

Michela Murgia – Chiara Tagliaferri

MORGANA

Translation by Olivia Jung

Introduction

The first black woman arrested for sitting in a bus seat for whites in the segregated United States of 1955 wasn't called Rosa Parks. Her name was Claudette Colvin. She was fifteen years old, she was pregnant by a married man much older than her, she came from a degraded family background, and she wasn't part of the civil rights movement: she was just tired. Rosa Parks committed her act of civil disobedience nine months later; she was a mature woman from a respectable family, as well as a civil rights activist. So why was Claudette's name forgotten and replaced by Rosa's in that narrative of rebellion? The answer is simple: because we like listening to heroic stories, and even though heroes and heroines do things we would never do, they still have to at least somewhat resemble someone we would like to be ourselves. Claudette proves that this rule is twice as true for women: in order to become truly popular, not only does the female protagonist of an adventure leading to success need to prove that she achieved it, but also that she attained it through her utmost commitment and maximum efforts, that she overcame every obstacle, and that she deserved to get there thanks to her admirable life or feelings. They call it the "Ginger Rogers Syndrome": it implies that to stand next to Fred Astaire, a woman must do the same things, but also backwards and in high heels. It is the subtle misogynist practice of female meliorism: it no longer says that women can't achieve the same goals as men; they can but, if they want to accomplish them, they have to be better than men.

In this book, there are women who never suffered from the Ginger Rogers Syndrome and who reached their goals nonetheless. They are mystical warmongers, ghosts wandering through the moorland, cynical girls, porn stars with a brain, dirty-playing athletes, queens of the circus of life, raggedy fashion designers, extremists of wounds as art, uncompromising architects, transgressive icons far outside the box. Invoking an ideal sisterhood would be out of place: each of them is an "only child" so to speak, and maybe it is better that way. You will find very few good intentions in their lives: they had their own intents, like everyone, but it didn't really matter to them whether they were good or bad. Many of them fought hard to achieve their results, but none of them did so in an acceptably heroic way. They were attacked, despised, condemned, pointed at and, if the times had been different, they would have been burned at the stake. Some of them had terrible families that turned them into survivors, others grew up in happy families and had to come to terms with them anyway, because happiness is another thing you have to survive when you live outside the box. Some of them had children while others chose not to, but the maternity experienced or avoided was never their cage. They all paid a very high price for every step they took. And yet, whether they were aware of it or not, every one of them (even the ones with the most selfish and solitary walks of life) paved a piece of the way we walk on today. Their stories aren't uplifting, but they are certainly educational. They teach freedom, setting aside imposed rules, and being yourself even when no one (including other women) understands who you are or what you are doing. Weird, difficult, unconventional, and even bitchy, in their own way they all come from the mysterious genealogical tree of Morgana (also known as Morgan le Fay): a seed that passes from hand to hand and arrives to anyone, man or woman, who wants to live without having to justify the uniqueness of their own story. The story of Rosa Parks made its way to us because it was the story of the "right" woman sitting in the wrong place. We were never told the story of Claudette Colvin because the "wrong" woman couldn't sit in the right place in history.

This is why the book you hold in your hands is dedicated to her: she was a Morgana without even knowing it.

Grace Jones (pages 55-61)

Fireflies are rare. You might have “caught” one when you were a child, held it for a few moments inside your cupped hands before letting it fly away. If you have done it at least once and you have seen that light pulsing between your fingers, then it will be a little less difficult to understand Grace Jones. Bev Firefly, Beverly the firefly. This is what everybody calls her back in Spanish Town, in that Jamaica in the middle of the Caribbean Sea where the creole melting pot has colored humanity with a thousand nuances. Hers is the darkest shade of all, hence her nickname, because her face disappears in the dark of night and the only thing you see is the glow of her eyes and teeth, like the lights of fireflies. Finding a definition for Grace is challenging. Whether it is model, singer, actor, they are all reductive, and some actually prefer placing her in the Olympus of legends, gay icons, and multifaceted divinities. Grace Jones’ date of birth should be May 19, 1948, but time is a relative concept for her, as she herself states, “We are in space, not time.” She almost never knows what time of day or day of the week it is because she doesn’t think it is relevant. She stores her memories by placing them in wide categories, imprecise and happily chaotic, enclosed in a vague “It happened a while ago.” And a while ago is when Grace’s story began, starting from her homeland. “They came to Jamaica on a Viking ship first, and then on a pirate one. The people from my island made love to the people from far away. They drank a lot, then made love. So I am the daughter of all the cultures that blended together on the island. To understand, you have to come to Jamaica.”

