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(incipit)

Of the winter what's remembered is the first cold – its irreversible uniqueness. Likewise for the first loneliness, the first cherry, the first pretend, the bed that becomes empty, the table half-set, often without even a tablecloth, the taste of breakfast alone; the first intrigue, the first pain inflicted, the first bad grade. The first horoscope read – nonsense for sure. Likewise for the last day of high school before the exams; for the night before the first funeral that counts.

The De Stefanos

1.

December 31, 2011

It's one of those days you wouldn't remember if not for its being a day of departure, one of those days in which the weather starts acting up and the gray covers even the remains of what Romans call "winter sun," a sun that makes the days of the sad season less dark and damp and it seems there are too few chances to make something happen, and you proceed like that, with inertia or in fits, and at day's end you wind up all bent out of shape for nothing.

He arrives first, early, and this is a novelty. The obelisk punctures the sky like the cold penetrates his coat, through his jacket, getting down to his poorly ironed shirt – a sheet of ice on the skin. Even his pants stick to him, riding into the crack of his backside along with his underwear; he's convinced someone had changed the position of the seat. Ever since he left, with one hand on the wheel and the other fiddling first with one lever, then another, he's been positioning and repositioning the seat, tilting the backrest forward and backward – a persistent wriggling of adjustments; he even tries lifting his butt cheeks, first both, then one at a time, moving his hips in circles to as if to untangle something –, and curses his underwear, too tight, and his T-shirt, too short, remembering when he used to wear that horrible woolen undershirt that got all matted at the armpits but kept him warm, a barrier of heat. The cold is within.

When he exits the roadway he notices the order in which the cars are parked, some have been there for ages and yet are cleaner than his. Today there's no one meeting up at that rendezvous spot, with the flow of cars heading south, mostly to Ostia, or toward Villaggio Azzurro, slowing down a little because the road seems to hug the obelisk. Someone makes a U-turn, circling around that smooth totem. You have to be careful, you can get distracted looking at it, you risk not seeing whoever might be merging in, or coming from the opposite way.

He double-parks the car even though there are plenty of available spots. He steps out just to get out, to be seen by he's not sure who, but he's cold and goes back into the car, turns the key, turns on the heat, and right away the air smells like burnt dust. It smells like an old car. He doesn't

know whether to listen to the radio, so he checks his text messages, sure to be informed of some delay.

He looks at the screen with the afflicted face of someone who thinks no one ever calls him. Ever since he got an iPhone he checks his texts, emails, WhatsApp, Facebook, both his and his son's, the newspapers, other people's photos (even those of his colleagues), there's always something you can do if you have nothing to do. It's as if silence, having become inconceivable, has been shut off for good, and this drift that wants to distract us from the wait, this noisy background that attracts more noise, more useless information, compounds the delay and puts off the need to act. How the world has changed compared to when you stayed at home waiting for a phone call! You didn't go outside because someone might call, someone you didn't want to leave to the mercy of an answering machine or others. How the way we share has changed, the way we hide. The threshold of shame has shifted.

She arrives more or less on time with a scowling cloud in tow. Both flash a vague I-saw-you! smile. His is slightly longer, but only because of insecurity.

Now she'll get a piece of my mind, he thinks bifidly; he knows that attacking first is a good way to keep from being subjected to her attacks, or be subjected as little as possible. He also knows that the day is long, and another day will follow, and maybe even another one after that.

Her A-Class Mercedes passes him too fast and slips into the second available parking space; the front right window is lowered halfway, her Gucci sunglasses are an ostentation. She squeezed in poorly, too close to the Fiat Punto's door on her left, but she doesn't seem to care; she's focused on reining in her agitation, busy repeating something short and pronounced (her lips enunciating words), and when she tries to step out she realizes the space is too tight even for her thin frame. She's forced into scowling and repeating the maneuver two spots down – as for the door-against-door impact, oh well.

"All of this is absurd. You realize that," he says as soon as she opens the door.

"Yeah, yeah."

"..."

"Open the trunk for me."

"It's full of my stuff, put it on the back seat."

"Okay. Let me get the other things."

It's the blue Samsonite they'd bought in Munich. He hoarded a pile of art books from L. Werner, on Residenzstraße. Three hundred ninety euros extra luggage, the blue Samsonite.

She goes back to the A-Class they'd chosen together the previous year and takes a giant bag stuffed with gifts. She holds it up with both hands.

