



Nicola Cinquetti

{ IL GIRO DEL '44 }



BOMPIANI



NICOLA CINQUETTI
THE '44 GIRO

translated from the Italian
by Sarah Victoria Barberis

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“Is it necessary, then, this wacky and absurd business
of a bicycle race around Italy?
Of course, it is. It’s one of the last remaining citadels
of fantasy”.

Dino Buzzati
Cronache terrestri (Earth Chronicles)

1940

The Balilla, bouncing and swerving under grey towers of water, proceeds slowly on a road that can't be seen anymore. Grandpa laughs – rain cheers him up. He laughs and talks about the good old days when he, a young rider, was the one cycling in a rainstorm, underwear dripping and hair black with mud. Mr. Romolo nods but doesn't listen, focused as he is on staying the course, his hands clutching the wheel.

I'm in the backseat. I am eight years old and I savour my first car trip. I look at the world beyond the window and I see the trees run away – whipped by the rain – the light poles, the rows of houses, and the black hunched nuns, hands on their caps before the devil blows them off their heads.

“Today, we go for the pink!”¹ shouts Grandpa, rubbing his hands. “Today, Gino is going to win, burning them all!” Mr. Romolo hits his fist on the wheel and says *maybe not the pink t-shirt, Gino cannot get that anymore, he ranks too low, but the stage victory is guaranteed*. They are two great Bartali supporters and when they mention him, they light up like painted saints. Mr. Romolo, who owns a bicycle shop in town, swears he knows

¹ The winner of the Giro di'Italia is awarded a pink t-shirt.

him well, that they are friends, *superfriends*, like Garibaldi and Nino Bixio. “He must have shaken hands with him once”, says Grandpa winking at me. “Bartali must have millions of such friends around Italy”.

The car starts moving up the hairpin turns of the Abetone and hail begins, a sudden burst like a machine-gun. I lean over and cover my head with my hands, terrified and ecstatic. The adults put on a serious face. We shelter under a tree, as if in the roar of a trench, but Grandpa doesn’t want to stay there because of lightning, and Mr. Romolo says he will not budge from there because he has no intention of letting hail smash the car.

Thankfully, the assault rapidly fades without lightning, and the rain tempers its rage. Mr. Romolo gets out to check on the bodywork, which is unscathed and now nicely polished. We can start again. Up the mountain the first supporters begin to appear with umbrellas, capes, and banners with smeared writing. I read and get excited: *Go, Gino! Gino Forever! Hurray for Gino!* The banners are mostly for Bartali, one saying, “Fly, Grouse!” and I think it’s the best.

We stop a couple of kilometres before the mountain pass, along a very steep stretch of road. It keeps on raining and it’s cold, though it’s the end of May. On the road splashed with puddles, the wind sweeps the pine needles, which scuttle away like crazed bugs. I shelter under my grandpa’s umbrella and start staring impatiently at the curve beneath us. I know Bartali wears an olive green shirt, the great Legnano shirt, and I already imagine him appearing, mighty and superb, like in the picture with the slanted autograph that hangs in Mr. Romolo’s shop.

The first cars pass by, the commanders, splattering mud with their wheels. Grandpa jumps around like a child. “Let’s go to the other side”, he suggests. “You can see better from there”, but once we cross the street, he declares himself unsatisfied and wants to go back.

Finally, the first cyclist appears, welcomed by the shouts of the fans. He wears a grey t-shirt. “It’s Cecchi!” announces Mr. Romolo, who is a *superfriend* of Bartali, but also claims to know all the cyclists of the group. Old , the one everybody calls *Little Brush*, comes up wearily, exhausted by the rain, staring at the road.

“This one isn’t going too far”, says Grandpa. When he passes before me, I shout some words of encouragement and I go after that hunched, dirty back without caring about the rain or the puddles drenching my shoes. I return under the umbrella, short of breath, and I see the olive green shirt emerging from around the bend.

