

MARTA BARONE

CITTÀ SOMMERSA

ROMANZO
BOMPIANI





MARTA BARONE
SUNKEN CITY

translated from the Italian
by Julia MacGibbon

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SUNKEN CITY

This story has two beginnings. At least two, because, as with everything in life, it is always hard to establish what begins and when, what whirl of fortuitous circumstances lies behind a seemingly unpredictable episode, or which face turned to look at another at some point in the past, setting in train the random chain of events and of beings that led to our existence. First of all – this I can say with some certainty – I was born. It was March and it was snowing, and the year was 1987. My parents had met just two years previously and would separate for good three years later.

I was born to a woman with a hole in her head. My mother had been in a road accident, thirteen years earlier. After my birth, I spent a week under observation because I was in withdrawal from the anti-epileptic drugs she was still forced to take. Of the accident, the coma and the operations, there remained only a slight hollow at the spot where part of her skull was missing – replaced by a piece of metal mesh which, over time, had been masked by her fine, feather-light hair. She always lies on her other side to sleep, because the section of head she doesn't have continues to ache.

It could be said that, for good or for ill, I sprung from that hole. My very existence depends on that wound, that open door onto the cliff edge of possibilities. When my mother, at the age of twenty, fell off a motorbike being driven by someone else, she was accompanying him to pick up the documents that would have allowed them to marry. That's not the way things turned out. At that point, the trajectory taken by my future mother, by the elfin-faced young woman in the photos from back then, by her body as it flew across the tarmac of a B-road, took a new and irreversible course, from which my own trajectory would subsequently emerge.

The second beginning of the story – even if, at the time, I had no idea that it was – coincides with the autumn of the year I turned twenty-six, when I left the house and the city in which I had spent my entire life, and went to live in Milan. I lived in a studio flat on the third floor of a 1920s apartment block. It had a wooden floor and a white kitchenette in one corner and was flooded with light right through to evening – something I would later find oppressive, but not back then. It was the first place I ever had entirely to myself and I loved it as though it were human.

I spent my weekdays alone. I went out early every morning and wandered around the city going nowhere in particular. It was early September and, after a cool wet summer, a belated wave of heat surged through the still half-empty streets. Just around the corner from the road where I lived, in a street rather ethereally named after Fra Angelico, from one of the top-floor balconies one could, in the humming stillness, sometimes hear a canary sing, and from the bubbling rill of his song – that unmistakable song that sounds something like 'blublu-blublublu' and ends on a long flute-like top note – I still knew enough to tell that the bird was a Malinois waterslager (and for an instant the tender gloom of the aviary where, when I was a little girl, my uncle

and I had checked the nests, spilled out across the pavement, together with the aviary's deep green smell). In that motionless air, the deserted buildings of the neighbouring science faculties gave the impression of having been abandoned many centuries ago. I walked for whole days at a time, down random streets, only very occasionally pulling out my phone to check where I was on the map. The city was entirely unfamiliar to me, and I to her, and this was, in its own way, comforting.

Sometimes an abrupt gust of wind roused the air, and patches of cloud-shade scudded across the facades, momentarily isolating a detail in a pool of light: a wrought-iron balcony; a roaring mouth crowning the mullion of a top-floor window. The colour of the facades shifted, quivered and then recomposed itself. I sat down to read on a bench in the shade. In the park at Porta Venezia a young woman held a cotton-bonneted baby to her chest, facing a tree. Its feet dangling, the baby examined the trunk with interest, his open palms pressed to the bark. She smiled almost imperceptibly, one eyebrow arched, as though she knew a secret. Whenever I happened to take the metro home, after an evening out, my journey took me down a street where the grand arched windows of the Institute of Chemistry cast amber light into the gloom behind the dense, dark fronds of the elm trees. Once, in a back street behind Piazzale Loreto, I walked past a laundromat where there were three young sailors who looked like they were Slavs. We stared at one another through the window with identical expressions of surprise, as though my presence there were every bit as improbable as their own. Russian sailors in a Milanese laundromat! I shrugged – as convention dictates in such cases – and resumed my walk.

