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The dance of the Gorilla

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PREVIEW EXCERPT

The Dance of the Gorilla

I was a punk before you, I was nastier than you.

I played heavy metal when you were shut away in pre-school

Enrico ruggEri, *Punk (before you)*

I

1.

In September 2019 I was living in Amsterdam, in a floating house on the canal a short distance from Hungarian Street in the red light district, where the Eastern European street girls worked. I would see them arrive in the evening and leave the following morning, or nip out to have a cigarette on the street corner with their sequined garments covered by a dressing gown. Some would end up marrying a client, others finished up brothels on the city outskirts or perhaps in Switzerland, where pussies sold more than cuckoo clocks.

My boat was the third in a row of ten, permanently moored to the embankment for sewage and electricity. It was ark-shaped and the colour of burnt earth. It had an outdoor area protected by glass panels that were very eighties looking, as was the black and silver interior. After my first few days below deck I had realised why the Dutch prefer renting to foreigners than floating about themselves, but the neighbourhood wasn’t bad. There was even a small, laidback coffee-shop, with an upholstered sofa and Abba music playing in the background. I needed it for my Partner. The one in my head.

When he screamed so loud as to make me feel queasy, I would walk the fifty meters that separated me from the weed dealer and smoke away until they flung me out with the garbage.

Toku called me on one of those nights, as I was watching the clouds drift past the moon sprawled out on the deck. His face on my cracked phone screen looked like LeBron James, apart from his marble-white left eye.

«What’s up?» I muttered. «You never call this late.»

«A friend of yours died, brò. Albero.»

I clambered onto my Emmanuelle-style wicker chair trying to conjure up some significant memory. I didn’t retrieve much. Albero was tall and edgy, with long arms and huge hands. Having him on your side when things came to blows was a guarantee, but he also liked dancing at parties and organising barbeques. «How did he die?» I asked.

«His son told me he fell down the stairs.»

«Mauro?» The last time I’d seen him he was two years old.

«He popped into the bar a short while ago and left me his number, if you want to call him.»

My stomach clenched. «I wouldn’t know what to say to him. When’s the funeral?»

«Tomorrow. Do you think you’ll go?»

«It’s not my thing. I’ll try and get there this evening to say my farewell before they close the box. Do you know if he’s at home? »

«I can call the kid and ask him.»

«Thanks. I’ll let you know what time I’m arriving.»

«My condolences, Gorilla.»

 I hung up and booked the 6:00 p.m. low cost flight. I didn’t believe in god, in UFOs or in premonitions, but at that moment I had the clear feeling that I was making a huge mistake.

2.

Milan appeared through the clouds with the flickering lights of the new skyscrapers and the dark green stretch of Forlanini park. I loved and hated that bitch of a city. I had missed it and it made me feel nauseous. My Partner squealed with excitement as we walked along the jet bridge at Linate, I pretended to read the advert for Cloud computing, ignoring the looming shadows and the whispering threats of the squeaking conveyor belts.

Toku was waiting for me outside with a Mini Cooper. He was wearing a dark suit, a pale blue shirt and a spotted tie. Natural elegance, hidden scars, dark glasses to conceal his blind eye. He lost it during his time with Black Axe, which in Nigeria is a cross between witchcraft and Narcos. He had been forcibly recruited at Benin University, but the day they sent him to Italy to set up a drug-dealing ring, he had defected with the cash. He had hidden away in Puglia working as a tomato picker until he found out that his former colleagues had all been arrested or killed. At that point he had brutally beaten up the corporal, moved to Rome and paid a junkie to marry him.

Three years later an overdose had left him widowed and an Italian citizen.

We hugged and I breathed the manly scent of his sandal aftershave.

«Do you want to go to your hotel first?» he asked.

«No hotel. Unless you got rid of the sofa bed from the back room.»

«Nobody would touch it. In that case I’ll take you straight to your friend’s.» He waited until I got into the car and then started the engine. «Did I ever meet him?»

«No. He’s from several lives ago. What did you want when you were twenty?»

« To become a dentist.»

«I wanted a revolution. Albero still did.»

«What made you change?»

The reasons had faded over the years so I gave him a standard version: «I started working for security agencies, my view of the world changed. I spent years feeling guilty for leaving the collective. Then that passed too».

«Thank goodness.»

I touched the scar on my forehead that concealed a titanium plate. «I was shot in the head. It’s a good cure for romanticism.

3.

The real cure had actually been intravenous drips of Risperidone, to which Sulpiride and Clozapine tablets had been slowly added. When I came round after the bullet had been removed from my skull, I had discovered what silence meant. It was just me in my head, a blinding emptiness. But that silence had also brought a sense of awareness. Ever since I was a child I had known I was ill, my mother had been very clear about what the problem was. But one thing is to know rationally that you have a personality disorder, another is to experience what a healthy mind means.

It hadn’t lasted long.

4.

While Toku drove, I looked out of the window at parts of the city I didn’t recognise. In exile I always read about Milan, the media were constantly spewing out glorifying bits of news. Foreign tourists had voted it number one, CityLife with it’s crooked towers, the Bosco Verticale that the Chinese wanted to copy from us, Hangar Bicocca with its Towers of Silence, the Fondazione Prada, the revamped Darsena with its street markets, microbreweries and gourmet sandwiches.

The money.

Everyone talked about money in Milan. Everybody wanted to get at least a whiff of it. It was the new cocaine. You could see dollar symbols in the eyes of young people returning from their master degrees, tattooed on the backside of influencers, etched on the number plates of sports cars parked in Brera.

My ex partner-in-crime had, instead, lived in the northern part of town which these days was referred to as NoLo, a long avenue that ran out of the city confines and was filled with neon signs of all-you-can eat Chinese restaurants, Arab fruit and veg stores and minimarkets. Albero’s building was a dignified fifties block on the edge of the new neighbourhood of converted loft apartments, it had stucco decorations on the cornices and mourning drapes on the main door. Toku dropped me off then went back to the bar with my wheelie case in his car boot. I sat on the wall of a small park to have a smoke, regretting my decision.

Albero was dead and he wouldn’t have given a damn about my presence, whereas it would make some of my old friends would feel queasy. I made my way upstairs feeling as tense as I did as a child when I went to my classmates’ birthday parties knowing I had only been invited because my mother had insisted.

The small apartment was on the third floor, it was dirty, dark and full of people talking or crying, or drinking red wine out of plastic cups. There were beer bellies and white beards, thick glasses, faded tattoos and, here and there, the odd kefiah with hints of old skinhead outfits. Few flowers, lots of red flags.

Nobody spat in my face, but most pretended not to see me. The few people who shook my hand updated me on lives that couldn’t toe the line and on others that ended up teaching emotional boxing or Kundalini.

Mauro had red hair that I didn’t remember and the body of a twenty year old with a beer belly. I went over to hug him, he led me to the ad-hoc viewing room, dazed by alcohol and grief. His father was laid out on an Ikea bed wearing jeans and a white shirt, without religious symbols but with an anarchist flag hanging behind him. There was little left of the giant who sent cops flying like toy dolls. He was gaunt and hollow, his limbs were long and fragile. His cranium was asymmetric despite the efforts of the undertakers.

«Well, well» said Alex behind me. He was an nasty midget, with a few extra centimeters on his waistline and a red tie under his sleeveless jumper. «We even have a Gorilla present at this sad occasion. When did you get here?»

«Half an hour ago.»

«Perfect timing, I have something to tell you.»

I sighed. «Have you got any weed?»

«*Dope*. Since when do you smoke joints?»