“Gino! Gino!” shouts Grandpa, and resumes jumping. But the yell sticks in his throat because it’s not Bartali, that young speed demon climbing up like a greyhound: he’s young – very young – with the cruel look of someone who can smell victory.

“This one is going straight to Modena”, says Mr. Romolo.

“This one is going straight to Milan”, says Grandpa.

“Who is he?” I ask.

Mr. Romolo, who read the race number on the cyclist’s back, draws a page of the *Gazzetta* from his pocket and reads his name: “Coppi Fausto from Castellania”.

Bartali keeps everyone waiting. He will pass before us with a four-minute gap caused by a bicycle malfunction. A bewitched

Giro d'Italia for the *Grouse*, who had already fallen during the second leg of the race when a stray dog crossed the street in front of him.

On our way back we stop by at an *osteria* to listen to the radio for commentary on the finish. The fire is lit and the place smells like a farm. When she sees me, soaked and cold, the host's wife begins shouting and says more or less that you cannot leave a child in the hands of two men because men know nothing of children, and look what they've done to him, this wretched one – only Antonio of Padua can save him from pneumonia.

She brings me closer to the fireplace and wraps me in a rough woollen blanket that smells like ash. Mr. Romolo and Grandpa don't blink an eye. They order a flask of red wine, a soda for me, bread and salami for the three of us. My glass is empty in a heartbeat, so Grandpa fills it with wine and tells me to drink because this is how men get warm. The hostess grabs it out of my hands, furiously, spilling some wine on the floor and then drinking the rest to the health of men – who are all criminals.

Then, they turn on the radio draw near the device, and fall silent. The signal is bad and sometimes the voice is lost, but the news reaches them nevertheless: at Modena's finish line, Fausto Coppi is first, three minutes ahead of Olimpio Brizzi. Bartali finishes third. Coppi is the new pink t-shirt.

I don't have a bicycle, but I can take my cousin Assunta's and ride along the streets of the neighbourhood. I imagine being Coppi, young Coppi on the streets of the Giro d'Italia, always chasing the group because of some unfortunate accident. The chase is bitter, difficult, demanding, but Coppi doesn't give up,

catching each adversary, one by one, and in the end achieving victory – always. The finish line banner hangs just in front of my house where I pass, back and forth, screaming *Coppi Wins, A great victory for Coppi, Coppi wipes them all out*. I raise one hand from the handlebar in victory – just one, because I am not good at taking both off. What a shame because it would be really exhilarating to straighten my spine, raise my arms, and smile broadly.

Fausto Coppi, in the meantime, bravely defends his pink shirt. Every night on his way home, Grandpa brings news about the leg of the day and the general rankings, and it's always good news. Grandpa still roots for Bartali, but this is not a good year for the *Grouse*, increasingly out of luck, ranking lower and lower, he himself hoping that the Giro is won by the young Coppi, still a member of the Legnano, still a wingman of the Champion.

For the last leg, Verona-Milan, we go to Mr. Romolo's shop, closed on Sundays, to listen to the running commentary. It's a clean shop, his bicycles polished and fragrant from the naphtha and hanging on the wall with hooks, like animals for slaughter. Pictures of Bartali in the mountains look like a saint's altarpiece above the counter. "One of the best bicycle shops in town", says Grandpa to purposely annoy his old friend, who believes his shop is not just *one of the best shops*, but by far *the best* in the whole town.

Coppi reaches the finish line in Milan with a thirty second delay due to a slip of the bike chain that troubles him right before crossing. But it's just a slight shiver that makes the victory even sweeter: it's *his* Giro d'Italia – it's *ours* – and in the whole Italian empire, no one is happier than me.

On our way back we encounter a truck honking its way around, crammed with people waving Italian flags and shouting, “Hurray for Coppi!” and then “Long live Italy, long live the King!” and of course, “Long live Mussolini!” But all this revelry annoys me because it seems to me that these people don’t have the right to celebrate *my* champion. I had become a Coppi supporter that day on the Abetone, under the deluge, when no one even knew who he was. Now that he has won the Giro d’Italia, thousands, tens of thousands, tens of millions of fans suddenly appear. But *I* was the first.

