

Just in Time

(Appena in tempo)

by

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(The Third Half)

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“A Montecarlo, tutta la terrazza sembra una fiera pazza d’ombrellini”: here Govoni’s poetics explode, bright as fireworks...” Fireworks? Natalia raises her chin from the collar of her blue down jacket, where it had collapsed just a moment before. “How does this guy speak?” She thought she didn’t say this out loud, but apparently she did. Maybe she just mumbled it, but someone heard her. The lady sitting next to her can’t suppress a laugh of consent; she would shake her hand, if only she had the courage. An old man covered with liver spots, a hearing aid planted in his ear, turns angrily toward her: “If you’re not interested, you can just go.” Luckily the rest of the crowd (fifty people? Sixty? Natalia tries to count them) has sunk into a mild stupor, from which it will probably resurface only for the final applause. They gave in one after the other, as if falling prey to an epidemic of narcolepsy. Giacinto Turchetti continues his literary dissertation to the complete indifference of his audience.

The old man is right; if she’s not interested, she *can* just go. A rush of cold air stabs the back of her neck. Damn you, killer draft: where do you come from? Natalia picks her scarf up from the ground and wraps it around herself as if putting her neck in plaster. While she’s at it, she slips on her gloves, too. “They should have given us plaid blankets at the entrance,” her neighbor quips, rubbing her hands together to warm them up.

What a ridiculous situation, Natalia thinks; if I were looking at it from the outside it would probably make me laugh, but since I’m in the middle of it... right, how did I end up here? Scalding tea, hot cocoa... To avoid giving in to hypothermia (that could play strange tricks on you, she reminds herself, like making you forget where you are, who you are and at what time the train leaves), she compiles a mental list of comforting drinks. A shot of grappa, a glass of Vov — do they still make Vov? Poor Corrado Govoni, minor poet gone into oblivion only to be speciously exhumed for this anodyne convention. Now an actor from the Forlì rest-home is laboriously climbing onto the platform; he is, or at least they’re saying he is, an old friend of the poet, who “spent his formative years” in Ferrara. His shoulders are stiff and sunk by arthritis, his hands spin like claws as he declaims: “*Sole e baci, baci e sole, è tempo di viole*”. Natalia has a sudden memory of her father: as a child, whenever she sulked for a perceived wrong or on an unsatisfied whim, he would fall to his knees, arms outstretched: sun and kisses, kisses and sun..., he’d say,

and she'd run to him to be ruffled with tenderness. The whim forgotten, the little one would trill like a little bird, or so her father would remind her in his old age: you trilled like a little bird, he'd say, and she'd reply, Dad, a doorbell trills, a bird twitters. How funny you were when you were little, he'd say, omitting the rest of the sentence: it's a pity you've stopped. Her mother, on her part, never quit reminding her of that: why did you harden your heart, Lia? Please don't call me Lia, Mother, no one's called me Lia for forty years. There you go, see how intolerant you are? You act like a tsarina. Memories that wedge themselves in with no reason, taking advantage of this tedium, a bundle of spoken, heard, repeated words and the desire of a hot Vov.

It might be that after lunch you can't talk about poetry — but what time is it? Four o'clock already? —; it might just be that in terms of age the participants exceed even the most benevolent case studies about the fourth age, and are mainly female as usual; it might be that Palazzo Paradiso is too sumptuous, too regal a place for such a badly organized occasion; whatever the cause, suddenly Natalia stands up as Giacinto Turchetti resumes speaking. *Excuse me, please, excuse me...* never sit in the central seats, in the middle of the row: always on one side in the event of a precipitous evacuation, or a fire, or a commando of armed madmen shooting at the audience, or maybe just a panic attack — never in the middle, always close to the emergency exits, and possibly where no one can notice you if you suddenly get up to go pee. Her anxiety, a constant traveling companion, keeps telling her this with obsessive punctuality, yet sometimes she forgets and falls for it, for the desire to be conscientious and disciplined, neither too far forward nor too far behind, centrally seated.

Excuse me... sorry... knees and umbrellas, cumbersome feet, bulky handbags — it's an obstacle course, and it awakens the dozing audience.

