

Matteo Losa

# ANOTHER DAY TOGETHER

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## Giovanni / J

Sometimes I think it would be a lot easier if the test results were just really, really bad.

“How long does it take to die?” The question literally takes shape in my mind as if someone were writing it in chalk on the blackboard of my brain.

Once, when I was still in the pediatric ward of Milan’s Cancer Institute, the psychologist following my case told me that I had to think positive because it would make a difference. But she never explained how that would help. “Think about it like a little mouse that’s nibbling away at your disease,” she said smiling with all of her thirty-two teeth. For years, thinking positive and nibbling the tumor away were like a mantra for her.

Then one day she switched to “You’re already making so much of your life. You should be proud of yourself and we should all do what we can without regretting anything else.” That is when I realized that things weren’t going as they should. The little mouse was full and wouldn’t be nibbling at the disease anymore, and that thinking positive is new age bullshit. So, little by little, I stopped seeing her.

“How long does it take to die?” The question is still there, impressed on my mind, but the air in my battered lungs is about to run out. I would like it to run out, I try not to start breathing again by pressing the palms of my hands even harder against my face.

“How long does it take to die?” I want to drown in these hands, but...

“Fuck,” I exclaim when the need for air gets the better of me, as it always does. My freaking stubbornness is stronger than my desire to end it.

I turn off the computer screen with the Netflix homepage. I turn off my phone. I try to barricade myself from every source of light in hope that the darkness can turn my brain off, at least for a second. I always felt comfortable at night. I spent at least three months of my life hospitalized because of the seven surgeries I had to undergo throughout the years. At first, I was afraid of going to sleep, my mother was almost always by my side whether it was in the bed next to mine or in the stairwell from which she would come and stroke my hair every now and then.

Later on, however, I stopped being scared because I learned that night is stronger than anything else. It even managed to turn off the hospital. Darkness would swallow the I.V. drips and silence devoured the floors; when it was black outside the windows, the white of the doctors’ coats was as far from me as possible. No white coats, no bad news.

Thinking about the nights I spent in the hospital makes me shudder because I realize that it is now dawn and I have to spend an entire morning with those white coats.

I get dressed quickly, putting on the first things I find on the floor; it doesn’t really matter since they will all end up in the dirty laundry as soon as I get back home. It is sort of a ritual to cleanse myself from the hospital.

I already know what awaits outside my bedroom door. But despite that knowledge, I’m never quite ready to put up with it. It’s a little bit like when a nurse looks for a vein to withdraw some blood: you know there will be a prick, you know it will hurt, but not that much. You know that soon you will be having breakfast in the hospital cafeteria with a band-aid on your arm. You know you will wear it like a badge of honor, like a war trophy, feeling like a hero for surviving that torture.

You know all of these things but, despite it all, when the needle touches your skin, the fear will surge and make your heart race at an unprecedented rate, making it almost explode. Every. Damned. Time.

The hallway leading to the kitchen is like the set for a horror movie.

Black, dark enough to seem endless.

There is a little table a few yards to my right that bears the weight of the world. A candle. A single lit candle with a flame flickering so high that it lights the bottom of the painting hanging behind it. Just above the frame, there is a portion of the terrestrial globe that is dominated by a snake, which, in turn, is under a woman’s feet: they seem to be “resting” on top of the slithering creature, as if they were holding down the snake gently rather than crushing it. You can glimpse a long cloak in the painting, but the candlelight isn’t strong enough to reveal its color; it is already doing enough. Sure, it doesn’t quite serve the purpose for which my mother lights it every time we go get a CT scan, but it still does a lot for being just a small wax candle.

Walking down the hallway gives me anxiety. Sensing the tension in the air gives me anxiety. I even talked to my mother about it three or four times, but nothing changed, so I just dropped it.

Sometimes I think that it would be easier if I had a brother or sister. My parents wouldn’t invest all their energies on me and maybe all of this wouldn’t feel so heavy. It would be like the Virgin Mary from the painting: it would weigh me down, but more delicately...

