

Requiem for a Shadow

We've had bad air for quite some time, a thin powder coat wrapped the city around. It hadn't rained for a while now and the only puddles one could see were dog pee and the world's sins, waiting to be washed, accumulating day by day.

The girl who was leaving at 9/B in Via Negarville was the typical easy target with which it was impossible to burn yourself or lose touch. She was 25, red-headed, about 175cm, weighing roughly 60 kilograms. Even the pale light of that February was looking good on her. She was beautiful, a timid beauty, otherwise indefinable.

He relaxed his shoulders and focused. Though the lens of his T90 canon, the red-headed lady stopped on the sidewalk and looked at her watch. The thirty-old man she was seeing was very late, as always. This was fairly predictable as they were also colleagues. She taught primary school. He taught high school. This was the only touch of originality to the script. As soon as she saw him taking the turn too wide for the hurry, she heard the Golf's engine over-revving. The teacher honked, approached the sidewalk, and she smiled at him just before she got in the car.

Puglise photographed her so, happy and with love at the bottom of her eyes. Looking at other people's lives, there's always something to learn: their attitude, their taste, their habits, their features. Over time, you end up believing that you know them for real. Sometimes you even become fond of them. That's rubbish, he said to himself, that's only stuff for solitary hearths.

In the rearview mirror of the second multiple series, he watched the Golf shrinking and disappearing beyond the plant at the corner of the road. The smoke of the factory went unnoticed to nothingness of the ten-storey buildings, to the sick chestnut threes, to the countryside, which now had been almost completely turned into an industrial estate, spreading all around.

He put his Canon camera away and abandoned himself to sitting. Lying in ambush over so many nights waiting for a blonde woman with cougar looks that he had been hunting for two weeks had exhausted him who felt like he was about to end up in a coffin. He remained in his car, waiting for hours freezing in the night, while in the chalet the temperature was rising steadily to the stars, and felt he had no strength left. Not to mention his continuous crawling in the garden with his 50mm on his neck and his inevitable retreat napping before the tiger passed to the second round.

He peeked into the thermos. There was a bit of coffee at the bottom of the thermos that he threw down his throat just to smoke on it. He then raised the car's volume. Bix Beiderbecke sounded as shy as a little boy getting his first real kiss. He enjoyed his solo while smoking going down the road. Relentlessly, reached Mirafiori, then Turin. He was exhausted then.

Another two minutes and everything would come back to his place, ready for use for the next time, he knew, and yet he stayed there until the silence buried the last bit of *Sorry's* song. He then rolled up the camera roll, set off, and left after starting to screech.

There was no time to die yet.

He left his Canon in the office and pulled out his padded trench. The saleswoman who had sold him the trench had defined it as suitable for all occasions. It was practical and formal at the same time, durable and warm, indestructible. Indeed, on the green trench, the leaves

and stains of mud passed almost unnoticed. Swirling in the back of a scaffold with that thing on was looking pretty ridiculous. He then ended up realising that he had to buy something sportier after returning the to the hanger.

“Hey boy!” He said when going through the kitchen, “do you have any messages for me?”

“Consuelo is pregnant, boss.” Rico said from the living room.

Puglise opened a pack of cheese ships before reaching the other room. The TV was on the channel broadcasting telenovelas all the time. That was for him simply a way to escape reality.

“It was the priest’s fault,” the parrot continued, while patting a chip on the fly. “It’s the fifth month, troubles are soon to come.”

The first one was from an NGO’s HR Department urging him to send them a quote. The second was there exactly for the same reason. Then the third one came down, who was there as invitee from the federation undertaking a data protection course. Finally, he started listening to the accountant stomping his social security bill while trying to find a way out of a particularly unstable financial situation.

It was June 2016 already and he was only thinking about the worst.