Via, via, vieni via di qui, Paolo Conte sings in her mind. *Niente più ti lega a questi luoghi, neanche questo tempo grigio*. Away, away, come away from here, nothing binds you to this place anymore, not even this grey weather. Natalia rushes to the checkroom where she left her trolley, then runs to the exit. And I didn't even visit the Ariostea Library, she thinks. What a waste of time.

“Ma’am! Ma’am! These fell when you got up, ma’am!” The woman who was sitting next to her catches up with her, panting and brandishing her reading glasses. Right: she’d taken them out to read the brochure. She bought them in a pharmacy, choosing a red frame to avoid losing them.

Her benefactor has a husband in tow: he appears from behind, surprising her. Suddenly the man takes off a fake grey Borsalino, baring his shiny skull. He almost bows, holding out his hand: Arturo Feliciangeli, a pleasure to meet you, we fled as well. The wife adds something. *Via, via, vieni via di qui*: Natalia’s mind is colonized by Paolo Conte, singing just for her. She’s not listening to them, but she feigns interest, or at least she tries for common courtesies: she’s never been good at these things. The wife nods: “What a disappointment. Well, at least it was an excuse to return to Ferrara. We live so close that at the end we never come”. They talk over each other, so that it’s not clear who starts the sentence and who ends it. Marital harmony? Osmosis? After all, they were being kind. “Where are you from?” she asks. “Bologna. Less than forty kilometers away, right, love?” It’s nice to hear the word ‘love’ between spouses of a certain age, with that soft and warm Bolognese sound that... could it be a second marriage? Although even if it were, they would have spent at least twenty, possibly even forty years side by side. Well done: it takes some courage. Natalia tries to remember when was the last time she spoke the word ‘love’ aloud, not counting her cat. These two look like they are the same age, in their seventies. But why do they keep talking over each other?

“We left our car in the parking lot.”

“And now my wife can’t find the coupon.” The husband raises his voice an octave.

“Are you sure you gave it to me and didn’t leave it in the car?”

“Did you come by train, ma’am? Do you need a ride?”

“If you want, we can take you to the station. It’s too cold to walk.”

“On foot it would take you at least twenty minutes. Driving it’s less than five.”

“Take her trolley, Arturo, please!”

“Did you find the coupon, love?”

“The lady’s trolley, Arturo! Hell’s bells, would you take it already?”

It all happens in a second: somehow Natalia finds herself sitting next to the driver, on board a canary yellow Panda Cross 4x4. Feliciangeli himself has explained the Cross bit; as for the canary yellow, even a blind person would have noticed it.

“You know why we chose this color? So that on foggy nights no one would crash into us.”

Natalia has lost her sense of direction; she doesn’t know where they’re going, she feels

bewildered.

“You know what? We’ll drive you to Bologna. When is your train scheduled to leave?”

“No, thank you so much, you’ve been already too kind.”

“We’ll be there in twenty minutes, really, and anyway we’ll have to drive by the station. We live in via Montebello, quite close to it.”

“Really, I don’t want to be a bother...” She’s disconcerted, but the lady from Bologna reassures her.

“I’m more comfortable back here, I can lie crosswise and even stretch my legs. So you came all the way from Rome to hear Govoni’s poems?”

Natalia would like to reply with the kind of line that doesn’t leave room for other questions; otherwise she’d have to tell them that Govoni was well-liked by her father, who used to recite him by memory. But she has already forgotten the question: what did the woman ask her?

“Ma’am, are you okay? Do you need some air?”

She realizes she has not replied. An embarrassed silence has suddenly descended on the car, whose heating system is going full tilt.

“Forgive me. No, It all happened by chance. I wanted to visit the Library of Palazzo Paradiso, but then I saw the signs for the conference. I actually came yesterday to visit the Meis.”

“The what?”

“The museum of Judaism, Italian Hebraism and...”

Feliciangeli interrupts her: “Ah, so you’re Jewish?”

“No, but I’m interested. They restored an old prison, and...”

