

Pierdante Piccioni
Pierangelo Sapegno

GUILTY OF AMNESIA

Translation by Olivia Jung

The elevator doors made a weird screeching sound when they opened onto the third floor of the courthouse. To this day, Pierdante still couldn't figure out if he made up that noise in a dream or if it was real. He was sitting on a bench in a hallway with polished floors and partially open doors. The door in front of him was the only one that was wide open. There was the name of a prosecutor on the door tag. He couldn't read it from where he was sitting, but he knew her name well: Margherita Palmisano, Assistant District Attorney.

The elevator made that damn screeching sound that grated on his nerves and a woman stepped out. 'That must be her,' he thought as she walked down the hall, striding like a soldier on her high heels. She was accompanied by a man with a receding hairline, wide shoulders, and a plaid jacket of indefinite colors underneath a heavy brownish raincoat. He carried a gym bag in his right hand, and the Nike sneakers he wore on his little feet squeaked on the floor as he walked. The man never stopped talking as he headed toward the open door in front of Pierdante Piccioni. A police officer winced out of what looked like disgust as he heard him go by. The woman, on the other hand, bounced on her heels with martial confidence; her gaze was fixed on an unknown thought, apparently far enough from the outpour of words coming from Plaid Jacket. Her legs were long and sinuous, she was wearing a light-colored pantsuit under a grey coat. Her hair was brown and wavy, her lips thin, and her nose aquiline. She would have been a very attractive woman, which she actually was, if it weren't for that nose. Too narrow and pointy. Pierdante couldn't explain why, but he immediately took it as a sign of wickedness. He hoped that she wasn't the prosecutor he was waiting for. He watched her as she walked in his direction. 'Keep walking,' he thought. 'Maybe she's just a lawyer, not everyone here is a prosecutor.'

If he had to pinpoint when his fear began, it would have to be in that very moment. It started with a feeling. They had called him in for questioning as a person of interest in some event he wasn't familiar with; all he had to do was go in and explain who he was: the head of an emergency room who had been in an accident and lost his memory. He was the least reliable witness on the face of Earth. He actually thought everyone already knew about it, including this Palmisano prosecutor, and that he was only summoned out of some boring formality, which is why he didn't even bother to bring a medical certificate.

She stopped by the door that was right in front of him. Plaid Jacket kept on talking on and on. He was saying how a friend of his got him into jogging so much that now he was captive of "this euphoria that overtakes you when you're done giving your soul running on the street. It's like a drug, Margherita. Doctors say so too, you know. Running creates serotonin."

Margherita didn't say anything. She pulled out her phone and started dialing a number while he kept on talking. "Palmisano here, I just arrived," she said. "Bring me the folder I asked you about yesterday evening."

She ended the call, put the phone away, and stepped through the doorway as he followed behind her. She took off her coat and hung it with familiar nonchalance on the hat stand.

"You know that doing too much sport makes you impotent, right?" That was her voice. It had an unusual cadence, with vague Sicilian traces. He laughed, still following behind her. His sneakers still squeaking. "Seriously," she said. "Doctors say so. It's a known fact."

She seemed certain about it. Pier thought to himself, 'Doctors never said such a thing. Now I'll get up and let her know very politely.'

"What doctors?" he replied as he kept on laughing. "Trust me. You have a nice body and sports help you stay in shape."

"I do Pilates twice a week. You run every morning. Why is that? Come on, tell me the truth. Deep down you're trying to forget something, there's something you don't want to think about. Are you afraid of getting old?"

Another laugh. A little more nervous than before.

"Excuse me, Gino, but I have stuff to do now."

"Come on, just a coffee and then you can get started."

He stepped through the open door and she followed shortly thereafter.

Pierdante got annoyed. He had been waiting for who knows how long and now they were about to go get coffee. He stood up and timidly addressed Palmisano.

"Excuse me. I'm Piccioni. Pierdante Piccioni."

"Ah, yes," she said. "Good morning. Just wait here." And she headed to the elevator with Plaid Jacket following her again.

The police officer next to Pierdante looked at him sternly, as if he had just been reprimanded: we'll tell him when it's his time to be heard.

"Come on in, professor. The Assistant District Attorney is waiting for you."

She was waiting for him? It took her half an hour to get that coffee, after which she came back floating on her high heels, without so much as a glance in his direction. She was still accompanied by the guy in the plaid jacket. They closed themselves into her office for another half hour.

This time, however, the courthouse officer was nice to him and seemed in a completely serene state of mind, even though Pierdante didn't really like her that much. After all, he was summoned by the prosecutor for events that happened during his amnesia. That is why it never even crossed his mind to come with a lawyer by his side. "They know perfectly well that I'm an amnesiac. I'll get out of here in a few minutes," he told himself.