He was playing with the glass while scribbling a few notes from his conversation on a note-block. He would have gotten about one-thousand one-hundred euros a month. The only way for him to survive would have been getting paid under the table and saving as much as possible. It would have taken only a little bit of effort for him to start his business. The accountant also stressed the fact that he needed to pay government tax on his own income.

“Otherwise,” said the accountant, using that priestly tone that used to make him feel quite irritated, “they will take away your license immediately.”

He then deleted the message and turned the music on.

He did not remember what disc he had left on the plate, but it only took four beats for him to recognise *The Bridge*. While seating on his chair, his feet on the desk, he immersed himself in Sonny Rollins’ saxophone and he felt like being on Williamsburg Bridge, steel under his ass, his feet dangling on the East River, Manhattan on the right and Brooklyn to the left.

“Hey Sonny,” he thought, “how is the world on the other side?” Better, worse, or as disgusting as it is here. Rollins did not answer that question, limiting himself to make a very low note like hell on the saxophone. Puglise raised the volume of his Hi-Fi and went to the bathroom.

Immobile, standing in front of the toilet bowl, he waited for it to come out. While turning to the mirror on the sink, he saw himself as fat as Fats Waller and Fats Navarro put together. Shit, he said mumbling. He would have never become a typical elegant private eye like Safrakis. He was too tired to even afford thinking about style. He had gotten very close to that, but that was during the golden years, and the golden years were a long way gone, forever.

His face did not make any discounts. He was one of those men who kept repeating themselves that that was one of those bad days. In his mind, sooner or later the wheel would have restarted, turning as before. Denying the evidence was pointless at the time, even sunset’s avenue had an end at some point. Only four months were left before he could retire. Once he had raised one thousand a month, he had no need to actually start imagining what kind of miserable life he was going to live with that misery.

And he needed even less to imagine the idyll he had the option to live again: inevitable infidelities, altar boys running away with their *papi's* credit card, absent employees, borrowers who never pay and kept suddenly disappearing, and so on. A shabby procession of quite mundane assignments and clients who seem to be ever more inclined to ask for the truth and to end in disappointment, not accepting it. How much that would have cost was definitely a different matter.

He had seen enough of his colleagues buried in their raincoats. Compared to them, he only had the only benefit of having 2,300 euros on his bank account and some money to pay government taxes with. Then he went back to looking at the fat man in the mirror.

“Fuck you.” Salvatore Puglise murmured then. He was sixty-four years old, the dean of private investigators working in Turin. All he needed was money, money, money. And in the meantime, given that his pee was taking longer than expected, he only had to wait for it to end while enjoying a cigarette.

The good thing about having moved the office to the studio next to the apartment would have been to be able to always stay on the piece and with greater comfort. When you no longer have a secretary and your own work comes looking for you without notice, gives you the option of only crossing a corridor and an internal door to both find time to be productive and to rest, if and when necessary.

It was really a pity that because of the crisis, abbreviated divorce procedures and ruthless competition, there were not many busy days. In Turin alone, there were seventy agencies, although that figure had doubled as the province was counted in. Younger investigators had come up with new services such as marketing investigations. They were not longer the investigators of the past, they were service providers, they served businesses, they offered services to persons and businesses working in different sectors. In addition to this, funeral parlours were marketing their special offers everywhere around town. There was no way around this, for the dead and for the living, those times were very hard times.

He then started working on his quote and tried to keep his fare as low as possible. His hourly rate was fifty euros, excluding VAT and other expenses. He would have worked at least four hours a day. He came up with this calculation just to make sure the new graduate student who was going to get the job would not feel too excited by getting paid a total of five-hundred euros, a psychological threshold.

The HR Director's secretary had also written an email to him, to which Puglise had replied, attaching a file with a quote. The client should have approved it, after discussing it first with him, and completing a mandate describing the job before actually taking it from him. As he was on the computer, he took advantage of it to check on the red.