He cuts her off again. “How sad, though!”

“Let her finish, would you?” His wife has a genuinely annoyed tone.

“A jail turned into a Holocaust museum — what is sadder than that?”

“Will you be quiet?”

Natalia feels like jumping out of the running car.

Yes, Mother, wherever you are, I’ll admit it: I am intolerant, those who like to be funny at all costs irritate the hell out of me, like those who talk about things that they don’t know, like those who call themselves ‘love’ but actually can’t stand each other. Yes, Mother, I’ll acknowledge that I act like a tsarina, even though I never really understood what you meant by that. We might all be fools, but some fools are more foolish than others, and I will not adapt myself to them. I’d rather have waited for the connection and reached Bologna by train.

Ten twenty-five. The clock at the Bologna station reads the same time since August 2, 1980 — everyone knows this, but few remember it. Natalia has managed to get rid of the Feliciangelis, who wanted at all costs to buy her a *tigella*. “They say they’re good only in Modena, but that’s not true,” they said.

But you can’t be physically repulsed by someone and then go eat a *tigella* with them. Then, again, is she sure about that? All this coherence, all this intransigence: what purpose does it serve? Where has it taken her? Who does she think she is? If only there existed more people with such kindness... Natalia is seized by a sudden mix of hunger and remorse. Once again she is distracted by the slightest feelings, by a wave of last-minute scruples.

She almost forgets the clock. Then an inner sound, like a tinnitus fired by her subconscious, brings her back to reality. She turns around. This is a pact she made with herself: every time she passes through Bologna, she must check that the clock’s hands are in place. To remind herself that she’s happy. At least a little. Yes, she must strive to make the most of her life, to live better than what’s she’s settling for out of laziness, lack of desire or simple adaptability, because after all greyness is reassuring like chicken soup, it keeps one’s cholesterol at bay, it avoids glycemc spikes and gives one the illusion of living quite well.

She looks up at the old clock that survived the bomb, and, as if she were standing in front of Donatello’s Madonna of Forgiveness, she apologizes for the time she has lost dissecting unnecessary details, cultivating daily whims, flagellating herself with minuscule questions of coherence that are totally irrelevant to humanity’s lot. Like *tigella* or not *tigella*. Christ, live a little! Where “Christ” is an intensifier of a moral: live, you ungrateful creature!

On that August 2, 1980, Natalia had took the 10.10 train, and she had not even heard the explosion. You can’t waste away a life that was left to you by pure chance, without any particular merit. She doesn’t know if her reasoning makes sense, but she believes it, and that is sufficient.

She breathes out to get rid of her mental dross, then makes two ritual, clumsy jumps on the spot and goes. She follows an Indian couple with a baby in a stroller and slips into the elevator with them. Never alone in an elevator, nor with men with disreputable faces. She presses the -2 button and the car plunges underground.

In the new section of the Bologna station you’d get lost even if you were a boy scout until you came of age. All that nonsense about “non-places” as alien spaces, scenarios of solitude and mental dulling, here it would fit like a glove.

The waiting passengers look like souls in purgatory or extras from *Metropolis*, going up and down the moving walkways, all in line, disinclined to smile. The halogen lights dye their skins and make them appear like Muppets, so much so that even children look ugly. The Indian baby boy in the stroller has the face of an adult, his eyes unmoving; he doesn't smile even when you blow him a raspberry, and remains intent on his thoughts, whatever they may be.

According to the display, the train is long behind schedule. But of course! If you arrive an hour earlier, it'll get there an hour later. Natalia looks for her ticket, puts her hand in the outside pocket of the trolley and unearths a cotton handkerchief — she's allergic to paper tissues. The hankie falls to the ground; she picks it up with two fingers, as if it were contaminated, curses and throws it in the trash. Meanwhile the P.A. system announces the imminent departure of another fast train, destination Rome.