She stood up from the chair behind a desk that was buried in a paroxysmal mess of papers and folders, which she pretended to put in order just to place them back where they were. She reached out to shake his hand and invited him have a seat in front of her while Gino said goodbye and left.

Shortly thereafter, a man walked in. It was a judicial police marshal in plain clothes. He sat in front of the computer that was on a small table covered in scattered papers. Pier wondered what they needed all that paper for.

She sat down. "The court clerk will put on record everything we say, professor," she said in a very sweet tone. He kept on looking at her nose, after searching in vain in her eyes for the same kindness expressed by her manners. "We can begin," she added.

Piccioni placed his hands on his knees. For some reason, that office reminded him of a classroom. His high school diploma exams. And that indefinable fear, attenuated by the knowledge of being prepared and the awareness that it was only the last hurdle before happiness.

Palmisano started by asking him to confirm his basic personal information. Then, relaxing in her chair, she asked him point-blank: “Do you know Mrs. Francesca Marchisio?”

“Never heard of her,” he answered calmly. “The first time I ever saw that name was when I read it in the letter you sent me.”

She moved a stack of papers and reached across the desk to pass him a photograph.

“This is her. Do you recognize her?”

Piccioni looked at the photo with a degree of curiosity. His memory went up to 2001. After being in an accident that put him in a coma on May 31, 2013, he woke up on October 25 from twelve years before. He even wrote two books about his story. He was an accomplished doctor, the head of an emergency room, a consultant for the Ministry of Health; they tried to retire him with a disability pension because the medical report referred to him as mentally ill. He fought against everyone and everything, rejecting the fate they were pinning on him with all his strength. He overcame hundreds of tests and exams, studying day and night in the storage room of a hospital hallway, where they relegated him while waiting on a decision regarding his appeal. In the end, he managed to have his way: he passed the exams and the general director was forced to reluctantly restore him to his former position as department head. He said to him, smiling through clenched teeth, “I’m happy I found again the Pier I used to know. Welcome back.” He got calls from basically every TV channel: he had become a national case.

“Never seen her before in my life...” he said after a few second. She drew another deep breath.

“Do you know Mr. Gabriele Nunziata?”

“Listen, as you well know...” he started, but was briskly cut off.

“Please just answer the questions.” And she restated the question, “Do you know Mr. Gabriele Nunziata?”

“Absolutely not,” he replied in a tone much less kind than before. “And in this case too, the first time I ever heard of him was on that letter.”

Again, she placed one hand on the papers and with the other hand she slid the photograph of a man toward him. He had round cheeks, a frown, and slanted eyes.

“And do you recognize this one?” she asked.

Pier started to think he was in a dream. Maybe that was exactly what was going on: he was dreaming. He relaxed, he wanted to see how it was going to pan out.

“I’ve never seen him before either, but I’d like to...”

“I already told you not to interrupt and just answer the questions,” she said raising her voice.

“I repeat. Never seen him before.”

“Really? Then look at this.”

She pulled out another photo and placed it in front of him. There were three people smiling together at the camera. The woman was that Francesca Marchisio. The ruddy man in a black turtleneck sweater was an

indubitably more jovial version of Gabriele Nunziata. And then there was a man standing between them; he was wearing a grey jacket and his hair was slightly less salt-and-pepper than his own right now: that was him in the picture.

“And how do you explain this?”

What the fuck was going on?

This bad dream was one of the worst nightmares for an amnesiac.

It's the one where they try to hold you accountable for something you can't remember, and therefore can't even explain. He'd had plenty of dreams like that. Even of the romantic variety: a woman stalking him everywhere, even following him up to his doorstep, to ask him why he couldn't recognize her. One time, instead, he read about the arrest of some entrepreneur; his wife, who was reading the paper next to him, told him they used to hang out a lot: “You went out to dinner several times.” Oh, really? If he was doing business with him, and he were to mention his name to the prosecutors, then how could he even defend himself? He spent many sleepless nights over it, he followed every piece of news about the trial to see if he had been mentioned anywhere. But that man was not Gabriele Nunziata. This was a completely different story.

He stared at the picture while trying to give an answer. “Well, of course. It must've been taken during my amnesia. You know, over the course of those twelve years I could have met thousands of people and taken as many photos. So, unfortunately, I'm unable to provide an explanation.”

He looked up at the prosecutor with compassion in his eyes. But there was no trace of the kind expression she had in the beginning.

And he couldn't manage to wake himself up.

He suddenly started to sweat. He could feel his heart beating fast. He turned to the marshal, who was staring at him stone-faced. Motionless.

“Francesca Marchisio and Gabriele Nunziata were found dead in the basement of the old Port Authority. They were probably killed seven years ago. Didn't you know?”

My God, what was happening to him?