice it so far?” she wondered.

“I would do much more for you, Miss Scott,” added Kevin, purple with embarrassment, as he swung funnily.

“Please, stop swinging that way. You look like a sassafras in the wind. Come on, Mr. Harris, take me to dance and get rid of this silly embarrassment,” urged Loreen joyfully.

From “Father for real” - Spring 1976 was sad and desolate. Alessio was hopeless, believing he would spend his entire life in that grey and cold orphanage. Even the bright colours and the vivid smells of spring seemed to be useless. He was an orphan, and things would never change. “You’ll see, one day you’ll have a mum and a dad too.”

(...) What’s your name?” asked Donato.

“Alessio,” he answered, lowering his hand. “Now they’ll go away,” he thought.

Surprisingly, the couple didn’t run away. Actually, they moved closer to him. Donato outstretched his hand. Alessio grasped it with excitement. “Daddy!” he exclaimed euphoric.

(...) Don’t worry, father,” said Alessio. “Don’t push yourself... I’m here now, and I’m not going anywhere. You need to rest. We still have a lot of things to do together. I have a lot of things to tell you. For people like us, after all the things we’ve been through, a stroke can-

not be a big deal, can it? Forgive me if I've not been around lately. I was so focused on myself that I forgot all the people I was leaving behind. But you...you have to keep on fighting, Father. As you used to tell me, if you fall you have to find a way to get up...please, get up for me, for us...but if it's too hard for you, if the pain is too much, I will understand. Fly away, run toward the light, father. Father for real!

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The short stories of this heterogeneous collection share the same central idea: how do humans react to difficult situations, to all the bad things that happen in the world? How do they approach love (*Looking for the White Geranium* and *Like the Wind through the Sassafras Branches*), how do they choose between their beloved ones and the social responsibilities (*The Sun, the Rain*), how do they act when the future is uncertain (*Roberto's Diary*), when they meet someone different (*Marco and the Dolls*), when people around us need our help (*My Best Friend* and *Father for Real*) and when they look at themselves in the mirror (*Ghosts from the Past*). Are they brave, mean, merciful or cruel? There cannot be only one answer to these questions. The aim of this collection is to describe different ways of reacting in critical situations and of choosing between what is best for ourselves - and the people we love - and a greater good.

Moreover, the short story entitled *Like the Wind through the Sassafras Branches* pays homage - maybe clumsily but candidly - to Jane Austen.

About the Author:

Massimiliano Ivagnes was born in Rome in 1970. After high school, he graduated in law and got his PhD in criminal law. He works as a lawyer, but has also published many articles. Writing is one of his biggest passions, and in 2017 he wrote his first novel "Palla al centro" (Albatros il Filo), which was awarded with the De Finibus Terrae International Poetry Prize in 2018.

In March 2018, he was one of the authors of the poetry collection "Ispirazioni 36" (Pagine srl) and his song "Abbassando, abbassando" was included in the book "CET Scuola Autori di Mogol - 2018 Alfa". His poem "Il canto della memoria" (Aletti ed.), whose video is on YouTube, was selected for the anthology "Alessandro Quasimodo legge i poeti contemporanei 2018". In June 2018, other poems (Pagine srl) written by Ivagnes were published in the series "Colori 70". A new poetry collection will be issued in 2019. The collection, called "Uomini, noi..." (Aletti ed.) deals with men and their world, and it was awarded third place in the Maria Cumani Quasimodo 2019 International Poetry Competition.

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