«Since I stopped with the medicines. Let’s go to the stairs.»

5.

In the seventies Alex was in the Student Movement. In the eighties he worked in a bank during the day and went around stealing at nighttime to pay for his heroine. In the nineties he got clean and joined my same antinuclear and anti-imperialist collective.

Now he worked in credit management and drove around in a second-hand Porsche with a legally registered gun in his belt. I didn’t like what he had become, but we had shared a lot during our political phase and even more after. There was a connection.

We sat on the stairs, in front of a half-open window that looked out onto the communal courtyard with rubbish bins and bicycles. Alex lit the joint and passed it to me.

«How are things?»

 «They were better yesterday.» I smoked, coughed, then smoked again. «Tell me before I fall asleep. I haven’t slept a fucking wink».

Alex took his joint back. «Things had been going pretty badly for Albero recently. He always got by doing odd jobs for friends and comrades, but the group had got much smaller. What with those who left and those who died... »

«I know.»

« Lidia left too. Did you know they’d got married?»

I nodded.

«She’s screwing around in Costa Rica now. She dumped him with Mauro, who left school and went off to Chiapas to volunteer with the Zapatistas. Now that he’s back he does deliveries for Moovenda, when he remembers to show up.»

«Our generation hasn’t been much good in terms of parenting...But why do I get the feeling you’re skirting the issue?»

«Ok. Albero asked me to help him out and I did.»

I jolted upright on the step and felt slightly dizzy. «Tell me you didn’t get make him do something stupid.»

«In theory it was a simple job… He just had to keep an eye on some empty warehouses in Sorate, in the suburbs. Things were fine for six or seven months.»

«Then things went wrong.»

He nodded. «Ten days ago somebody cut through the fencing and set fire to the warehouses. Albero was sleeping. He woke up when he felt his feet get hot but by then everything had burned down.»

I used my finger to cover a hole in the paper and took a lop-sided drag. «You couldn’t exactly expect top-notch surveillance from a dopehead like him.»

«You’ve no idea of the chaos. I managed to prevent him being sued by the owner, but the cops were on to him immediately. Mirko was defending him.»

Mirko Bastoni, a good lawyer and a good person. He’d stopped talking to me. «And how did Albero take it?»

«Really badly. He was scared of going back to prison and losing what little he had. When I heard he’d died I thought that perhaps…» He shrugged his shoulders.

I suddenly felt high and it took me a few seconds to understand. «You think he threw himself?»

Alex pointed to the stairwell. «He plummeted down like a stone, straight to the ground floor. Maybe he tripped, he was certainly drunk. But... »

But.

I put the stub out to play for time. «Do you feel guilty?»

«Wouldn’t you in my place?»

«Probably yes. But you’re less sentimental than I am.»

«I’m not that bad. He was one of us.»

Conrad’s Lord Jim came to mind, he too had been a romantic fool, «Do you want to be absolved? »

«No, I want to offer you a job.»

I sighed. «There we go. I was beginning to fall for your kind heart.»

«Listen and stop being a jerk. I know the owner of the warehouses because I’m managing her debt. And now she’s in trouble. The insurance company has already unleashed its guard dogs and it’s likely that we go to court before seeing any compensation. For the owner, it means bankruptcy.»

«Unless the culprit is found.» I’d worked for insurance companies, I knew how they reasoned.

«What’s it worth?»

«Ten percent of the premium. One hundred thousand euros. Half goes to you, and half to Mauro in the form of an education grant. I don’t want him to use the money to set up a methamphetamine lab. What do you say?»

«Fuck you.»

Alex turned red and his face filled with freckles. «Tell me what the fuck you don’t like.»

«I bet it was you who told Mauro to contact me.» Alex remained unfazed. «You used Albero as a way of getting me here, that’s the first thing. The second is that you’re pretending there’s nothing in it for you, and I don’t believe it.»

«I won’t earn a cent from it. I’m just trying to sort out a complicated situation and I thought I’d do you a favour by offering you some money.»

I grabbed hold of Alex’s face and pulled him towards me. «Show me.»

He wriggled free, baring his teeth. «What?»

«The mark of Cain you have on your forehead.»

«I’ve never killed anyone.»

«Keep using people like this and you soon will.»

I left thinking I’d walk but I was so shattered I got a taxi back to Toku’s bar. It was called The Border. The perfect place for a stateless person like me.

6.

The Border was in the western part of town, set between a neighbourhood of pensioners on minimum allowances and an area that had been revamped by the fashion world, and it tried to keep everyone happy: it wasn’t too extreme in its décor or in its music selection. But it offered enough weird cocktails to attract the well-dressed crowds.

When I got there it was full, and there were around twenty people outside waiting for a table, smoking electronic cigarettes that flickered in the dark.

Toku was at the door checking entries. He liked pretending to be a bouncer and not the owner. In his view clients felt more at ease and perhaps he was right. «How did it go?» he asked.

«Alex offered me a job before the corpse had even turned cold.»

«Will you take it?»

«Over my dead body.» I squeezed between two obese men at the overly bright bar counter and drowned myself in alcohol, pierced by phantom voices that came from the creaking of the ice machine. The laughter of a group of youngsters sounded like the start of a Bulgarian choir and I joined in, wailing, until Toku came to get me and helped me to the sofa bed in the back room.

I fell into a slumber…

… and immediately woke up, dropping like a dead weight onto a hard surface. I was outdoors, lying face up on cement with the sky above me lightened by dawn. I had the feeling I had plunged into a bad dream, I realised that my Partner, after three years of peace, had taken hold of my body to go on a jaunt.

II

1.

I had woken up in strange places ever since I was a young boy, so I didn’t succumb to panic. I was bare-chested, I had no socks or shoes, I was covered from head to toe in something that seemed to be tar and my tongue felt like cardboard from drinking. My trouser pockets were empty: no mobile phone, no documents, no money. I was in a disused parking lot in the middle of the country, and in the rising sun - I guessed that four hours must have passed since Toku put me to bed – I could make out the outline of a building in the distance.

It looked like the blackened skeleton of a whale, but when the shadows turned paler I realised it was in fact the remains of a burnt down industrial complex: three warehouses the size of airplane hangers with corrugated metal roofs collapsed onto themselves. I guessed they were the remains of the fire Alex had told me about. Therefore I was in Sorate, wherever that was, on the edge of the trendsetting giga-town.

I started walking towards the road and came across the car used by my Partner hidden behind branches. The driver’s window had been smashed and an ice pick was sticking out of the ignition wrapped in a web of electrical wires that undoubtedly had been taken from The Border. I sat in the driving seat and fiddled randomly to try and start the engine, but the battery was flat so there was nothing to do. I couldn’t use the car but couldn’t even dump it, because I had no idea what my Partner had got up to on his way there. Perhaps he had run over an old lady or robbed a Bingo hall, and my DNA and fingerprints were certainly all over the car.

I rummaged on the dashboard finding nothing but a box of matches and a mint sweet, which I ate while forcing the fuel cap open, slipping off my boxer shorts and ramming them as far as I could into the petrol tank with a stick. I had wrapped them around the matches, I lit the last one and walked away.

I was already on the edge of the highway when the car exploded. There was nothing choreographic about it: a muffled blast and a column of foetid smoke that rose upwards. I continued walking barefoot on the tarmac leaving the car behind me, I passed forage fields and derelict factories and headed towards a huge red sun. If a driver slowed down to look at me I would give them my containment cell glare until they sped up again. After twenty minutes my feet were bleeding, but I saw a closed petrol station with one of the very rare still functioning telephone boxes. I jumped over the guardrail and made a collect call. The handset reeked of wine.