"Hold on, let me help you."

"I got it."

"Don't tell me you got a panettone at Roscioli."

"Of course I got one."

"So did I."

"Means we'll be gorging on panettone."

"I'll tell you right away that's all I have as far as gifts."

"I'm not surprised."

"Anyway, I was sure you'd take care of it."

"Anyway, I was sure you'd take care of it." Her imitation is believable.

"..."

"Seriously, I didn't think I'd find you here already." She's sincere.

"You see? Every once in a while I'm on time," he says brushing the dandruff flakes off the shoulders of his jacket.

"Can you keep from doing that in front of me, or at me even? Jeez!"

Boldly imposing, the stiff big wheel looks on the verge of detaching itself and rolling forward to put an end to the decay.

"Why do you insist on passing through here? We have to go that way."

"..."

"Why do you like this junk so much?"

"I like it. It's sad."

The Ferris wheel is faded rust. Its carriages hover over the Tagadà fair grounds, which seems stuck in a vexed pose dating back to the last overhaul; the Ghost House is old for real, the big spider web and the hag's dress are more decrepit than they should seem. The giant spider is mangy and missing two legs. The roller coaster is cut off dangerously in the middle of a descent, not even the most exciting one, the rest of it has either collapsed or been dismantled.

"Ah, it's sad..."

"Yes." It's a faint yes, a little too drawn out, maybe because he craned his head to the left to check for dandruff.

"These aren't the things that are sad."

"So what are the sad things?"

"Your sad things are never the same sad things for the world that surrounds you."

“The amusement parks from when you were a kid getting dismantled aren’t sad enough? Even about sadness you want to pontificate to me?”

“Have you heard from your son?”

“I spoke to him last night.”

“...”

“...”

“Have you seen how he’s doing?”

“He’s doing well.”

“Yeah, real well. Sure...”

“He’s in God’s grace.”

“Yeah, sure, because you’re convinced he isn’t suffering.”

“He’s suffering and coming to terms with it.”

“Co-ming-to-terms,” she repeats, reducing it to a loathsome nah-nah.

“For your information, there are only two students in his class whose parents aren’t divorced.”

“What class? Hello? He doesn’t have a class anymore. Why do think he wanted to go away?”

“Because we nagged him into it. That’s why he went away.”

“...”

“And he did right to go.”

“Anyway, we don’t necessarily have to follow the big-city trends.”

“Are you talking about divorce?”

“Yes.”

“We’re average, that’s the way things go now.”

“It’s not an obligation...”

“No it isn’t, and anyway we live in a big city. Besides, what a horrible word, ‘trend.’”

“What about *your* horrible words?”

Try-to-stay-calm.

“Point them out to me when I use such ugly words.”

“...”

“And anyway, he does have a class, the one he did three years of high school with, which will start up again next year.”

“And anyway we’re not divorced.”

Someone had ripped out the main gate to the amusement park as if to bring back the scene of the Saturday afternoon crowds pushing – dads with kids, moms and dads with kids, teenagers and post-adolescents in their free time, cigarettes in hand and curses muttering from their lips –, a jostling throng looking to conquer a play space, because the amusement park is nothing but the extension of a baby’s playpen. Someone else had put the gate back as best he could, securing it barbarically to the posts with a bolt.

For a while, after eight in the evening, it became a place for junkies. They got in from a hole in the fence, alongside the now rickety hedgerow. More like chasms, not holes, but that's an old story going back to the golden days. Monday night, deserted amusement park: and off we go with a little heavy petting in peace. They patch up the holes from time to time, but there's a secret passage, on the rise up the Via dell'Artigianato, near the lamppost, where all you have to do is lift up two flaps and that's all she wrote.

But now the junkies have left, which you can see from the bottles of discount beer, because there isn't much smack going around anymore, and the people that hang out in these places can't afford it.

"You get attached to words, you lose sight of everything else."

"What?"

"No, no, let's not start that. Pay attention to the road so we don't get lost."

"The GPS will do that, I'll pay attention to driving."

The highway on the last day of the year doesn't fluidify the words. The conversation isn't particularly sparkling. The essence is held back. Both of them dangle in futility, repeating themselves, each one in their own way and with their own attempts. Simplified every so slightly, it would sound like "you can do it" or "not now" or "it's just two days."