As had rarely been the case before then, entire days could go past without me speaking to anyone at all. Immersed in that prolonged and total speechlessness, the things I saw gained a strange clarity, like noises in the night which, amid the silence, always seem more dis-

tinct. But the images remained scattered and disconnected and apparently devoid of any significance apart from the passing interest they provoked as, one by one, they caught my eye. In that brief flicker of curiosity, some insignificant portion of my brain perhaps sensed that in some small way they originated within me; but that perception of a perception was so pallid, so slight, that it immediately dissolved, and the images were left floating against a hazy backdrop, growing increasingly anaemic. It didn't occur to me that there might be any link between me and those things, or to wonder what that connection might be.

Truth be told, everything seemed rather irrelevant to me. I had a bit of money because I had, indirectly, received a small inheritance which, together with my meagre and sporadic income, was enough to live on for a few months without a regular salary while waiting for the situation to improve. And it had to improve. It couldn't not. The financial crisis was an abstract entity, obscure and certainly irritating but not something that could *truly* affect my life in the long run. I just had to wait. So I waited. By profession I read French and English manuscripts for the foreign fiction department of a large publishing house. My job was to assess their suitability for the Italian market. It was a restful job, and by then I, too, felt tranquil.

The solitude was new to me – like a perfectly empty cathedral in which every stride produced an inordinate echo. You had to move with care and avoid paying too much attention to all those echoes, to the amplification of every muffled whisper. It was interesting, but tiring. At weekends, of course, my boyfriend N., who lived in a city nearby, used to join me. I had friends in the city, and met up with them regularly. But the huge sudden void that opened out on weekdays was hard. One lunchtime I began weeping for no particular reason while eating cherry tomatoes out of their plastic box. As the tears

fell, I glanced at it distractedly and only then noticed that the label read Tomatoes For Aficionados. 'God, what philistines,' I thought, and the mental picture of me privately weeping as I ate tomatoes for aficionados was so silly that it calmed me down.

I wasn't writing. For years, by that point, I had been fixated with the same idea, which never amounted to more than a series of intentions, a vision of a series of sentiments. I knew what I wanted to talk about, but the how still escaped me. So I left the imagined novel – the shape of which seemed to be forever mutating – to roam, floating around my head with its exhaustingly fuzzy outline, a blue fog in which I occasionally ensnared a 'nice sentence' which sat there, isolated and useless. Sometimes the blond spectre of M., my absent protagonist (who had already undergone several changes of identity, but whose primary narrative function was essentially to be dead) emerged from the mist, but I could never make out anything more than details: the downy golden hair on the back of her neck, her long feet, her slightly curved shoulders. I longed for her to become a coherent creature, but I never succeeded in pinning her down in her entirety. I had an unwavering and infantile faith in the fact that, sooner or later, it would happen. I just had to wait. In this case too, I just had to continue to think.

Approximately three weeks after I moved there, my mother came to visit. I showed her around the neighbourhood: we stopped in front of some words that someone had written on a wall near my house, under a white-framed window – 'OUT OF PLACE EVERYWHERE' –, and we pondered the irony of fate. It was a day that still felt summery, shimmering with light. Behind the gates of the apartment blocks' courtyards, the palms and eucalypti rustled, incongruous and enchanting, as though they had emerged from somebody's dream. My mother advanced like a slow, placid ship, benevolently observing the city and noting the details I pointed out. I remember absolutely noth-

ing of what we said to each other that day, but that's immaterial: we continued a happy and uninterrupted conversation that has been going on forever.

At one point we entered a second-hand bookshop and I went down to the basement floor. She stayed on the ground floor to look at the shelf of books about World War I (she had developed a mild obsession with the period since she had retired, and she devoted herself to the historical archive at the primary school she had taught at for the last eighteen years of her career). When I came back up and re-emerged from the metal staircase that surfaced in the middle of the shop, she turned to me, smiling and flushed, and then something happened, something very sudden that lasted precisely as long as took me to put my foot on the topmost tread: for an instant, her face seemed distant and significant. As though I were already looking back at it. As though, for the length of that instant, the present, the past and a postulated future were superimposed. As though it were already a memory – one of those things to which we attribute no importance the moment they happen and which we look back on much later as a presage of something we will never truly understand: for an instant, my mother appeared to me in time. Then I reached the top of the staircase, she asked me, 'Have you found anything?', and that strange confusion ruptured – it would come back to me later that evening, when she had already left for home. But it remained inexplicable all the same.

