

THE LAST COPPI

By Marco Pastonesi

PART ONE

THE CALENDAR OF 1959

## THE LAST ROOM

January 2, 1960. Eight forty-five. Tortona. Civil hospital, medical department, *dozzinanti* sector— which means paying patients— room number four. The room is there. It's still there. It's there. It tastes of suspended time, timeless time, time holding its breath.

The Tortona Civil Hospital is dedicated to Saint Anthony and Saint Margherita. It was built in 1907, opened in 1908, renovated in the 1920s, and was recently threatened with closure. The facade in piazza Cavallotti with the HOSPITAL signage and the liberty floral decorations is the original one, but only the facade remains, the ruins, the vestiges, the Aurelian walls from which you enter and leave. I do. I go in and out and go back to the new facility, where there is the emergency room. For the medical department, take the side entrance on via XX Settembre, outside there are magnolias and two cedars, inside there is the bar on the left, take the corridor to the right, and the second on the right is the room. His room. His last room. Few know it.

It has now become a waiting room, consisting of two rooms connected and combined, probably the old number two and number four rooms. The result is a single five-meter-by-eight space— the walls are cream-colored — with two windows and three doors, two that open onto the corridor, where the walls are pea-green, and one that opens onto an adjacent room. For those waiting there are eight blue plastic chairs, another eight red plastic chairs, a total of sixteen. Then a hanger, a coffee table, two heaters. On the walls, a reproduction of the Fourth Estate by Giuseppe Pellizza da Volpedo - Volpedo is twelve kilometres from Tortona -, a map of wards, posters for various city and provincial events. An unsuspecting, forgettable, room, anonymous even, if it weren't for the framed plaque. The heading: *Italian Cycling Federation, Alexandria Provincial Committee*. It is thus dedicated: "*For Fausto Coppi, so that the "Champion" may never be forgotten.*" Date: 19 December 1999. The signature: President Ferdinando Ansaldo. And framing this is not even an epitaph by Orio Vergani or a verse by Alfonso Gatto, nor a superlative by Dino Buzzati nor a participle by Anna Maria Ortese, not a Longobardism by Gianni Brera, nor a metaphor by Indro Montanelli, but a sonnet of the Milanese doctor and writer Francesco Fiorista: "Bones of glass, silk muscles / and two lungs blowing in the air / freeing you in the sky, beyond the destination/ ahead of all, in lonely breakaway. / And you'll fly between hundreds of bicycles / With no exertion on the pedals / And breathe the blue of the peaks / Blue more than the water of the seabed. / In a cold January, you have left us/To a million days always equal / of futile expectations and useless questions. / In your silent closing wings / We know: you were the big heron/ the most elegant that has ever flown." Last flight.

At the end of the corridor is the Chapel of the Immaculate. Among its benefactors: Liebig, Pernigotti, countless ladies of charity, Perseghini and Vanoni Furnaces. This is the reign of Monsignor Lorenzo Ferrarazzo, the chaplain of the hospital from 1940 to 1984. And on that day, on January 2, 1960, at that moment, at 8:45 in the morning, in that room, number four, next to that bed, another patient, in front of that dead body, Fausto Coppi, is the monsignor, together with the head physician Giovanni Astaldi, the doctors Carlo Poggi and Giustino Meardi, Sister Aurelia and Fausto's brother, Livio, frozen like statues. Powerless, aware, guilty, accomplices. The Plasmodium falciparum, the cruellest of all evil things — sickle-shaped blood parasites capable of fast and silent reproduction, and of striking, subtly and ruthlessly — killed the greatest Italian sportsman of the 20th century, perhaps the greatest of all time. That, 60 years after his death, 100 years after his birth, it still seems impossible, still sounds incredible.

My story of Coppi, which began on the streets and pavements of cycling's home, begins right here where his life was interrupted, never ended. The arrival point has been transformed, as

was the case in the first Tour de France and Giro d'Italia, into a new starting point. It is a journey through time, a path through memory, a leg through history: on a bike, by train, in a car, looking, talking, smelling, feeling, between passion, with relatives, with friends, with riders, looking for confirmation or denial of what was written in the books, speaking, searching what has been deposited in the archives. Not a copy-and-paste, but a listen-and-note, a record-and-transcribe. Castellania, Novi Ligure and Tortona are the three leaders of a Coppi-inhabited area, which still smells of the 20th century, with the slow pace of the countryside, with the indolent gait of simplicity. It's hard not to be affected by these places, by these houses, by these people. Coppi belongs to these places, so much so that today Castellania has become Castellania-Coppi. He belongs to these houses, a silent punctuation of the landscape and of humanity, and belongs to these people, their flag and symbol, son and hero, one of them, the only one who defeated poverty and modesty, the only one who made it.

"I see your town and I find it tragic," writes Gianni Brera in a piece published later in the book *Il Sesso degli Angeli* [The Sex of Angels]. "The vine leaves have taken the colour of the earth. Muddy hills, gorges, skeleton trees, a few erratic rocks along a stream that is scattered with skulls. People in your town have your lopsided bones, your leather muscles. And they bear on their face the memory of hunger that has become a desperate, if not inhuman, will. Ancient volcanoes spewed this clay mud from which you were born."