Toku arrived half an hour later and found me huddled by the petrol pumps. He lowered his window.

«Hey, I’m not an Uber.»

«I’m thirsty!»

When I got in the car he handed me a bottle of water which I emptied in two gulps «What happened?»

«My Partner wasn’t tired.»

 Toku started the engine. «It’s not good for you to speak about yourself in third person.»

«Give me a break, it’s easier that way.»

«Easier but wrong.»

I got some wet wipes from the glove compartment and dabbed the wounds on my feet, while I told him the rest.

«The minute I come back to Milan the bastard crops up again... He really did wait for the right moment. And anyhow, what the fuck has he got against shoes?»

«Listen, you’re not possessed. You suffer from a personality disorder.»

«Jesus!» I burst out. «Do you want me to start with the pills again ?»

«No.»

«So give me a break. I know I’m mad. But I also know what isn’t good for me. It’s this city. It’s cursed.»

«Uuu. Bad Juju.» Toku laughed.

«Very funny…» I shook my head. «Anyhow I’m off in the morning.»

«And Alex’s job?»

«There is no Alex’s job.»

«So why did you go to Sorate?»

«My Partner went there. I have nothing to do with him.»

Toku gave me his killer smile. «Sure.»

«My Partner is not my subconscious, he’s the mental equivalent of a cancer.»

«You know you’re talking bullshit, right?»

We were on the ring road, near Linate airport. The first morning flights were taking off. Toku dropped me off at The Border and went back home to sleep.

I washed myself in the small bathroom that reeked of Lysol, removing with difficulty the black tar I was covered in, then I bought my ticket for the following morning and, as I had access to the computer that Toku used for accounting, I did a web search for information on Sorate. I discovered that those were not the first warehouses to burn that year in the Milan suburbs. There had already been twenty or so arson attacks, all of them in unused or abandoned industrial areas. Before burning, nearly all of them had been used as illegal dumping grounds, and the owners had been investigated for mafia association and for endangering public health.

With the money that circulated for Expo the ‘ndrangheta had firmly established its presence in Milan and used as dumping ground the hundreds of bankrupt businesses in the provinces where the owners were at their wits’ end. And Alex wanted to feed me to them? Had he thrown Albero into it? Had he become such a shit?

I went out to score some weed.

Among the scaffolding and tourists in Piazza Vetra I found a couple of Tunisians selling bad quality hash and I bought five grammes of it. Then I went back to the bar to smoke it, sprawled out on the sofa bed in the back room. At four in the afternoon the first waiters arrived to prepare for the evening trade, they pretended not to see me. All in all the staff comprised six young people from different parts of the world, including a couple of Italians. Toku had employed them all legally. He balanced his books by buying stolen liquor and had even used my cash savings to buy the bar, but he was adamant about his staff.

He arrived late afternoon and paid me a visit among the crates of drinks «You can smell it from the other side of the street. Do you want to get us closed down?»

I stubbed my joint out on the box I used as an ashtray. «Sorry.»

«Why don’t you go and see some friends instead of just wallowing here? »

«What friends?»

«*Jesus*. You’re so tragic.»

I dragged a chair into the yard so I could smoke outdoors, imagining my Partner slowly suffocating in my head.

When The Border filled with young people for happy hour I joined them in a shot-drinking competition, trying to understand their jargon that was littered with Italianised English terms such as “blastare” and “shippare”, which I only vaguely sensed the meaning of.

I resisted until closing time making a fool of myself in a variety of different ways then, stumbling, I packed my wheelie case and called a taxi to take me to Linate airport. I fell asleep the minute I closed the car door.

And woke up with dust in my mouth.

I was in Sorate again.

Shit.

2.

This time my Partner had dumped me inside the fencing, among the burnt ruins, at the end of a narrow path of rubble and sharp metal sheets. He had dug it out using a shovel found goodness knows where, until his hands were so worn that the handle was covered in blood. The path ended in front of a piece of junk that was as high as a fridge, around three meters long, and extremely heavy.

Hanging from the central, boiler-type barrel there were burnt out cables and two broken mechanical arms. Blood-stained hands had scraped off a crusty layer to reveal an old-fashioned circuit board.

This time I was dressed and found my phone in my pocket. I photographed the thing from every angle and went back to the car park taking care to not hurt myself on the iron spokes sticking out from the reinforced concrete.

The stolen vehicle was parked right just outside the entrance, it was a small car with a jerry can full of petrol on the back seat. There was a post-it stuck to it with a note in my Partner’s horrendous capital letter handwriting. All it said was: “To make things easier”*.*

3.

This time, after walking about a kilometer from the flames, I really did call an Uber knowing that in the state I was an ordinary taxi would have just left me stranded. I explained to the driver that I had had an accident, he covered the seat with a blanket so I wouldn’t get it dirty, then didn’t open his mouth again.

During the journey I tried to communicate telepathically with my Partner. *Do you intend to go on indefinitely with this story? Do you want us to end up dead? Do you know how much the tickets cost?*

With smoke coming out of my ears, I took a shower, threw away my ruined clothes and got some ironed ones from my case. Then I went into the main room to look for a bottle that didn’t look like it came from a supermarket. I found a half-full aged rum, slipped it into the pocket of my trench coat, and stepped out into the overly bright daylight. Blue transparent sky, mountains in the background, biting wind. I lit a cigarette to avoid getting too accustomed to my Partner’s nicotine abstinence, walked to the Rotonda della Besana and on to the block of offices next to it, then headed upstairs to the Pellaccia and Bastoni legal firm.

When Mirko saw me walk in, he made the expression of someone who has just sucked an unripe lemon. «What the fuck are you doing here?» he asked, standing behind his secretary.

I bypassed her and got the rum out of my pocket. «I bought you a small gift.»

«I don’t drink.»

«You can give it to someone else, I won’t mind.»

He slipped into his office. I followed him and used my foot to stop him from closing the glass door. «Do you really want me to camp out in your corridor until you decided to listen to me? »

«What if I call law enforcement?»

«You’d never do that.»

He let me in. It was a small room full of books, but through the window you could see the pinnacles of the Duomo in the distance. On the walls there was a map of medieval Milan, an A.C.F. Fiorentina pennant and an old framed manifesto of Soccorso Rosso, an association of lawyers that defended left-wing militants during the years of terrorism. At that time Mirko was still a young trainee lawyer. Later he would end up defending me too.

I sat down. «Do you still sit on the town council?»

«What do you care?»

«Just answer, don’t drag it out. It’s better for you too. The sooner we finish, the sooner I return to a civilised country.»

«And they’ll have you there?»

«Come on… are you on the town council or not?»

«Yes. Proudly part of the opposition.»

«And are you still assigned to the suburbs.»

«Yes.»

«What can you tell me about Sorate? Did the ’ndrangheta set fire to the warehouses?»

Mirko raised his eyebrows in surprise. «Isn’t that where the anarchist worked? The one who died?»

«Yes, it is.»

«I know nothing about the fire or the ongoing investigation, if that’s what you’re asking. But I would know if the mafia had been involved.»

«So you think it was just a kid who did it for fun?»

«I have no idea, I’m not a magistrate.»

«But you’re a politician and a lawyer, you’re familiar with that world. You can get your hands on the dossier.»

«Why should I?»

«I could pay you a fee. Less the cost of the bottle.»

He stretched out on a small armchair that emitted a squeak of springs. «I don’t want you as a client. Especially for illicit affairs.»

I gave him a doe-eyed look. «And as a mate?»