Who was I? It was something I never asked myself. Firstly, like anyone who possesses a modicum of sanity, I was thoroughly sick of my own company. And secondly because I never felt the need. I thought of the years behind me as a sort of long single day, in the even white light of which my entire life up to that point seemed to have happened just hours earlier and to be perfectly plain to see. Because of my age,

of course. After all, I hadn't actually been alive all that long. But also for another reason: ever since I had been capable of remembering, I had remembered a very great deal. And with very precise outlines. But more than that: confusedly but recognisably, I had the impression of there being a perfect continuity between the sense I had had of myself at eight, or twelve, or twenty, and how I felt now. Nearly everything I had ever seen happen or had felt, even many years earlier, even certain bizarre and unconfessable childhood emotions, was as clear and present as the yellow ceramic bowl in which I kept the fruit, as the cricket that had survived the end of the summer and continued its lonely chirruping near my window, or as the gurgling of the neighbours' newborn baby on the other side of the wall. I had no need to recall it. The past was a uniform expanse.

The young man runs through the night. He runs across the city, runs through the endless city. Tomorrow he will turn twenty-eight, and he is wearing pyjamas and he is shoeless and he is covered in blood not his own. It is the night before Christmas. The city sleeps on in the rain, unknowing and oblivious, its shutters lowered and its windows closed. It is, all of it, impossible.

'I think he got my aorta. I'm dying,' he had said. 'Get help'.

The young man runs.

The earlier masks have fallen; new masks will come. For now, time and the man are suspended. Everything he was, before tonight, disintegrating. He is stripped bare, frighteningly free, with a wild freedom, reckless and unrequested. He is frighteningly innocent. Blood, blood, blood. The only authentic *thing* shining into the night is the blood.

Perhaps his feet will be wounded, running like this, without shoes, without socks, on the asphalt. Running. His face tonight is invisible. His entire body a mechanical action pressing on towards where, towards what. How long the city lasts. The same streets as always, the streets of the living day, now unreal and unseeable and unfamiliar. Not one bar is open: he has no idea what to do. He is innocent. He's scared. He knows nothing yet. He already knows it all. Forever.

The young man runs through the city of stone.

Two years before I moved to Milan, my father had died. It was 14th June, 2011. So, at the moment of writing, just over six years ago. He had liver cancer, which had, in a matter of months, inevitably, statistically, reached his lungs. As he shrunk and grew ashen, he told me he had an infection, in his lungs, a stupid infection that he'd picked up because he was still too weak from the illness he'd now got over. As he spoke, he used the technical jargon that was familiar to both of us for different reasons. I nodded, from the sofa in front of him. Did he know what I knew? Probably, yes. And anyway, he couldn't hide his terror. But by unspoken agreement we carried on like this right to the end.

When I had entered the room in the hospital he'd been taken to, with lung failure, two days earlier and where, an hour or so later, his heart would eventually give out, he was lying in his gown, his mouth open, as though he'd fallen asleep in an embarrassing position, and on his eyes there were two pads of gauze soaked in the liquid they use to

keep the eyeballs detached. His wife explained – or perhaps she had already told me before I came in, I don't remember – that he wanted, if nothing else, to donate his eyes – perhaps the only usable organs in a cadaver devastated by the disease. Inside the room there were other people, and they were crying in various corners. Then and there no one came over to greet me: apparently this wasn't my loss to grieve. I couldn't bring myself to look at the familiar body with the monstrous pieces of gauze on its eyes. I hovered around, keeping my back to the bed.

Outside, the air was oppressive. Muggy. The clouds were massing above the city in the gloom of an oncoming summer storm. It was my mother, coming back in from the hospital, having only just gone there by bike, who half an hour later told me, astonished: 'He's dead.'

The eerie mugginess continued throughout the long senseless days of the wake, a full three days for some unexplained reason. And towards the end I watched with horror as my father's lips began to curl gently away from his teeth, decomposition beginning. He was small, almost sweet, beneath the extraordinary veil, with the crucifix that the funeral directors had placed on the coffin and which no one, it seemed, had disputed. A crucifix! On his face! Which, effectively, not even I had disputed. I was speechless, as though detached from this thing which was happening somewhere outside me. His long eyelashes, my long eyelashes, cast a shadow over his emaciated face. He wasn't unrecognisable. No, that wasn't the case at all. He didn't look waxy. He was himself, with no eyes beneath his lids now, but I wasn't disturbed by the idea. I sat there, on one of those plastic chairs they line up for these vigils, my head leaning back on the wall, and I continued to analyse it all relentlessly, the dirty light that fell from the window, the whispering at the door, the quality of the words I managed to catch, the generic squalor of the rooms where rituals of this kind

take place, the repetitiveness of fate which had brought me back here so soon; I analysed everything, but wearily. Almost in self-disgust. Almost as though I had no choice. And in reality I didn't, because *they made me that way*.