Grace’s father Robert is an Apostolic pastor and her mother Marjorie is a seamstress; somewhat out of necessity, she teaches her children at an early age how to make their own clothes. Nothing store-bought gets into their house, everything they wear is made by them. Grace immediately picks up on color harmonies and, above all, she learns the value of having a very personal style, which already set her apart the moment she came into the world: “I came out of my mother feet first. When I arrived, I was kicking and all pissed off.” And there were plenty of reasons for her to be pissed off from an early age. Her parents, in fact, leave her and her brothers with their maternal grandmother and take off to the United States. Her grandmother’s husband is a Pentecostal preacher and strict disciplinarian, a violent and terrible man. Grace and her brothers grow up between orders and prohibitions, stifled by a religious discipline that verges on oppression: radio, television, and movies are banned, they are not allowed to wear open-toed shoes despite the heat because showing your feet is forbidden, and shirts must be buttoned all the way up. However, the forced sessions of Bible studies and prayers enforced with belt-lashings only resulted in her taking her distance from a God perceived as sexophobic, chauvinistic, and violent. “We were beaten for any little act of dissent, and hit harder the worse the disobedience. It was all about the Bible and beatings. It formed me as a person, my choices, men I have been attracted to – all that can be traced back to how I was brought up.” Grace, of course, can only think about one thing: running away. But she is still too young, and her parents will take many more years before deciding to reunite with their children. Grace is basically a teenager by the time she leaves Spanish Town.

“I was thirteen when I crossed the water to America, feeling no emotion about leaving Jamaica behind. There was little to look back on but confusion and penitence. I told myself that whatever happens next, I am going to make sure I do my own thing.” The Jones family lives in Syracuse, then in Philadelphia, and finally New York; to Grace, America seems like a land of wonders where

everything is permitted. The concept of sin is left behind, and the overflow of new liberties makes everything possible. Grace starts with small dreams: first she wants to teach Spanish, then she wants to act on stage. In the meantime, she starts hanging out at hippie communes where she experiences her precocious initiations with LSD, which immediately dilate the dimension of her dreams. She talks at length in her autobiography about her casual relationship with drugs, writing: "I'm convinced that I need to try everything, at least once." Over time, she experiments with acid (she has a legendary experience on ecstasy with Timothy Leary, the guru of psychedelic substances), a lot of cocaine (though it was never her favorite), and even heroin (but only once, and she admits that she fortunately found the drug of happiness disgusting). Throughout her life, she will always have a shamanic relationship with narcotics, but she came out incredibly unscathed from an era that decimated most of her friends through AIDS and hepatitis.

While others got stuck in hell, Grace always found her way back and "wasn't even in particularly bad shape," by her own admission. Vanity, as she writes, is what saved her: she didn't want to waste away, which means that maybe, underneath it all, she loves herself.

She starts earning some money as a model and is signed by Wilhelmina, the leading modelling agency for exotic models. Wilhelmina likes girls who burn hot, who are clearly hand grenades, and no one is more so than Grace. She introduces her to Andre, the hairstyle divinity who created Farrah Fawcett's waves; first he separates her hair in locks, then he colors them. He paints on her body years before Keith Haring, and he becomes that body's lover. Wilhelmina strongly believes in Grace and thinks she is ready to conquer Europe. She puts her on a plane to Paris and the girl from Spanish Town finds herself sharing an apartment with two beauties: Jerry Hall, who will become Mick Jagger's wife, and the actress-to-be Jessica Lange. Grace and Jerry become inseparable, their antithetical beauty will unleash a frenzy in the streets of Paris, where they move like involuntary Pied Pipers of Hamelin but, instead of rats, it's men they enjoy driving mad. They don't have much money, so they make do with second-hand clothes from a store called Rag Queen: they are diviners, they can sort through dusty bags full of mold and pull out vintage items from the Forties, which they use to create new styles that the fashion designers for whom they model will straight up copy. "Sometimes we wore sequins, some African bone around our neck, and nothing else above, nor a shred of skirt below." It's the Seventies, everything seems possible in the groundbreaking atmosphere of the Love Revolution. Grace and Jerry practice a lot of that love, but they have a problem: they share a similar taste in men. They settle on the "first come, first serve" rule, but the competition is fierce. By day, Grace takes over the runways striding like a panther, and soon the covers of magazines become hers as well. In 1976, the fashion designer Issey Miyake chooses her as the absolute protagonist of a revolutionary fashion show: the scene is dominated (for the first time) by twelve black models. Paris initiates her in several ways. It was at a party there that the legend of Grace-the-singer is born: as the story goes, when the DJ starts playing Dirty Old Man, Grace jumps on a table and starts singing with her strange deep voice; a friend of hers hears her and tells her boyfriend, a record producer, et voilà, Grace returns to New York at the court of the legendary producer Tom Moulton, the King Midas of the disco mix. He is the one who builds Grace's singing persona that will become all the rage in gay clubs. Her iconic haircut, a flattop with the sides shaved off, definitively transforms her into an alien cybernetic Nefertiti. That haircut, which is already an

armor in itself, represents a catharsis from all the tears she shed in Jamaica, when her grandmother used to brush her hair so brusquely that she would make her cry. The anti-frizz and detangling products that Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie will describe years later in *Americanah* were prohibited by the old preacher because he claimed that the religion forbade them. She has the inspiration for that hairstyle while watching a boxing match: at a certain point, this boxer climbs into the ring, disrobes and takes his hood off. Stricken by his haircut, she runs to her hairstylist to get the exact same cut. She will later describe the experience: “Shaving my head led directly to my first orgasm. I’d never had sex like that before. It was sex from another era, another solar system.” The connection between aesthetics and identity has rarely been clearer in another woman, and it will seldom reappear in the future with the same clarity: Grace wants to become how she appears because she wants to appear how she is.