The lights in the kitchen are turned on when I reach it, but they don't dispel the haunting atmosphere from the hallway. My mother is sitting at the table with a cup of coffee in her hands and cookie crumbs scattered around her placemat. My father is standing, already fully dressed in his suit and tie, briefcase at hand, and his foot tapping away like Thumper from Bambi. But we are not at that part of the movie: we are at the point when they are about to shoot at Bambi's mother... or was it his father? I can't remember which.

He waited for me. He always does it before I have a CT scan.

"I'm off to work," he says as soon as I show up in the kitchen. "Good luck, champ." He extends his neck in an attempt to kiss my head, but I glare at him and he opts for a manly pat on my shoulder. At least this time he spared me his "I love you, son."

As soon as we are alone, mom puts her coffee cup down. "You know you can't have breakf..."

"I know!" I immediately interrupt her. "Can we get going, please?" I beg her.

Mom doesn't even answer. She leaves her coffee cup on the table, still half full, and grabs her bag and car keys.

As she closes the front door behind us, I glance one last time at the hallway with that single candle flickering in the darkness. As I ponder at how night is my habitat, I huff at the thought of what the day will bring.

## **Barbara / Barbie**

The automatic doors open just in time.

I feel like a castaway who is running out of air, but swimming, swimming in search for the surface. Or like a fish out of water making the opposite route. I can't figure out which one of the two. The hospital is always a source of air for me.

I lean against the first column I find and hide my face in my hands.

"Breathe," I tell myself.

Breathe.

I take my own advice and take a few breaths trying to calm down. Trying to give my body some air. But I realize that I'm only breathing in smoke.

I hate smoke.

I run my hands down my forehead as if I were closing some blinds. That is when I notice a cigarette on my right held by a hand with black nail polish resting on a knee bent at a thirty-degree angle.

When I pull up the blinds over my eyes, I see a guy crouched against the column next to mine. He greets me by name as if we already knew each other.

"That hurts," he says smiling when he realizes I have no idea who he is. But...

I recognize that smile.

"Giovanni?"

"J," he corrects me immediately. His smile is the only part that still looks the same as it used to. The craters on his face are gone without leaving a trace. His hair is now shaved on the sides with long, bushy tufts of hair falling over his forehead.

"I found a princess who broke the spell..." he leaves the sentence hanging.

"What?"

"My face." I realize just then how long I had been staring at it. "The frog prince was transformed back into a man."

I blush when he says it.

As he stands up, J asks me if everything is okay. No, things are absolutely not okay. This is not how I had dreamt my father's surprise birthday party. That was not how I expected him to react. I did not want to feel like suffocating on this day too.

"Yes," I answer. "It just feels a little stuffy... I'm finding it a little hard to breathe."

J smiles again with that smile that can relieve any sort of pain. That smile that helped me recognize him despite how much he had changed. "I know. That's the hospital's effect."

"That's not true," I answer irritated.

"Okay, sorry," says J pulling back.

"No, I'm sorry." Why does the worst side of me come out with the nicest people? "It's just that today's a bad day."

I spend a few minutes in silence staring at the floor. Then I see the cigarette butt as it drops to the ground and I remember I'm not alone, so I look for J's face once again.

His expression is serious, worried.

"Are you..." He hesitates for a moment. "It didn't go well..."

I look at him to figure out what he is trying to say.

"Oh my god, no!" I try to reassure him as soon as I realize what he is implying. "I'm sorry, I'm fine!"

J breathes a sigh of relief.

"Today's my dad's birthday. I organized a surprise party for him, but it didn't go as I expected."

"My dad's a doctor, not a patient," I reassure him once more. Then I look for the right words to explain the situation without really divulging that much. "I was expecting it to go differently," I conclude.

J makes a different expression, but I can't tell if he is more relaxed, so I reiterate again that I am fine. I am not about to die, even if that is how I felt at first.