«Even less so.» He seemed struck by a sudden thought and I sensed contrasting feelings fighting in the folds of his forehead. «But I could offer an exchange.»

«Meaning?» I asked warily.

Mirko told me the story of the Cruciani family.

4.

Four members of the Cruciani family had lived in an apartment of less than twenty square meters in the Ticinese neighbourhood, just a few steps from the Naviglio Grande, but in a building that was still very much working class.

«They always paid in cash, until some genius from the tenants union convinced the head of the family to make a bank transfer in order to have proof and demand a proper contract.»

I opened the window and lit a cigarette «Yeah, sure.» I laughed.

 Mirko explained that when the owner had seen the transfer he had gone round with three friends to kick the family out and change the locks. During the eviction, grandma Cruciani had fallen down and broken her thigh.

«What do the cops say?» I asked.

«That they can’t do anything. The family doesn’t have a contract, there are no witnesses of the assault, and the owner’s cousin now lives in the apartment, with all the Crucianis’ belongings still in there. They are stationed permanently in their car in front of the building, for fear that their furniture might disappear.»

«And what do you want me to do…? Help them squat an empty flat?»

«I just want you to collect information about the property, and find something that can be used in court, otherwise the judge will send me packing.»

«You don’t want me as a client, but you want to be my client.»

«Consider it a barter.»

«It could take a lifetime.»

«Then the information you want will take a lifetime. Deal?»

What could I say to him? As soon as I left the office I called Alex. All this was his fault, he wasn’t going to get away with it easily.

5.

I thought of getting him to come to The Border, but I changed my mind. If chairs ended up flying, Toku would sulk at me. So I arranged to meet him at the Artists’ Bridge, the one that when I lived in Porta Genova separated my drinking from my sleeping. I lived on the other side of the railway in a traditional working-class building with a courtyard, but in the evenings I preferred to use the bridge to cross the tracks and seek out the view of the canals. It was covered in street art, sheets of paper with bad poetry, stickers and messages of love.

I would have been happy to see it again, but I found it boarded up with access prohibited. Alex was already there wearing suit and tie and sucking on an electronic cigarette. «Safety issues» he explained. «They closed it shortly after you left.»

«They’re rebuilding the entire city but they can’t fix this?»

 Alex pointed with his mouthpiece. «There’s a passageway over there now that is more aesthetically in tune with the current times.»

«Are you more in tune with the current times too?» I drew closer, encroaching the safety distance between us and I immediately saw him stiffen. I thought I could feel the tension run along his muscles. He was no longer a short man, but a small, dangerous animal.

«Do you have a problem?» he asked.

«Only if you’ve *hooked up* with the Calabrians. Have you?»

I noticed his right bicep flexing beneath his jacket, but his fist remained still. «No.»

*Kill the traitor.*

My Partner’s voice exploded with such violence that I backed off with a jump. «My Partner doesn’t believe you.»

«And you?»

«Yes, but I’d like to understand why you’re dragging me into a story that stinks of ’ndrangheta a mile away.»

«Because they have nothing to do with it.»

«How do you know?»

He sucked on his cigarette in silence. «If I didn’t know you I’d check you for microphones.»

 I showed him my phone from which I’d removed the battery.

«Carry on.»

«Yes, but let’s walk, it smells of piss here.»

We got as far as the Naviglio Grande. It hadn’t yet been gutted, but the historic cartoon store I used to go to had been turned into a brand new “antica trattoria”, with outdoor tables for smokers where we sat down, facing the Santa Maria church. It was nearly lunchtime, we ordered a gin and tonic and threw crisps at the ducks that were paddling in formation on the water.

«I deal with debt management» said Alex, «so that debtors pay what they can and creditors cash in. I create relationships and interests, I draw up credible plans. I’m not a lawyer, I’m a peace maker»

«And you go and collect, if they don’t pay?»

«Sometimes. But that isn’t Aurora’s case.»

«And Aurora is…»

«The owner of the warehouses. I had set up a nice little package that was very appealing to everybody. The banks financed, Aurora paid in instalments without bleeding herself dry and her creditors saw money coming in, slowly but surely. And you know why the operation was made possible?»

«Let me guess: thanks to you?»

«Because I guaranteed. And if I guaranteed, it means somebody guaranteed for me because they gain something from it.»

I crunched the ice. «Are you talking about payoffs?»

«Payoffs two point nought. You go through financial institutions you know, bank managers you know, consultants you know and everyone takes their slice. If you ask me if any of them is connected to a clan I will reply that I don’t know, but it makes no difference. Everything is connected.»

«Through money.»

«And money talks. If my proposal was approved, it means that none of the families had any ulterior interest in those warehouses. Otherwise somebody would have politely warned me to keep out of it.»

«Couldn’t it have been a run-in between clans?»

«In Milan?» he laughed. «You’re talking about the new Calabrian headquarters. The ’ndrangheta is embedded in everything: the new metro lines, the redevelopment of the Navigli area, the BreBeMi highway, the outer ring-road... And when you’re making so much money, you don’t make war, you make agreements.»

«Your same strategy.»

«Are you lecturing me?»

I shook my head. «I’m the last person who can lecture. But I don’t like this.»

«I know. You don’t live in the real world.»

I finished my second gin and tonic. «Are you armed?»

«No.»

«Good. I need to do Mirko a favour and I need a hand.»

6.

I told him the story and took him to the incriminated building nearby. The Cruciani family now resided in a Škoda parked alongside the pavement, with a canopy stretched out to the wall to create a kind of tent. The husband was at work so the only people in the car were his wife and their ten year old daughter. Their story was summed up on two handwritten placards with several spelling mistakes and covered in pigeon shit. The little girl went to the fountain to fill a thermos, I pretended to drinking there, in front of her. «Your turn. Tastes good. Do you live here?

«Yes… Well, I don’t know.»

«Yes or you don’t know?»

She pointed to a window on the fourth floor, then went back to filling her thermos. «That’s my room.»

I joined Alex and we waited for the main door to open, then went up to the fourth floor. The correct door had a wooden reinforcement nailed to its frame. Alex looked at it with disgust.

«Sure you can’t manage?»

«I get bored on my own.»

It wasn’t true, I was exceedingly excited. Despite my erratic sleeping I could feel a pit-bull in my stomach. My Partner smelt blood and was whispering sweet words to me. *Let me go,* he said. *Let me have fun*.

Alex straightened his tie. «As long as we get a move on» he said. He kicked the door open and woke a fat man in vest and pants who had been snoring on the thermos girl’s bed, surrounded by a pile of dirty stuff and plastic plates. He stretched his hand towards the steel rod that he kept on the floor beside him, Alex pounced on him with both feet, crushing his chest and taking his breath away. The guy moaned.

My Partner howled like wolf on heat. *Let me out. This is my world. You know it is*, he panted.

I ignored him.

Alex punched the fat man in the face until his pillow was soaked, then we dragged him down the stairs, dumped him on the pavement and went back up to the apartment.

On the way there I had bought a bolt and I screwed it to the door.

Alex went to get himself a beer from the kitchenette, then sat and watched me while I injured myself with the screwdriver.

«Is that it?»

«I doubt it.»

«Let me know if anything happens, I’m going to do some work.» He took another beer and slipped his earpiece on as he started talking to some subordinate of his about invoicing and tax deductions. I went over to the window to finish my packet of cigarettes. Two hours later I saw four guys get out of a van with the word “removals” on it. They were of mixed ethnicities and could have been stand-ins for The Rock if it hadn’t been for their clothes and their flab. «They’re on their way» I said.

«Armed?»

«Doesn’t look like it from here, but I can’t promise. One has an iron bar.»