At the funeral, a secular service at the crematorium chapel – that mawkish name they give to the place where bodies are burned –, there were hundreds of people, but I recognised hardly any of them, apart from those who'd turned up for my sake. However, the number of people who came was the only remarkable thing about it. The whole thing was pervaded with a terrible sense of impersonality. It could have been anyone's funeral. When I climbed onto the dais to read two poems (I had told myself I should; I had chosen two pieces, by poets I loved, for the simple reason that they were beautiful and had a liturgical ring to them and that they spoke of things that were somehow relevant in the most abstract and oblique way possible), I didn't know that I was looking out, amid the mass of faces, onto another unimaginable and secret trajectory. I didn't know that, but I wasn't looking for it: I was as blind as my newly dead and eyeless father.

I never once lifted my eyes while reading, my voice unwavering and resonant. Then I returned to my seat. I was twenty-four and wore my hair in a braid that wound around my head.

I didn't know much about him.

Apart from the fact that when we are young we confine ourselves to noting our parents' existence without being particularly interested in them, my father and I had lived in different houses for over twenty years, and for various periods of varying duration we had not spoken or had seen very little of each another. Ours was, as they say, an awkward relationship.

He was almost forty-two when I was born. He had always been baffling. I didn't really understand what job he did (when I was very

little he had taught for a year or two at a private school, but after that, who knows), or why he had started studying again. I scampered along behind him down the forlorn corridors of the university, and I read or played on my own while he held court among groups of students just out of their teens – his classmates. His beard was already silvery, although it conserved rusty streaks – a reddish watermark I share. In the greenish light of the Palazzo Nuovo building he seemed strange and sad, and out of place.

Back then he lived in an attic. The miniscule kitchen where we ate when I slept at his house had a big window looking out onto the rooftops. He had brought nothing with him. He seemed to have come from nowhere, as though nothing had ever happened before I existed. But for a five-year-old this is a perfectly acceptable sort of temporal dimension: adults are a fact of life and an insoluble mystery; adults come and go, their faces appear and disappear, the rooms they live in have existed forever and first come into being the moment you, the first human on earth, step through the door. Sometimes they are transient, sometimes they are as immutable as the mountains. You don't question their existence.

Of course he hadn't come from nowhere. He wasn't from Turin – and neither was my mother, who, at nineteen, had left her native village on the boundary between the province of Turin and the province of Cuneo, like almost everyone she knew. He came from the Gargano peninsula, but when he left school he moved to Rome to study medicine. (That was as much as I knew. How he then arrived in Turin, for example, no one had ever told me.) By then his accent was neutral, with no recognisable regional lilt. In the summer we sometimes went to visit his family for a day or two. He had two sisters and two brothers: he was the last but one. Three of them had stayed on in Puglia, although they all lived in different towns. The eldest, who had made

his fortune, lived on Lake Garda and I hardly ever saw him. One or other of them would put us up when we visited. There was clearly something odd about their relationship and, equally clearly, my father was very different from his siblings. But these were things no one discussed. When he was down in Puglia he sometimes reacquired an accent of a sort, but for me, who knew how he normally spoke, it sounded affected, as though he were trying to go unnoticed. As though he were trying as hard as he could to resemble them.

When I was ten he graduated in psychology and from then on worked in residential care centres for drug addicts, the mentally ill and troubled teens. A few of the troubled teens came to the funeral, awkward and sweet, with their smart, ill-fitting suits and their long-wristed arms which they didn't know where to put, and their faces contorted in grief. So, this was what he had been doing in the last, let's say fifteen, years of his life. He had two other degrees though: one, way back when, in medicine; another in jurisprudence. The connection between these things wasn't clear.

In any event, nothing in his appearance or his manner betrayed the fact that he was a cultured man. He was messy, noisy, carelessly dressed and had forever been as poor as a church mouse. For sixteen years, after the attic, he had lived with a woman he would end up deciding to marry a week to the day before he died. Or, to be more precise, he had gone to live *with* her, in the house she owned, and this had allowed him to enjoy a modicum of middle-class comfort. Amid her sober, elegant furniture, amid her beautiful ceramics and the polished wood and the costly soaps, he was every bit as absurd as a penguin in the Hermitage.