Two hours in this station, with the memories that it brings back? Never. I'm cold, I'm hungry, I'm sleepy, I want to go home. Clear thoughts, without hesitations. Is there time to change the ticket? No, damn it, the train leaves in two minutes. Natalia rushes onto the escalator that descends to track 16. The train conductor is checking that all passengers are on board. She gestures to him from afar. She reaches him, panting; at sixty you're not old, but if you carry a few excess pounds and never exercise, your heart will jump in your throat in the space of twenty yards. She emphasizes its dramatic effect:

“Please, my train is the next one and it's one hour late, can I just take this one?”

The aged-woman-consumed-by-anxiety act comes natural to her, and everyone falls for it.

“Let me see your ticket, ma'am.”

“I can't find it. But I have it, I swear to you. Please, I can't get to Rome in the middle of the night, I'm not feeling all too well. In fact, I feel just awful.”

The conductor grabs her trolley, and Natalia has barely the time to mount the car's stairs.

Suddenly her tiresome day becomes a memory. Natalia gets rid of her scarf and wool cap, sticking it into the pocket of the quilted jacket. She sees the train ticket peeking out of the same pocket: sooner or later all travel agencies will close down, and she'll have to learn to buy it online.

She surveys car 7 before entering it. The heating works, but without reaching the usual sauna effect. There must be ten passengers in all, and they are wonderfully silent. She is about to choose a lonely seat, then she changes her mind: a noisy group could board the train in Florence, and she wants to read her novel in peace. She decides for an aisle seat in front of a young Japanese couple; they must be on their honeymoon, their rings are still gleaming. They look like drawings out of a graphic novel, all carved contours and watercolor shades; they're young, in love and perfect, and they don't need to say anything to each other beyond what they already know. Excellent choice: they won't talk, they won't argue, they won't scream, they will be ideal travel companions. Natalia suffers from an ear disorder, still not accurately diagnosed, which gives her dizzy spells whenever someone close by speaks too loudly. She takes off her jacket, she stretches her legs toward the aisle, seeing that no one is passing, and for a moment she's pleased: the heavy, mint-green tights don't appear to thicken them. Her legs are her strong point; they are long and thin, you could even say girlish, at least until they stay covered and summer doesn't reveal the purple nests of capillaries. But this is winter, the train is well heated and I'll get to Rome ahead of schedule, Zeus will make a fuss of me, I saw Ferrara again after so many years, I visited a museum that I wanted to see and all things considered the Govoni conference was a gift: *sole e baci, baci e sole, è tempo di viole*. Dear Dad, keep watching over me until I am old and decrepit, keep me company with your poems, your music, your embraces.

By now she knows these mood swings all too well: a sudden tachycardia for the smallest setback, followed a moment later by the impulse to laugh at herself. She lifts the novel by Romain Gary from her bag and opens it to where a page corner is turned down. She lowers the little table in front of her, she lays the book on it and finally smiles. Maybe I can even finish it... She reads: *I believe that we must not go around looking for sadness*.

To her right, on the opposite side of the aisle, an almost imperceptible sound distracts her. It sounds like a choir, something solemn and familiar, Verdi perhaps, yes it might just be Verdi — then silence. She turns around. A white-bearded guy has just inserted a pair of earbuds into his ears. He holds a thin book in his hands: maybe poetry, but it could also be a novella or

short stories. Its title is unreadable. He keeps it cracked, holding his place with his index finger. The fabric cover is the color of penicillin, but with the passing of time it has become more gray than green, and it is covered with spots. It could also be a Gospel. It is very thin: maybe a breviary? A Protestant pastor's breviary. No, they're poems for sure. Her instinct says so. How about minding her own business? Natalia adjusts her hair, punished by a light chestnut "natural" dye that fades after just two washes. They've become so damned thin. She checks her reflection in the window. This is me: I look like I've just raised the lid of a pot to throw in the pasta: the "steam effect". Her hair billows on top of her head, lost, not knowing which direction to take. She hides it under her woolen cap, pulls her legs back to let the beverage cart pass, crosses her ankles and resumes reading: *Because even when one is very old, happiness can still be useful*. Apparently Gary has read her mind, aside from that *very old* that has nothing to do with her.