I wake up early Monday morning and run to get thirty cents from Grandpa. Then, even before having breakfast, I go out to buy *La Gazzetta dello Sport*. The magazine is almost completely dedicated to Coppi’s victory, and it shows all the rankings and the commentaries that I read and reread until its pink pages are worn out. “Never before, neither in Italy nor abroad, has a 20-year-old, with no skills or previous aspirations, had such success in the great race...” Even the ads celebrate his victory: there’s a picture showing Coppi and Bartali sitting at a table before a bottle of Coca Buton liquor. To the side, the slogan of the winner: “Through the tough struggles of this Giro, the Coca Buton has given me back my strength and vigour!”

“What does Coca Buton taste like, Grandpa?”

“Meh! Sweet stuff like priest’s wine. Good for sissies”.

“That’s not true! Even Coppi and Bartali drink it!”

“Coppi, a rookie, maybe. But Gino... I don’t think so!”

In the afternoon mom loses her temper because “it’s unacceptable that one stays in his room all day long reading that good-for-nothing newspaper” and kicks me out of the house.

I go for a walk in the neighbourhood, my head cluttered with images and dreams and bicycles. I wander for a long time – aimlessly. Finally, I end up in a square where other kids are playing with marbles, and I stop by, playing with them.

Early in the evening, we see a patrol wagon packed with men in black shirt. They are hysterical. They shout, sing, and sometimes shoot in the air with a musket to chase away the pigeons. I assume they are still celebrating Coppi's victory, but I soon realise no one mentions Coppi's name: the yells and the songs are for the King and, obviously, for the Duce.

They leave after one last rapid-fire burst, the longest one, and we resume playing with the marbles, loudly singing their songs.

And for Benito

and Mussolini

Eia! Eia! Alalà!

Then, General Pinotti comes to the balcony and shouts that the song mustn't be sung like this, with that second *and*, as if Benito *and* Mussolini were two different people. But we don't give a shit and our response is to resume singing even louder, stressing the accent on that second *and*, so much so that the general gets mad and swears that one day or another he will annihilate us with gunfire, *because this is how we deal with rascals*. As usual, his wife comes out, the old "generaless" taking his arm and drawing him inside.

I keep singing when I get home *And for Benito and Muss...* but I am immediately silenced by my mother's voice.

"Shut up!" she yells with rage and raises her hand as if she is about to slap me.

I look at her in astonishment. I don't understand what I am to be blamed for. Am I late? Or even she's mad at that damned *and?*

Aunt Anita draws nearer to me and caresses my sweaty hair.

“Not a good night for singing, this one.”

“Why?”

“Not tonight”.

It's the 10th of June, 1940. Mussolini has just announced on the radio that *the hour of destiny has arrived*. Italy enters war.

Nicola Cinquetti The Giro of 1944

IL GIRO DEL '44

A novel about bikes and war: a city boy, an evacuated family, a gang of countryside boys and everyday life.

Giro d'Italia, June 1940. Martino follows the tour with his grandpa and his best friend: they all support Gino Bartali but there's a young man that seems to threaten him, Fausto Coppi, who's going to win his first tour. Martino, though, has nothing to cheer for, because the day after the end of the Giro Italy enters the

war. Four years later he and his family are displaced in the countryside where there's nothing to do. Luckily, he got his bike. But that gets stolen by a mean girl that looks like the boss of a local gang. Without stopping dreaming about his own Giro d'Italia, Martino will get closer to this strange girl, experience death and war and live some of the darkest pages of Italian history. Nicola Cinquetti wrote a strong and clear novel about war and about life.

NICOLA CINQUETTI

is a poet and writer. He teaches Philosophy in Verona. With *Ultimo venne il verme* (Bompiani) he was finalist at the Strega Ragazzi Prize.



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