«Ok. Me out, you in?»

«Perfect.»

*Let me go*.

The guys came upstairs, I sat and waited for them in the kitchenette, they would see me as soon as they opened the door. That’s what happened: two of them burst in while the others endured Alex’s iron rod in the back of their knees and collapsed on the landing howling.

The first two chased after me in the small apartment, knocking over everything like rhinoceroses. «Why don’t we talk this through civilly? » I asked, circling round the table.

The largest of them tried to grab me by the neck, then screamed as he tried to wrench the screwdriver out of his hand. I had rammed it in right up to the handle, nailing him to the Formica surface, without really knowing how. I didn’t even remember I still had it in my pocket.

Seeing his friends on the ground the last of them stopped in his tracks, undecided.

«Ok, let’s talk» he said.

I shook my head. «Too late, I’m afraid.»

Alex leaped over the pair sprawled out on the landing and rammed the man’s collarbone with his iron rod producing the noise of dry wood. The man collapsed, crying in pain. Alex cleaned his glasses with his tie. «Have we finished? Can I go?»

I indicated the door to him with a bow. «Please.»

«What about the other business?»

I wanted to tell him to forget it, but we had just experienced our umpteenth communion together and I couldn’t bring myself to. «Let me think, ok? I’ll call you tomorrow.»

«Why don’t you have a chat with Aurora, in the meantime?»

He managed to get a yes out of me, I knelt beside the guy who was crying. «Which of you is the owner?»

 He pointed to the guy I had nailed to the table. He had passed out and, in falling, the screwdriver had ripped his hand open lengthways. I bandaged it up with a towel then brought him round with a glass of vinegar. «I’d have preferred to use another way» I said as he spluttered. «But those like you are slow to understand.»

«You’ve fucked up my hand» he wheezed.

«Things could have been worse. Honest. Look at me.»

He did as he was told. He had small blank eyes, like a puppet.

«I know you’re thinking that you’ll come and get me with an army once you feel better. You’re younger than me, you’re bigger than me, you have some truly nasty friends. Sooner or later, you’re thinking, you’ll break my ass.»

 He lowered his gaze, I rammed his bandaged hand.

My Partner had an orgasm. The man screamed.

«Look at me. Look closely. Because I’m giving you the best bit of advice of your life. Forget it. You won’t manage. This is a hobby for you, but for me it’s a job.»

His expression changed, as if he sensed that something was ready to emerge from my body and crush his bones, something with which it was impossible to reason. «Ok.»

I smiled, my Partner grumbled with disappointment. I gave him Mirko’s card. «Sort things out then.»

7.

The landlord called saying he wanted to sign a formal contract and asked to be sent it immediately. The office secretary emailed it to him, we printed it at a tobacconist with a printing service, he signed it then I let him go to A&E. I headed back to the neighbourhood and gave a copy of the contract to Mrs Cruciani who took a while to realise I wasn’t taking the piss. I told her I was from the tenants union. «You’ll find the apartment in a bit of a mess, ma’am. But the bolt works.»

I walked away feeling lighter than I had for a long time. I had carried out a good deed, my Partner was dozing like a cat in my stomach, the sun was shining. I didn’t really believe I’d solved all the Crucianis’ problems – sooner or later the landlord would start behaving like an arsehole again - but I never claim that I had. If you’re a miserable wretch you have to learn to defend yourself alone, because nobody else gives a shit. It’s a tough world, dude.

 That feeling of wellbeing evaporated when I saw my satisfied gaze reflected in the window of one of the many French fries shops that had spread like mould pretty much everywhere. I wasn’t relaxed because I had done a good deed, but because I had hurt someone. My Partner needed to prove he was tough and unforgiving, unbeatable and inflexible, he loved seeing terror in the eyes of his victims. And because he was part of me, it said a lot about who I really was. I could put on the airs of being a great man, but I too was a by-product of that shitty city. Like the landlord, Alex, and everything else that had grown inside the confines of the Milan ring road.

I went back to The Border where Toku welcomed me in fits of laughter. «I thought it was odd that you’d forgotten your wheelie.

«Did my Partner bring it back?» I forgot I’d put it in my taxi to the airport. I went back to my cubicle to change my bloodstained shirt and as I was doing so Alex called: Aurora would meet me in a public place, that evening.

Toku had observed me from the door. He disappeared and reappeared with a gin and tonic. «You took the job. I don’t know whether to be happy you’re leaving your cubicle or worried that you’re going to be a permanent resident in the bar.»

«Firstly: it’s my bar too.»

«Minority shareholder.»

 « Ok, let’s say the back room is mine. Secondly: it isn’t true. I just want to understand why my Partner is so keen on it. It’s the only way of neutralising him. Like a Judo move.»

«You know when they say that the answer is inside you? Well, that.»

«Still on about the subconscious? My Partner just wants to break my balls and get into fights.»

*Like this morning.*

There was that futile voice tormenting me again. Frustration made me hit the wall just below the Miles Davis screen-print. Toku gave me strange look.

«Sorry. It’s just that sometimes he makes himself heard. At least I think it’s him. Sometimes I imagine things.»

« You also imagine your Partner.»

To avoid an argument I left the bar and got a taxi to the meeting point. It was in piazza Gae Aulenti, symbol of the renewal of Milan.

It had been built on the old Garibaldi station viaduct, and was encased by a circle of skyscrapers owned by banks and high-end shops. At nine in the evening they were all closed. There was one bar still open, where young Americans were drinking fluorescent-coloured cocktails while staring at the two Bosco Verticale tower blocks in the distance and letting out little gasps of wonder. The full moon provided a clear view of the lush green trees protruding through the façades and from the base of the roof, pruned by gardeners who lowered themselves from cranes at the crack of dawn.

Aurora del Giudice was wearing an overly heavy jacket for that evening and I guessed she was around forty, with the figure of someone who does spinning three times a week. She had a man’s porkpie hat that was too small for her balancing on her curls and a slim-sized cigarette in her hand. She smoked and flicked the ash near her feet, perhaps inhibited by the general cleanliness. I walked up to her.

«It’s you, isn’t it?» she said. She had the husky voice of a blues singer.

«Can you see anyone else round here who doesn’t look like a rapper?»

«You don’t exactly look like a detective.»

«Because I’m not one. Can I sit down?»

She shifted to make room for me. I slumped onto the marble wondering if I’d ever manage to get up again. I was exhausted.

«What did Alex tell you?»

«That you’re the right person to handle the arson attack. Do you want to?»

«It depends.»

She raised a thin eyebrow that turned into a tiny antenna. «Do you want me to persuade you?»

«I just want you to be honest.»

«I don’t even know who you are.» She got her out her phone.

«How do you spell your surname?»

I told her, she did a Google search. I’d hoped she wouldn’t. «Usually that brings up a photo of me looking dead, but I can assure you I’m not a zombie.»

She shook her head in disbelief as she scanned through the article. «They call you Gorilla?»

«It’s because I’m skinny.»

Aurora continued reading. «I think I’ve already heard about you.» She put her phone away. «Did you by any chance deal with stalkers?»

«I have done.»

«Do you remember a woman who risked being eaten alive by her husband’s dogs?»

I didn’t answer. I can be quite a gossip, but never with someone who could become my client. It gives a bad impression.

She took it as a yes, regardless. «In that case it might not be a complete waste of time.» She got up. «Buy me a drink and I’ll tell you what you want to know.»

8.

We moved to sit at one of the tables freed up by the Americans. The square was almost deserted, the Tesla storefront gleamed in front of us with a million-euro vehicle on display. While looking at the car Aurora ordered a White Lady, I went for a gin and tonic.