The highway broods over the traffic news, the GPS (a male voice) orders a right turn in 237 kilometers. The road is to be filled with something noisier than the silence with which important questions are not addressed. In such cases the list, the free association, the solitude of landscapes prevail. The other cars convey perfect intimacies one would like to access, to enjoy at least a few minutes of peace – a little girl standing in the backseat, brushing her father's bald head, the mother wearing a cowboy hat, laughing next to him; the man swallowing half a sandwich in a Mercedes that's too clean; just ahead of them in a slow-moving SUV they're busting a gut with laughter, there are three of them up front (mother and daughter and mother's sister?); even in the back there are three of them: two men in track suits and a nun. They laugh and laugh. It's a casual and sincere joy that's better not to watch because it's contagious, so don't get caught laughing for no reason.

"How's the dermatitis?"

"A little better."

"It looks like you don't have any today. You've got dandruff instead."

"If you keep irritating me it'll come back, you'll see."

“So you’re staying at Moses’?” she says with her eyes on her cellphone.

“Yeah.”

“...”

“Emanuele told you?”

“Yeah.”

“You know we promised: no questions, neither direct or indirect through Emanuele.”

“Are you afraid I might ask you about the little bimbo?”

“On with that again?”

“If you’d only deign to respond.”

Can-you-just-relax?

“And what are *you* afraid of?”

“...”

“I’m still waiting for you to tell me who Delicious Crow is.”

Her gaze softens: “You’re right.”

Rome fades in the distance, caressed by the ring road. The windshield wipers dust off a drizzle not even worthy of a ritual mention. The frayed drape of water in the interval between two swipes is, in her unfocused mind, like the down on a newborn’s head. Few forms of loneliness are sadder than what you feel in a car beside a person with whom you have nothing to say, and a three-hour trip ahead of you.

The landscape along the A24 livens up a bit after Genzano, especially once you get past L’Aquila, near the Gran Sasso mountain. The snow on the slopes seems to slide down, and it’s colder, you can feel it. He still has the sense that he’s wearing the wrong shirt, that his underwear isn’t warm enough. The driver’s seat position is a compromise. He has a sudden desire for a green tea, but a rest stop isn’t a good idea. Green tea reminds him of when he was studying for the Mechanics exam during his senior year of chemical engineering. Lots of concepts, lots of formulae, and a lottery of possible questions, especially if you wound up with young assistants. He dreamed of getting professor Caputo for the oral exam. The way Caputo managed to use a complex fractional formula to demonstrate the delay in the development of a specific turbine stuck in his mind. There’s a strange and crazy euphoria in wanting to face torture. History, mathematics and technology: with Caputo theorems became daily performances. With Caputo you could remedy a screw-up you made that would demotivate you for

months. But in the end he got Leone, the friendliest and best prepared of the assistants, and things went very well. Two fairly canonical questions, the first one difficult and dreaded, but because it was especially dreaded he'd prepared for it well, and at the crack of the third question the assistant got up and went to speak to Professor Caputo, who, checking out the number of people left, said that was enough, and at the next imperceptible sign from Leone (which he interpreted as "28 or 30?") the professor pronounced "30" and Leone came back to announce: "Okay, that's fine. Congratulations. We're giving you a 30." Those words were followed by an emptiness, which he often thought about later, because you can't give a perfect grade in Mechanics with only two questions. That emptiness counts more than fullness, counts more than the average grades that didn't get any blowback. From that exam De Stefano has retained the feeling that sometimes things go too well, and that too well seems like an intolerable wrong.

When they get onto the A14 at Giulianova they're more than halfway there. From her dismay he gathers that she can't handle Led Zeppelin for long. He mentally goes over the CDs he has in the car and opts for Virgin Radio, more neutral. He tries to give a good example, doing everything he can to avoid provoking her with his usual grouching: "Driving is so annoying," "driving is a waste of time," "it would have been better to take a train, at least I could have read."

Letting her drive is out of the question, not so much because he wants to maintain the sense of power the driver has, but because he feels the situation could degenerate, and he has no desire to find himself abandoned at a rest stop after an argument.

An hour of sighs and unease passes and she starts fidgeting, as if her thoughts can't manage to get to the processing center.

Castel Fontana is perched atop a hill and looks over the valley with the ceremonious severity of the Marche natives. All around you can see the pinkish stone that made a fortune from the Gola del Furlo quarries.