A ticking marks the silence. Out of the corner of the eye, Natalia notices the middle finger of Earbud Guy's right hand beating a rhythm on the folding table. His hand is cured but without any exceeding affectation, his nails clean, no tufts of hair sprouting from the third phalanx. Let's check if the left matches the right: good, it's a B. She is wary of men who are obsessed with the care of their bodies; the only commandment that has to be obeyed is that they wash themselves (every day: better not take anything for granted). In her youth she has had to suffer the advances of haughty intellectuals and even high school principals who ignored the use of soap. She has never succumbed to the charm of the greasy-haired and the bleary-eyed. Because if the eye is bleary and the hair is greasy, the rest follows suit. Do we need to go into details? No, we don't. Those who appreciate things like that can go right ahead.

The man reclines his head on the back of his seat, raises his chin just so, as if this position helps his concentration, and narrows his eyes. She feels a tug of fondness for her unknown travel companion, and has to restrain herself from caressing his face, now lit by a sort of childlike joy that relaxes his features. She watches his wavy hair, still thick, pure white like his beard. Beards are dangerous, because they conceal surprises — a pointed chin, thin lips as rough as scars. White-bearded men, especially when accompanied by protruding stomachs, usually look like Santa Clauses or pastry chefs from cookie commercials, but this one doesn't belong to the same category: he has no beer belly, and his cheeks are not ruddy.

Beautiful jacket, congratulations. She is about to tell him this, but then she checks herself: she'd come off as an idiot who tries to strike up a conversation at all costs while he tries to rest, lulled by the music, not even realizing he's being observed.

It is indeed a beautiful dark gray fustian jacket, well combined with corduroy pants and rocking orthopedic shoes — either he suffers from lumbago or he's just trying to look taller. She decides for the first. He looks a bit like Renzo Piano; maybe he is an architect as well. Or an

Amnesty International doctor. Becoming aware of an undefinable murmur, Natalia turns suddenly and sees that the two Japanese newlyweds is spying on her. Their manga traits dissolve into suggestive giggling. They're laughing at her. So embarrassing! She goes back to her book, blushing like a high school girl, but then she laughs inwardly: since when did I begin to investigate the lives of others?, she asks herself; and why can't I stop?

On a bus, in the subway, at the market, outside her school, whenever the human being who happens to be in her sights strikes her with some detail, be it a tic, a melancholy look or a voice inflection, she provides that person with a destiny that he or she will never be aware of. And maybe this is for the best, because they're almost always dramatic stories. Who could be hiding behind this dapper gentleman in his... what, seventies? She throws him a last fleeting glance, then resumes reading. *Only the living do things like this...* writes Gary, consistent with the theme at hand.

At the Florence station no one boards the car. When the controller passes by, Natalia has already forgotten where she's put the ticket; she mumbles some apology while the object of her attentions kindly shows his phone without losing his concentration on the music.

An orchestra conductor? Hmm... he wouldn't travel second class. A stingy or penniless conductor. Maybe he's got children scattered all over the world... maybe they all depend on him... maybe one of them is seriously ill... She's found the ticket. Or maybe... a gurgle of hunger distracts her from her epic bout of voyeurism. "Excuse me, where's the bar?"

A few nibbles to the only item she finds, an insipid snack with pumpkin seeds, a quick last-minute pee, because if you have to go while you're in the taxi line you might as well shoot yourself, and she's back to her seat. Just in time to throw the book in her bag, grab her down jacket, her scarf, her gloves and her trolley and be the last one to get off the train.

Aside from the manga duo, the bearded septuagenarian-without-a-Santa-belly seems to have vanished, too — and only now she realizes who he looks like. He reminds her of her brother Giovanni. The same smile, almost childlike, the same ability to remain absorbed in his own pleasure, be it a project or a thought, regardless of the world around him. Yes, he would look just like her brother, if her brother had reached his age. She pictures him so. There's the explanation for her surge of tenderness toward an adult specimen of the male gender, so rare for a person like her, multi-divorced and trained for a life in solitary.