«I was thinking of buying one, you know?» she said.

«Very sustainable.»

Long story, short version… Husband and wife set up a small business selling spare car parts, business grows, husband becomes overenthusiastic and starts dreaming of becoming Tony Stark. He invests, loses everything and his last bit of money is blocked in three warehouses that he still needs to finish paying the construction company for. Aurora divorces him and struggles with debts. Some she pays, some she creates, until she finally gets her hands on the warehouses. She puts them up on the market hoping to sell them and settle her debts, but nobody’s interested. Then they burn down.

«That’s why I’m a suspect» she concludes. «But because it wasn’t me, sooner or later this shitty story will come to an end. I’m not even sure why I should pay you to prove it.» She took another cigarette, and offered me one. They tasted of nothing and kept on going out, but I’d finished mine. «Are you really sure you would handle the situation better than the police?» After my third “ma’am” she’d insisted we addressed each other informally. An infallible trick.

«Ninety-nine percent sure.»

«Aren’t you overrating yourself a bit? Or underrating them?»

She was goading me, but it was fun. «Do you believe that organised crime is responsible for setting fire to your warehouses?»

«Is that a trick question?»

«You’re too smart.»

She smiled briefly and her eyes shone. «No. I don’t.»

«So you’re already low on the list of priorities. Do you have any powerful friends in some institution or other? Even a priest will do.»

«No.»

«Money?»

«That’s where the problem lies, don’t you think?»

«Right. So now you’re not only off the list but you’ve become a nuisance to the system. An arson attack can be caused by freezing tramp or by a kid after some photos to post on Instagram. The magistrate has no interest in making an effort, nor does the police, they will limit themselves to keeping your utilities under check for a couple of years, then they’ll close the file and send you to trial regardless because the insurance appraiser will have produced a load of evidence that makes you a suspect.»

« You know your stuff» she grumbled.

«Unfortunately yes. At that point you’ll be broke, you won’t be able to afford one of those lawyers you see on TV and no magistrate will do it for the glory. The insurance company will hang on to your money until the Supreme Court hearing, which I doubt will take place before the ice age. Insurance companies have better lawyers than you, and for a million euros they’re prepared to spill blood.»

Aurora remained unflinching for a few moments. «Are you always such a bastard?» she asked.

«It’s part of the package.»

«I forgot that you’re a bounty killer.»

«An artist. I follow my inspiration. How did you come across Alex?»

«I know you’re friends. I can’t speak badly of him can I?»

«Honesty has a price.»

«It was him who contacted me about one of my husband’s creditors. He seems to know his business.»

«But?»

«Let’s say he charges a hefty fee.»

*Kill that traitor son of a bitch.*

The voice of my Partner momentarily deafened me, and I thought I heard it reverberate across the square all the way to the leafy windows of the Bosco Verticale.

She didn’t notice. «Isn’t it odd how you can sell money?» she asked.

«I think it’s the most widespread business in the world» I replied, still distracted by the echo. It seemed to never end, it turned into the whisper of the song coming out of the loudspeakers in the bar. The skyscrapers shone lights that only existed in my mind. I ordered a beer, to distract myself, and a cappuccino for her. «Do you have any enemies who are not your creditors?» I asked, struggling to make out my own voice.

«Wasn’t it supposed to have been a tramp?»

«The warehouses were not made of papier-mâché. For them to burn like that you need more than a camping gas.»

«They were full junk.»

«You’re not being investigated for illegal storage of waste. Not yet anyhow.»

She huffed. «Not *my* junk. They were left empty for five years, you’ve no idea what people throw away if they’re sure they’re not seen. Washing machines, fridges, gone off food...In the end I had to employ somebody to guard them. Not that he did a great job, poor guy.»

«And you didn’t consider clearing them out?»

«Do you know how much that costs?» Then she remained silent as a Zamboni cleaning vehicle, driven by a north African in a uniform, went past polishing the floor tiles beside us.

«Somebody even dumped vats of used oil there. I reported it to the local police and they fined me for failure to look after a property. And the vats remained there because I didn’t have the money to dispose of them.»

«Did you go and check occasionally?»

«Occasionally.»

I got my smartphone out and showed her the photo that I had taken of the thing that my Partner had freed from layers of soot. «Do you know who dumped this there?»

She looked. «It’s junk, I didn’t do a census.» She zoomed into the photo. «But...are you sure that was in our place? »

«In the warehouse that only had the façade still standing.»

«Did it have any symbol on it?»

«Not that I noticed.» I wondered if that’s what my Partner was looking for when he cleaned it up. «You know what it is, don’t you?»

She smiled with her lips covered in whipped cream «I’m not sure, but I broke my leg when I was a child and had to have dozens of x-rays. The machine they used was identical to this one.»

I finished my beer, Aurora got up to go to the bathroom and I ordered another one. The music playing now was soft jazz, I closed my eyes to hear it better.

I was woken by slaps and screaming in Chinese. I opened my eyes and stared at a dirty windscreen that seemed to belong to a lorry.

And I was driving it.

I instinctively braked and heard something very heavy roll about in the back. The lorry swerved towards the emergency lane, I prayed to the god of madmen and accelerated again to try and straighten it. Then, with the risk of overturning, I veered into a parking bay that magically appeared in front of me.

A lorry.

Jesus Christ. I had risked starring in the ethnic version of Thelma & Louise on the Milan ring road. There were two middle-aged Chinese men sitting beside me with the expression of someone who has just faced death.

«You said you knew how to drive!» the one closest to me screamed into my face.

He tried to slap me again, but this time I was expecting it and I blocked him. «I’m awake, thank you.»

«But you were sleeping before, idiot!» said the other. Then he repeated it in Chinese and topped it with insults, judging by his tone. I got out to check the back of the lorry and discovered that we were transporting something large, covered by a cloth. I peered through a fold and nearly passed out: it was the x-ray machine from the warehouse.

«Holy shit, it wasn’t enough for you to go and rummage in the trash? You also want to take it home?» I screamed, beside myself. «Give me one fucking reason! Just one!»

My Partner said nothing, but the Chinese men screamed at me in unison to get back in the lorry and stop pissing about.

I got in and tried to fasten a seatbelt that wouldn’t unroll. «Do you know where to take it?»

 The driver pointed to a post-it and started the engine making the truck shudder as if it were about to explode. The note had the address of The Border written on it in my Partner’s crappy handwriting. «I don’t think that’s a good idea.»

«It’s *your* idea» said the guy sitting next to me.

«And it’s too late to try and find somewhere else. But if you want we can just dump it somewhere in the countryside.»

If I had agreed, Albero’s ghost would have come out of his tomb to strangle me. «No. That’s fine, for now.»

With careful questions, that received blunt replies, I discovered that after falling asleep on my beer, like an deranged old codger, my Partner had gone round all the Chinese restaurants until he found someone willing to pick up an item of hazardous waste in the middle of the night in an area that had been closed off by the police. The reason for choosing the Chinese was down to my Partner’s weird logic. Perhaps he had read somewhere that they heroically resisted to torture, or perhaps he had decided to try one ethnic group at the time and find out who deserved to survive the nuclear holocaust. Oh, he had also already paid them, by maxing out my credit card.

At seven in the morning we reached The Border. A sedan was parked outside the front entrance. The man in the driving seat was as wide as he was tall. But it was the guy in the backseat who jolted me out of my slumber. «Come back in an hour» I said to the Chinese man at the steering wheel.

«No, I’m unloading this shit and I never want to see you again. You insane idiot.»