Ludovico Marchetti, her father surprisingly won the competition for the post of technical office manager in the tiny municipality of Serrabruna, after ten years of cash cows with his architecture studio: hundreds of projects, all the same, paid for under the table without even a whisper, as they did in those parts. "These are folks who don't want to stick out. They all want the same house – some bigger, some smaller." That was the tip from one of his colleagues, and he took it to the hilt.

His wife never worked. She was a proud and satisfied housewife, sharing with him a background from Molise and an adamant respect for learning; she never meddled in her husband's business, not even when the possibility arose, many years earlier, of helping him in his office because one of the assistants took off with the money.

The road up to the town wraps around the hill in a gentle spiral. The windows suddenly fog up, and at least there's an excuse to do something. Her useless attempt with a paper tissue – immediately black – is rejected with a grimace and the fan switched on, full blast. The air, first on them, then turned to the windshield, quickly increases the temperature inside the car and their souls, and their sweat levels. It's an unpleasant heat that will contrast with the shot of cold when they step out without coats, in front of the garage, with her father waving his arms to greet them, and her mother still in the house, brushing aside the flower-patterned curtain in the kitchen, allowing herself a smile, then slipping away to put on a hint of lipstick.

From outside everything seems normal: a couple in a Volkswagen Polo with Rome plates going to celebrate the New Year; you can see bags in the back, a big blue suitcase, and on the rear windows a moiré pattern of rock group stickers. The car is not new, but it's not yet ready for the scrap heap; they are elegant, you can see, she wears a brand name perfume, goes to the hairstylist often. She seems to be smiling, has those good teeth, no cavities, smooth skin smelling fragrantly of pomegranate cream. What you notice about him is his hair, nice and high on the head, and thick; it could be the hair of a 1950s actor, James Dean just to mention one, if he combed it back with a little gel. Whereas he lets it fall forward on his brow and has it rise up like stubble. From the profile you can see a sharp jaw and some residual acne. Today he hasn't shaved, as if on a weekend, so no razor burn on his neck, no cuts under his ears and not even the scent of his favorite aftershave, Aqua Velva, supermarket stuff now hard to find, which reminded him of the nursery school mornings when his father accompanied him and his sister to school in that canary yellow Opel Kadett, the one with the trunk that never ended.

The road on the last stretch of the rise that goes up to the house is lined with the usual signs. The bruschetteria, the electrical appliance store “with the assistance of the best brands,” the chic restaurant next to the Rotary Club with the terrace.

She acts as if she doesn't see them, and even this time he pauses at the sign of the bruschetteria, turns, she looks at him and shakes her head, but he doesn't notice because he's thinking back to how many times he's passed by

there. Every time he said the same thing: “You gotta take me there.” This time he doesn’t, obviously, but he thinks it, and maybe she’s expecting him to say it and would even be disposed to fling one of her high-strung darts at him. That bruschetteria had always attracted him. It had always struck him as a reliable place, even if it’s hard to understand why someone from that part of Italy would bet on bruschettas instead of piadina sandwiches or some other local specialty.

She bursts into tears in her father’s embrace. “You’re exaggerating, as usual. Just like your mother with her mother, as if they were taking her away.”

A wet and smiling face, a liberating contentment. Her father takes two steps back and looks at her.

“You’re so much more beautiful in person than on Skype.”

“I got all dressed up for you, Dad. So, how are you doing?”

“You did well.”

“It’s strange not to be welcomed by Corbusier barking.”

A gloom descends on her father, but he nips the worst of his memories in the bud. “Poor guy.”

“Yeah, mom said he couldn’t walk anymore.”

“He was shaking all over, limping. At one point it looked like he was recovering... then he stopped eating. And when an animal stops eating...”

“...”

“The willow isn’t in good shape either. I had it pruned but it didn’t help.”

“It looks like it can barely stay up.”

“The gardener says plants are like animals. But enough talk about unpleasant matters, let’s go up because it’s about to snow. Give me that, I’ll carry it.”

Sante is bustling around in the kitchen. He moves as if he were wearing armor.

“Your brother is busy with the cocktails. You know he’s obsessed,” her father says in a hushed tone.

“Still?”

“Yes, and we’ll have to pretend to drink them. The last time with the Armentanis we got drunk.”

“She’s here too?”

“Of course she’s here. They’re getting married in May.”

“You tell me just like that?!”