He was enthusiastic and sentimental (his postcards and messages, even when unashamedly practical, always had an elegiac flourish to them). He devoted himself with a defenceless fervour to all the things

he cared about, such as his young drug addicts with their ashen faces and all his other assorted misfits, and he had a haphazard, almost boyish relationship with everything else – clothes, money, the future. Although he was capable of dreadful anger, outbursts of rage which, like a sudden wildfire, blackened everything in his wake, and although the words he used could be cruel (but all of this only with those closest to him), he was generally what one might call a cheerful man, lovable and candid by nature. He liked everyone, everyone had to be saved. Oh yes, his faith in others was boundless: in effect, he often met with burning disappointment. But he was also vain, and he revelled in the adoration of others, which he could inspire with surprising ease. And how it irritated him that I, on the other hand, didn't worship him in the slightest. I found the contrast between his public and private personas very irritating (by private, I mean when it was just the two of us and we had no audience of any kind), as I did the fake, artificial mannerisms he adopted when anyone else was around; it was as though he were acting out an exaggerated version of the image he thought they had, or wanted them to have of him. I watched him adjusting to the circumstances, slipping on different masks. There was the thoughtful intellectual, the lyrical nature lover, the matey simpleton and even, unfortunately, the inspired father, and all of them worked their inevitable magic: ecstatic admiration from his audience, incalculable annoyance in me. This had sullied everything. So by now, almost every time he expressed any form of emotion, I detected a note of falsity, an instinctive exhibitionism that probably wasn't, at the time, even there. But I was implacable. I never forgave him any of it.

He was quick to develop infatuations, but few of his friendships survived over time. Something that forms part of the natural course of human relationships (people drift apart from time to time, it's normal), in his life took on a form of pathological recursiveness. Peo-

ple he had frequented for years, people with whom we had gone on holiday, vanished from one day to the next and were never spoken of again. The motives undoubtedly varied from case to case; the closure, though, was absolute. When, at fourteen, I had discovered quite by chance that, before getting together with my mother, he had once been married (what is more, to a woman whose home I had frequented throughout my childhood and whose new partner and children I knew), I had asked my mother, of all people, 'But why did he never tell me? What was the *point* of not telling me?' I was genuinely perplexed.

She had thought about it and then replied, 'He divides his life into compartments.' She could offer no other explanation. And in reality there were no other explanations, nor was there any real point in my father's omissions, in his tendency to dismantle the past. He moved from one scene in life to another in this fashion, hiding from those he'd previously been close to and offering himself unreservedly, swathed in a fictitious splendour, to those who next came along.

Even if he did all he could to ignore it, he had aged. Yet to me he gave the impression of being always the same, always predictable; an immobile man, wrapped up in the same old things, the same old poses, the same old words. I wasn't interested in deciphering him, nor did I think there was anything to decipher. He and his death were part of the terrain of obvious facts on which my life played out: the smooth, even surface over which I could pass an impassive hand and feel no residual ripples of any kind, despite the rage that rumbled beneath it like water under river ice in winter. Besides, what's interesting about an immobile man?

Marta Barone

Sunken City

CITTÀ SOMMERSA

A semi-unknown father and his past to be discovered. Terrorism in 1970s Turin.

A young woman, lonely and in love with literature, writes the chronicle of her fight with her father's death: the two had shared a happy relationship during her happy childhood, a hard one during her teenage years. But now that the man is dead too many questions lay unanswered: who was the young doctor-worker who always sided with the poor, who always had someone to save, who was sentenced to jail for taking part in an armed band? And why did he never want to tell his daughter about those years? Lawyers, old far-left-winged militants, archives and trial accounts are voices that slowly make up the portrait of a complex and contradictory man, a witness and a protagonist of a complex and contradictory time. On the background, Turin, city of rage, pain and hope, backdrop of violence that generated just deception and ruins. The novel of a man, of his families, of his choices, retold with love and rage.

MARTA BARONE was born in Turin in 1987. She is a translator and wrote three children's books: *Miriam delle cose perdute*, *I giardini degli altri* and *I 7 colori per 7 pittori*. This is her first novel for adults.

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