"And you, instead? Why are you here?"

J moves his lips, arranging them in "I'll know any girl off her feet" mode.

I bite my lips and blush again.

"It's a long story, Barbie."

In the end, he closes his eyes for a moment and starts walking away, like the other time.

"Barbie?"

Barbie what?

I feel someone grabbing my arm.

Alessia invites me to go back to my dad's office because the others are leaving.

"My name's not Barbie!" I yell at him as he heads off.

Alessia asks me to explain, but I don't think I will. At least not now. At least not until I have figured out what there is to explain.

## **Giovanni / J**

I skip Coldplay and Macklemore. I zip my coat all the way up to my nose trying to protect myself as much as possible. I pull up the hoodie to shield myself from the bitter wind that is stinging my cheeks and tickling my tear ducts. It challenges me to close my eyes, but all I want right now is to see all the beauty that surrounds me. Yes, I just want to see. So, instead of taking the metro, I head to the bus stop.

I watch people get on a ride that is not my own.

The area outside the hospital is not particularly fashionable.

I sniff, inhaling a smell that reminds me of "home." It reminds me of the bathroom I was in not that long ago with Barbara.

On my left, I can see the looming silhouette of the hospital: a large building that instills fear just by looking at it, but not nearly as much as experiencing it from the inside.

But now it scares me less. I feel like a damned Superman with X-ray vision who can see past walls, patients, IV drip feeds, doctors, and nurses. Past hospital beds and morgues.

Now I can see a little nest of happiness, hidden in a mountain of steaming shit.

I fall asleep on the tram with my head leaning against the window, to the sound of Lady K and I wake up with Lady Gaga repeating that, despite a hundred million reasons to walk away, I just need one good one to stay.

I cough, startling the guy sitting next to me.

I curl up, then stretch out as if I were the only one there.

The afternoon has already turned dark, but I try to find my bearings anyway. Even just with my thoughts.

"I am used to seeing them die, Barbie. I am tired of seeing them get better."

That is when I saw Barbie shed her first tear. That first tear is like a diamond, it is forever.

Fefe Dobson isn't the most appropriate soundtrack to a memory like that one, so I violently skip to the next song.

Ima sends me a message on Whatsapp as Sia starts declaring she is titanium, but I skip both.

Fedez.

Chris Brown.

The Ramones.

Skip, skip, skip.

The tram is slow. It runs on a track that binds it along a trail of mandatory stops it can't escape. But not me.

I can go beyond.

I can choose.

For once in my life I am not chained to others' decisions. I can do what I want. I can choose the soundtrack for my first kiss with Barbara.

The Passengers, no.

Imagine Dragons, no.

Ultimo... maybe.

I like his song Sogni appesi, and also what he describes in his other one called Pianeti... but no.

I skip everything. I don't have a track to follow, I can go wherever and however I want. I can choose my stop.

And my stop is Jess Glynne.

I close my eyes again on that series of delicate notes.

As soon as the first tear reached her lips, they started trembling as if they were allergic.

I laughed nervously as Barbie sniffled.

I scratched my head, messing my hair.

Instead, she adjusted her hair putting it back in place by tucking it behind her ears as if she were taking back control of the situation.

I tried to get up from the toilet seat, but my knees were shaking, preventing me from standing up.

Barbie's first tear had reached the tip of her chin. It was ready to leave her face.

I remember feeling the nail polish coming off my fingernails and ending in my mouth.

Then, I saw the trail left on Barbie's cheek by that first tear, followed by the ensuing flood.

I felt like shit, I couldn't find the words to stop it.

"Barbie..."

Finally, I stood up from that toilet seat.

I took two steps towards her, taking her head in my hands as if it were the forbidden apple from the Garden of Eden.

I would have faced any punishment God would have inflicted upon me. I would have put up with anything for just one bite from that Paradise.

I kissed Barbie as if nothing else existed in the world beside the two of us.