I pointed to the car. «Those are cops. And one of them is the worst kind of bastard you could ever come across.»

I knew him well. He was called Ferolli. He had been trying to get me into jail for the last twenty years.

III

1.

Seeing me approaching, Ferolli got out of the car with the help of his bodyguard. Over the years he had become gaunt and scrawny, but he compensated with haute couture clothing that gave him an elegant air. But a mere glance at the starving rat expression behind his dark glasses was enough to realise the kind of person he was.

He gave me a condescending smile. «Like all off-duty delinquents you went and opened a bar» he hissed. «I expected something more original. »

«This? It isn’t mine. It belongs to a friend who lets me have free drinks.»

«Your *friend* is on his way here to let us in. But if you have the keys, we can save time and go and sit down. I’m sorry for the inconvenience but this is the only address where I could hope to find you.»

I let them in, also because I was worried that the truck with the Chinese men might appear on the horizon. I lowered the shutters half way and went behind the counter to choose a large glass. «You used a strange tone when you said “friend”. Do you not like Toku because he’s black?»

«I don’t like him because he’s even more of a delinquent than you are.»

«But this is his place. Would you like me to kick you out with your hypertrophic coachman?» The driver stiffened and came towards me. He was so bloated that a button popped of his shirt.

«Don’t make a fool of yourself» I said to him.

«Who are you calling a fool?»

«Watch it, I’m not some handcuffed junkie.» My Partner’s hair stood on end and I felt the muscles stiffen along my spine.

Ferolli emitted a wet, sloppy whistle: «Palamara, go and keep an eye on the car. So we don’t get a fine».

Palamara turned bright red. «Yes, Sir» he grumbled and walked out stiffly.

I poured myself a Vodka with ice. I raised the bottle.

«Would you like one?»

Ferolli scrunched up his forehead, giving it the texture of a crocodile. «When did you learn about courtesy?»

«When I learnt to drink. Yes or no?»

«Just a drop. It’s early. Straight.»

I took him his glass. «Now that we’re alone can you tell me what you want?»

«To save you some hassle. You and your… business.»

«It isn’t my business. Let me say it again, I’m just a guest.» I sat down in front of him. «It’s been ages since you last broke my balls. What’s changed?»

«*Milan* has changed. Perhaps from your boat in Amsterdam you hadn’t noticed, but it’s become less tolerant of people like you.»

He was trying to tell me that he knew where I lived. How sweet. I emptied my glass then went to refill it. «Perhaps because there are too many people like you. But I’m here on holiday. It doesn’t affect me.»

«Are you sure you’re on holiday?»

«I’m sure. Do you have differing information?»

Ferolli said nothing. He emptied his glass and placed it back down exactly over the watermark. «That’s sorted, then» he said, buttoning up his coat. «I’m glad you’ve wizened up, with age.» He walked out and joined his driver.

I picked up his glass and smashed it into the trashcan. It didn’t make me feel better.

2.

Toku arrived an hour later. He still had a sleepy air and was wearing a linen suit. He found me sprawled on one of the couches staring at the ceiling, hoping it would come crashing down on me. «You took your time» I said.

«I don’t hurry for the police.» He had been woken up by a local police squad who refused to tell him what was going on. «Not that I had any doubts that you were involved. What happened?»

«Ferolli came to wish me a pleasant journey.»

There was a knock on the shutter, then the older Chinese man peered beneath it. «Here’s the idiot!» he screamed. «Now, idiot, get your stuff or I’ll dump it in front of the window.»

«What stuff?» Toku asked me.

«Nothing. A piece of junk» I replied, whistling.

«A piece of junk…» Toku went out to check. Two other Chinese men were leaning against the bonnet and smoking. They glared at me.

Toku lifted the cloth. «It’s an x-ray machine» he said immediately.

«Good eye.»

«It’s like the one we had in the Dentistry department. You’re not thinking of brining it in here, are you? It’s hazardous waste.»

The middle Chinese man grabbed me by the collar. «Is it radioactive? Have you given me *bái xuè bìng*?»

I wriggled free. «I don’t know what *bái xuè bing* is, but the machine is not radioactive. Stop breaking my balls.» I looked at Toku.

«I’ll find someone who can dispose of it, ok? But let’s get it off the street.»

Toku stopped protesting and had it brought in through the back door and place next to my sofa bed, covering everything with a layer of soot and dust. I removed the filthy sheets and sat down to admire the pile of metal. «So tell me. Did you find it by chance? Did you go looking for it?

My Partner continued snoozing in his neurone without replying.

«We could pretend it’s a piece of art and put it in the front. Somebody might buy it» suggested Toku as he sat down beside me. «Seriously, what do you need it for?»

«I don’t need it for anything. If only I knew why it’s so important to my Partner…»

«Can’t you remember anything even if you force yourself?»

«I never know if they’re real memories or just my fantasies.» I lit myself a cigarette. «Did you really use a machine like that one at university?»

«It was more a case of seeing it being used. I only sat two exams before being recruited by the Axes.» He got up to look at it closely. «I’d say it’s pretty dated, from the seventies. But somebody’s fixed it.» He pointed to a burnt globule with a few pieces of copper still intact.

«That was the power supply cord. And it’s of the kind that’s used today.»

«How do you know?»

«I lived in the Gran Ghetto for two years. I learnt the basics.» Toku kicked a partially melted flap. It fell off and he picked it up. «The serial number is here. You can still read part of it, but not the year.» He smelled it. «It stinks of rotten, though.»

« It just smells of burnt, to me.»

«You smoke two packets a day, it’s a miracle you can breathe at all.» He kicked it again, this time lifting a metal sheet that covered the entire left hand side of the wreckage. Toku went to get some protective gloves and handed me a pair. We pulled together and the metal sheet came off like sticky tape, revealing other clumps of plastic and rusty cogs. At that point I too caught a whiff of rotten. «Dead rat?»

Toku inserted his hand into the body of the wreckage and pushed it downwards. «Roasted rat, I’d say. He threw what looked like a lump of charcoal onto a newspaper, then another piece and another. As they landed, the pieces of charcoal crumbled revealing little rat-shaped corpses baked to the point of acquiring the consistency of leather. The largest of them broke in two as it landed, cracking like a piece of earthenware and exposing something red and shiny inside what had been the animal’s stomach. Breathing through my mouth I prodded it with a pen. The red thing was a piece of buckled plastic, but I could tell it must have been oval-shaped originally, the size of a guitar pick.

I held it delicately and detached it from the rat’s stomach. It came off together with a stick that was divided into segments. As soon as I straightened it I realised I was looking at the phalanxes of a human finger: I was holding it by its fake nail.

3.

I stepped out for a breath of air. When I went back indoors Toku was tying the finger into a rubbish bag.

«Are you throwing it in the compost?» I asked.

«The wreckage is yours, and so is the finger» he said, holding it out to me. « Get rid of it. I’m Nigerian. It wouldn’t do me any good to be found with a piece of dead body.»

I put the gloves back on and slipped it into the pocket of my trench coat, making sure not to feel its consistency through the bag. «Yessir.»

«Don’t piss around» he growled, spitting fire from his dead eye.

I left the bar to search for a secluded gutter, but as I walked away from the neighbourhood, the finger seemed to get heavier and heavier. Ok, I would be getting the first flight out and forget all this, but did I really have to get rid of what was perhaps the only piece of evidence of a murder?