And yet in those years, the lands of Coppi were the centre of the cycling world: here are the pioneers of the bicycle industry, here are the prophets and even the evangelists, here - above all - are him and his apostles and then his disciples. I am sure that, knocking on the doors of all houses, from Villa Romagnano to Villalvernia, from Pozzolo Formigaro to Gavi, other stories about Coppi would emerge. So much to lose. And to avoid getting lost, I want to focus on 1959, the last year, a year unknowingly lived by Coppi as if there was no 1960, as if it was the last time. Like he felt inside the end.

Because the less well-known, less-explored, less-discovered Coppi is this one: the last. A Coppi that is struggling, who plods, who huffs and puffs. The one that prays that the other riders will slow down. The one that gets the organizers to give him a ride. The one who considers a bike to be a safe-haven and a flight, not more in riding, but in life. The one who also considers the group as a shelter. The one of 1959. They're his last fires. Fireworks, glows, sparks. Reflected light, recovered, remembered. A long farewell made of 100 goodbyes, a last farewell parade, which he would like to extend by one more year, more and more as a captain and not as a player as a bright star, even if already turned off, as a comet star, as a reference point, but also as a man unable to get off his bicycle, to divide, and to split from his bicycle. A Coppi in twilight, in shadow, in dark. An ancient animal. The last time, the last round, the last runway, the last hire, the last race, the last farewell. Every time is the last time. To try, to find, to live, to feel alive, to remember, to be remembered.

THE LAST TEAM

1959. In Camp David, for the first time since the Second World War, the presidents of the United States, Dwight Eisenhower, and the Soviet Union, Nikita Kruscev, meet. Cuba is about to be taken over by Fidel Castro. In Italy there is the Christian Democrat Government: The Prime Minister is Antonio Segni, who succeeded Amintore Fanfani; Its secretary, Aldo Moro. Milan, with Nils Liedholm from Sweden, Juan Alberto Schiaffino from Uruguay and José Altafini from Brazil, wins the league. In Paris, Nicola Pietrangeli wins the French Open at Roland Garros. Rome is preparing for the Olympics. Domenico Modugno and Johnny Dorelli win the Italian song festival in Sanremo, with the song *Piove*, ". Families of workers live on a salary of about 40,000 to 50,000 lire a month, families of employees live on between 80,000 and 90,000. A coffee at a bar costs 50lire, one daily newspaper costs 30 lire, bread is 140 lire per kilogram, pasta 200, petrol 120 lire per litre, the Fiat 500 half a million.

In 1959, Coppi is still pedalling now at the age of 40, and his season will be lived frantically. Coppi is Coppi, as everyone says, justifying, glorifying, unnecessarily trying to explain. But Coppi is actually two Coppis, a double life lived, not least in his family situation. Bruna and Marina are in Novi Ligure in viale delle Rimembranze, Giulia and Faustino are also in Novi Ligure on the road for Serravalle in Villa Carla, six kilometres away on foot, but a thousand miles away in terms of atmosphere. Coppi is a double in life and a double in his work, from rider and director, businessman, testimonial advertising, manager, sports man and showman. He, who preaches about training as discipline, order, religion, then ritual and almost ceremony, now does what he can on his bike, which is little, less, never enough.

Used to not wasting time on the street or on the track, Coppi doesn't even waste it on the ground. The holidays of Christmas 1958 and New Year 1959 are spent with Giulia, in Novi Ligure, at home after a trip to Bilbao to build the new team. There is a lot of curiosity, and also a bit of anxiety: some fear that this totem of cycling may stay out of the saddle. The *Gazzetta Dello Sport*, that pink secular gospel, assumes that the new formation will be called Coppi-Lube, Italian but with Spanish representation. Coppi talked to the Iberian National Technical Commissioner Dalmacio Langarica, who as a rider won a Vuelta (in 1946) with seven stages, and to Federico Martín Bahamontes, the incumbent Spanish champion, a formidable climber (twice finishing as King of the Mountains in the Tour and Vuelta, once in the Giro). José Herrero Berrendero, nephew of that Julián Berrendero Espinosa, is to be included in the new formation. Espinosa, "The Blue-Eyed Negro," won the Vuelta twice in 1941 and 1942 and overall had eleven victories. Bahamontes is hungry: The Gazzetta claims that in 1959 he would like to ride in the Vuelta, Tour and the Giro. It's absolutely justified that Coppi is trying to hire Bahamontes. The meeting is in Toledo: Bahamontes invites Coppi to hunt, and then to eat a meal of stew as they do in Madrid, and thus it becomes a game, like pouring wine from an oar without dropping a drop. Then comes the inevitable, predictable question: "Come ride with me?" Bahamontes pretends not to understand, but Coppi remains poised: "You understood very well," he adds: "You could win the tour." Magical words: Bahamontes accepts. Not so much for the fee (one million pesetas, not all of which will be received), but for the charm of having a man at his disposal who seems to understand and know everything about cycling.