So her interest for that man wasn't stirred by one of her usual, specious fantasies applied to the fate of others. A wave of warm sisterly complicity resurfaces from a deep, hidden area of her emotional memory. Walking along the platform of the Termini station, Natalia recognizes the origin of the feeling she discovered at the age of three when Giovanni was born, the little brother she desired so much she even staged unlikely hunger strikes to raise the stork's awareness: "I want a litle bwother!" In the end they had humored her: a little brother had arrived, and she would gaze at him in the cradle as if it were Baby Jesus.

The warmth rising from her belly and invading her lungs, heart and brain makes her feel better: any feeling of love truly felt is a treasure to hoard, a supply of happiness you can draw upon at all times.

At the Rome Termini station, stranded human beings drift outside the control barrier, between via Marsala and via Giolitti, in the tunnel of icy air where the lights of bars and shops have been turned off. They draw supermarket carts full of rags from one track to another, perhaps simulating some vital activity; they barter a charity sandwich for a cigarette and fight aloud with themselves, beer-smelling soliloquies of pain. Natalia cowardly pretends not to see them, proceeding straight toward the taxis.

A woman of less than thirty, her face flushed, her hair bleached in patches like a cheetah's coat, is approaching her.

"Got any spare change?"

Natalia gives her a five Euro bill but keeps her eyes low to the ground, as if ashamed of having an address, a point of reference, a home.

The woman shouts after her.

"What, I'm so ugly that you can't even look at me? You're a real princess!"

She would like to go back to her and tell her to get lost, but also that she's right. Yes, I'm afraid to face the world, I'm afraid of your suffering, I'm afraid of your loneliness, I'm afraid of everything. She is tempted to do so, but there's no chance she'll ever act on it. All the things she'd like to do are an unwritten novel.

Yes, home — she can't wait to get there, but the line at the taxi station is endless. She hops on the spot to fight the cold while a "Death Wish" type decides who's got the precedence boarding the oncoming cabs: only at Termini Station, she tells herself, and not a peep from anyone.

"You can go; you wait a sec; you, where d'you think you goin'?"

A few soldiers stand guard at the marquee, machine guns on their shoulders, while a smattering of tramps is already curling up to sleep. They lean against each other along the windows. This is the way Rome welcomes you.

No, I can't stand waiting any longer, not even five more minutes; Natalia has barely the time to think this that her legs are already moving fast towards the Piazzale dei Cinquecento bus terminals.

Number 40 is already full of people and about to leave. Once again she jumps on board in the nick of time — apparently it's the way things are meant to be.

And sure enough, he is sitting right there: the white-bearded man, his little book still in his hands, earplugs in his ears, totally absorbed in his music. Suddenly she is irritated by his boyish smile. He could at least acknowledge the fact that I'm here, damn it. He could at least

bestow a gracious nod on me, maybe even give up his seat... Instead nothing, he just sits looking at the window like a tourist discovering Rome by night. Perhaps he is a foreigner: a German philosopher, or an cultural attaché at the Finnish embassy... her game resumes automatically, without the need to press Play.

The last five passengers descend at the Corso Vittorio stop; when the bus crosses the Tiber, the only two left on board are she and him; but they remain mutually indifferent, they don't exchange a single look.

At Piazza Pia, the last stop, they get out from two separate doors. Finally, Natalia thinks. In the space of the last fifteen minutes she has decided she can't stand the guy.

She regards him as he walks towards the arch of Porta Castello, a small leather backpack on his shoulders as if he were a high school student.

She has to walk in the same direction and on the same sidewalk, there's no escaping that. She cannot change course for his sake. With every step she takes, she feels more and more ridiculous. It looks like she's following him. Had I had been the one ahead and he the one behind, she reasons, I would have been afraid: the *Frecciarossa* serial killer eyes his victim and follows her all the way home...

In via di Porta Castello the streetlights work intermittently and buzz, or maybe they don't really buzz but that's the feeling; the two restaurants and the one gelateria are having their closing day off, and the anomalous urban silence is disturbed only by the sound of her trolley on the disconnected cobblestones.

Natalia stumbles on a hole, although by now she's trained enough that she doesn't fall; but when she looks up again he's gone, swallowed by the darkness of a cross street.