I leant against the wall of the central fruit and veg wholesale market consisting of four, low, brick and cement buildings surrounded by walls and gates. It was Saturday morning, the only time it opened to the public, and lines of Africans and Pakistanis were filing out with flowers to sell in bars and cafés. In front of the market, which covered an area the size of two football stadiums, there was a small park that was used during the day by lorry drivers to piss in and at night by swinging couples. Had I dumped my paltry remains there, they would have been covered by excrement and condoms before the following morning and eaten by stray dogs and crows.

I couldn’t do it. I wasn’t interested in a murderer being punished, not in abstract terms, but it did seem horrific to me that somebody could disappear from the face of the earth without leaving any trace. It was a ridiculous and dangerous qualm of mine that surfaced in the worst possible moment, like getting an erection during a funeral. And I felt a similar kind of forbidden pleasure.

I had to find someone to palm it off to.

4.

Mirko came out of the courthouse, together with a small crowd of robes, uniforms and losers. It was cold, the sky had suddenly clouded over and my trench coat flapped behind me in the strong wind that was bringing rain.

He noticed me, quickly unlocked his scooter from a lamppost and jumped on it. I positioned myself in front of him.

«I’ll run you over» he screamed from beneath his helmet. «Mrs Cruciani passed out when she saw her flat full of blood. What the fuck did you get up to? »

«Legitimate defence. I have a witness.»

«Who?»

«Alex.»

«Alex? That hypocrite?» He tried to accelerate but I blocked his handlebar.

«He didn’t even want to be paid for it. I solved a problem for you, now you need to solve one for me.»

Mirko cursed into his helmet. «Listen. I spoke to the deputy public prosecutor. There’s nothing big on Sorate. You can relax and leave me alone.»

«Absolutely sure?»

He took off his helmet and threatened me with it. «Get out of my way or I won’t account for my actions.»

I got the bag out of my pocket and dangled it under his nose. «Explain this to me then, seeing that nothing serious happened in Sorate.»

«This what?»

I opened the bag. It smelled of roast meat that had gone bad.

Mirko turned green and heaved. «Is that what I think it is?»

«I’m afraid so. I found it inside a rat that died in the fire. Don’t ask me what made me look there.» He leant on his scooter trying to contain his nausea. «Jesus, what a find... You must hand it in to the police.»

«Ferolli came to see me this morning and he made it quite clear that it would be best if I minded my own business. If it was him who had roasted himself a corpse, he’d probably get rid of the finger by inserting it into an orifice of mine.»

I expected Mirko to carry on insulting me like a drunken carny, instead that name had frozen him. «Ferolli?»

«Are you going senile?»

«I know exactly who he is! But he’s not a policeman any longer.»

«Judging by his behaviour, somebody needs to explain that to him.»

«He’s far more powerful than when he worked for the State.»

«So who pays him, now?»

Mirko made a circular gesture with his hand. «This city.»

5.

We left our mobiles and the finger in the scooter’s top box and walked towards Piazza San Babila. The streets were filling with office workers and sales assistants on their way to find their lunchtime salad. They moved about in flocks. Neither of us, however, was hungry after having smelled dead meat.

Mirko told me how Ferolli had retired three years earlier from his role as Prefect and then reappeared a few months later as consultant for Risorgimento, the developers responsible for gutting the entire Santa Rita neighbourhood in the south west of the city in order to turn it into the next high-income area. A million and a half square meters, two billion euros estimated building costs, three skyscrapers, a shopping centre, green areas, hundreds of new apartments. Oodles of cash, but never enough.

Risorgimento had gone bankrupt twice, and the previous owner had been investigated for speculation and illegal waste disposal. Following the change in management at Risorgimento, Ferolli had been hired as ombudsman, that is as guarantor of the lawfulness of the work carried out by the new management, and in a very short frame of time he had become one of the supervisors of the most important operations carried out by the holding. Together with the banks that effectively now owned Risorgimento, he had overseen the acquisition of new foreign funding and had severed relations with the previous investors, justifying it as a transparency operation.

«You know for certain that Ferolli is bent? I hate to have to ask, but there are even nazis who hate the mafia.»

«If you mean colluded in the old sense of the word, then no. He doesn’t take bribes for authorising non-compliant building sites. At least I don’t think so. He’s in the higher chambers, where favours are exchanged between people with unblemished criminal records. And, for better or for worse, they are the ones who decide the destiny of this city.»

It started to rain, which was lucky because Mirko was beginning to flare up. It was one of those quick and violent storms that forced us to seek shelter under the porticos in Corso Vittorio Emanuele, jostling among tourists and hawkers who had had the same idea. Mirko shook his sleeves onto a beggar’s dog, then apologised and gave him five euros.

He squeezed my arm in an instinctive display of affection, then immediately withdrew his hand as if he’d burnt himself. «So what do you intend to do with the finger?

«Me? Nothing. Perhaps it belongs to Ferolli’s missing lover and you’ll be able to frame him.»

«Even if it were Hoffa’s finger it wouldn’t have any legal value coming from you.»

«Most probably it belongs to some poor wretch who was sleeping in the wrong place. But at least her relatives will know what happened to her. If you don’t manage to find anything out, nobody will blame you.»

«Oh, so now it’s my responsibility?

Before I got a chance to reply, I felt the hairs on my arm stand up. We had turned the corner of the department stores into the short cobbled street that led to La Scala. The rain had dwindled but we were walking close to the wall, taking care to avoid the water gushing from old drainpipes. In the distance you could see the rear end of the last taxi in line at the small taxi rank, a waiter was smoking outside one of the many tourist-trap restaurants, a handful of passers-by were walking away from us and a couple were walking towards us. One of the two had a beret pulled over his forehead and was walking along staring at his feet.

*Him.*

I had already seen the man with the beret. Just a short while before, as Mirko and I ran for shelter under the porticos. He had stirred my Partner’s paranoia, making it travel up my spine and I was now shaking with tension.

Mirko had jumped over a puddle that I had preferred to circumvent and he was a couple of steps ahead of me. «Mir- ko…» I started saying as I ran towards him, but the man with the beret had already extracted an automatic gun from beneath his jacket and fired the first shot.

The bullet struck Mirko in his hip and came out the other side, then I heard the other bullets bounce off the cement, or at least that’s what I thought in the din of gunshots echoing against the historical buildings. Mirko was struck by another bullet, this time in his leg because I had already lunged at him and pushed him against the restaurant’s automatic door that crashed down with us. We shattered the glass, rolled over a table with a wicker wine bottle on it, breaking that too, then ended up on the floor.

The man with the beret peered through the broken window and fired a series of shots while I slithered across the floor dragging Mirko between the upturned tables and chairs. More broken glass, more shards. The waiters screamed, cowering behind the counter, I grabbed something and hurled it randomly. It was a sliver candleholder that served as a centrepiece and didn’t land anywhere near the man. He had already fled.

*Catch him.*

My Partner was shrieking, making a sound a bit like chalk on a blackboard. Everything was in black and white.

*Catch him. Catch him. Catch him.*

«Shut up, for fuck’s sake » I screamed. I bent over Mirko. He was still alive and, unbelievably, conscious, as a pool of blood formed beneath him. I grabbed a handful of napkins and pressed them against the wound on his stomach.

He cried out in pain.

«Don’t worry. You won’t die, you won’t die» I reassured him.

He tired to focus on me.

«It’s only blood, nothing yucky. It didn’t pierce your stomach, a kidney at most. Nothing serious. I’ve been there. Promise.»

Mirko became distressed, then held out the keys to his scooter. They were dripping with blood. «The finger» he whispered. «Doctor Ayako.»

«Mirko…»

«Fucking go» he whispered, then gagged on a mouthful of blood.

*Go.*

I went.