On January 7, 1959, Coppi passes through Milan before going to the Sestriere "for the ritual oxygenation treatment of pre-season." Ten days go by. Giulia is also at Sestriere. Coppi is then in Paris on January 19<sup>th</sup> for personal affairs: the new team, which is also expected to include Bahamontes and Berrendero, is also the focus of his concern, and to which is added the Argentine specialist Jorge Bátiz, who in 1958 helped Coppi's success in Six Days at the Estadio Luna Park in Buenos Aires.

Coppi says, and does not say, in the Gazzetta, he trusts that soon - but never so late as this-training for Milan-San Remo will begin and, "if all is well", he will participate for the first time in his career in the Vuelta. And finally he trains. But he did it riding. Every race is worth training for. Because Coppi has no time, time is tight, he holds it, he forces it, he throws it, he would need 36 hours, and to extend the days he shortens the nights. These races are not only races, but also stories of men and spaces, of slow speed, and here Coppi escapes and chase himself.

On February 10, he rides in Lodève, France: first is Jean Bobet, Coppi finishes 11th equal. February 11, at midnight, he is in Saint-Raphael, France. On 12 February at 5.20 a.m., he travels to Novi Ligure, to his home, then goes to Acqui Terme, to the Hotel delle Nuove Terme, which offered riders restorative mud to lose those crucial grams of weight. There, he arranges a press conference to announce his new team after a long wait. It's finally called Tricofilina-Coppi. The patron is Alceo Moretti.

Moretti is, in his field, a genius. A man from Marche Region, born in Pesaro in 1921, two years after Coppi, and dies in Ancona in 2012. Rifleman, then partisan. Journalist, in print and television, publisher, PR, promotions and communication specialist, advertiser. There is a lot of sport in his life: as a sportsman, he is mainly an athlete, basketball and soccer player; as a coach, only football; as a sports director and general manager, cycling. At the end of 1958, he became the commercial director of Tricofilina, in Milan, the factory "Ai Colli Fioriti" in Via Tadino 8, near Corso Buenos Aires, the headquarters is in Via Carità 20, near Corso Lodi. Their flagship product is the oil-based brilliantine as a certified remedy for baldness and dandruff. But they also make cream and beard soap.

The marriage between Moretti and cycling or, better, between Moretti and Coppi is born one lunchtime: Moretti always goes to a restaurant 50 meters from the offices of some newspaper, frequented by journalists. One day Caesar Facetti of the "Corriere Lombardo" arrives broken. Angry: "A scandal." He explains: "A champion like Fausto Coppi without a team and without help." He states: "On the eve of the season, Fausto is sidelined and seems destined to dedicate himself only to making his bikes. Yet he wants to ride again. He had a team with Pasta Ghigi, but at the last minute he was dropped by the sports director." Moretti does not hesitate for a moment: he asks Facetti how much a professional team costs. And since it's roughly the same amount that the company has given him for advertising, the decision is immediate: "I'll take care of it, I'll form the Coppi team."

Moretti is bluffing. If he is talking about soccer and athletics ok, but this is cycling. but Moretti feels he can, rather, he has to.

Tricofilina has two CEOs, Mr. Burke and Dr. Peretti. Peretti is absolutely opposed to Operation Coppi, Burke is extremely sceptical because he believes that people no longer love the 'Champion' as they used to. Luck helps Moretti. One day he is talking about Coppi with Burke once again, and, as he approaches the window, he sees Fausto Coppi getting out of a car. From the window, he can see people crossing the road, approaching him, surrounding him, besieging him. Moretti calls Mr. Burke to the window and says: "Do you see what's happening down there? There in the middle of that crowd is Fausto Coppi." Burke looks, then nods: he's on board. With Peretti, it's harder. He has no intention of giving up, he does not want to know, and he will not even be seen at the press conference to present the project.

Moretti, who has already given his word to Coppi, is very embarrassed. But he needs his support. Then he gambles. A new shaving cream, an experiment, was recently launched, but the product is not good, the warehouses are full of unsold cream. So Moretti goes to Peretti and offers him a test, which is also a bet on his future at the company: "I will create an ad campaign with Fausto Coppi shaving and saying: I only shave with the Tricofilina cream. And I will fill the shops and the spaces of Campania –the test region - and if I empty the warehouses, you will support me forever." Peretti looks at Moretti laughing: "If we sell shaving cream because Coppi uses it, I'll become a monk." A month later, Moretti knocks on Peretti's door: "Sir, have you chosen the convent yet?" Peretti doesn't even remember the bet. "You told me that if we sold the cream, you would become a monk. The warehouses have emptied out, we sold everything. I mean, did you choose an order, perhaps Franciscan?" A few days later, at lunch, Peretti admits in front of Moretti and Coppi that he was wrong. This is how Tricoofilina-Coppi is born. Moretti studies and brings on board friends and journalists, recruits young or misunderstood riders, to be launched or relaunched, without contracts. The big hit - Coppi's accomplice- will be Bahamontes.