The profile was public and impersonal. On the board, he published the usual bullshit, in the field where he entered his personal information he had no reservation entering irrelevant details, such as place of birth, work history, residence, all details which he could have avoided sharing. Anna Nobili, born in Lucera on March 9th 1990, a teacher, living in South Mirafiori, since September 2015. She was engaged.

The last post was dated to the previous day, a self-portrait she took in front of the Moloch of Cabiria. Puglise printed the photo and studied it. Its resolution was pretty poor, it must have been taken using a pretty old phone model, the image was dark, the flash had made her hair shine brightly in the dark like a western sunset leaving the rest of the picture resting in the dark. He cut the image and stored it together with the other ones, took a Canon, opened it and pulled out the roller.

It was a quarter to seven. If she only tried to hurry up, she would get the chance to find Revelli in his studio, she said shaking the Fuji 400 Asa. The tiger was in the cage, the red one, however, was still escaping to him. It was from late September that he was looking for her without being able to catch her.

She must be somewhere, he thought. It was just a matter of time.

That was a pretty unique case.

2. Saturday

Ella Fitzgerald was singing with the usual class, dressed in lamé, mirroring the ox eye in a diamond cascade. Puglise was hiding in his private room, wearing an impeccable smoking. The two girls he had come out with were chatting outside. The waiter had just brought a second bottle of champagne. *A Foggy Day* was flowing smoothly. He then started getting comfortable spreading his arms around the couch. The two girls then approached him and let him grabbing them. Giggles.

"I'm sorry, so they'll all see us!" Said the blonde.

"And you let them watch, my dearest!" Puglise replied.

"Let them dream!"

The hand of the black-aired lady with porcelain skin was coming up his tight when the waiter came back to the table. "Sir, sorry for interrupting, but ..." "Then don't do that" Can't you see we are busy right now?"

"We all noticed," the waiter pointed out. "I'm really very sorry, they are insisting to see you."

"Now? And who would it be?"

"Sorry, they did not say that. Please, follow me."

Puglise then took his cigar from the ashtray.

"I am going to be quick!" He said to the girl. Then he followed the waiter swinging.

They left the room, passed through the kitchen, and took their way to the main corridor.

The light bulbs were blown out. It was really very dark, the song was over, one could hear cheering from afar.

"We are almost there," the waiter said. "The phone is right behind that door."

Puglise gave him a tip and entered the cabin. The handset was leaning on the shelf along with the phonebook. He then sat on the stool and brought it to his ear.

"Haven't you made up your mind yet?" The man at the other end of the thread said. His voice was embroidered with barbed wire, rimmed with rust and poisoning. It was not the first time he had heard it. He had heard it before.

It was the man with no face, he said to himself, of course. Puglise had been looking for that bastard for a long time without ever being able to catch him. He was only able to see him once wearing his raincoat and his hat. He was clearly not new on the job. Quiet, cautious, introverted.

"My friend," the voice continued: "She is waiting for you. You must call her." He then laughed, a metallic laugh, growing to become a bitter and loud cry. The cabin was shrinking like a scrap in a hydraulic press.

Puglise then gave a spat at the locked door, calling for help, feeling like the cabin was shrinking even more. Suddenly the floor opened up under his feet. He then started clinging to the handset, while he was sinking into a black whirlwind.

He fell to dead weight immediately. The wire rolled out, smoking overheated, and suddenly snapped like a whip after reaching its end. Somebody grabbed his arm. "Can you make it on your own, or do I need to pick you up myself?" The man with the raincoat said abruptly. The hat's brim was shadowing his face. His traits were blending with the dark. Then a lighter's flame came up from the dark. That man lighted a cigarette and placed it into what seemed to be a scar, not his own mouth. Then he inhaled, sucking half of the air from his lungs.

Puglise suddenly found himself in the alley, a lamp post was climbing in the night. Apart from the coal-built condos, the downtown skyscrapers were staring at the clouds as poisoned teeth. The brights of a black Oldsmobile with silver chrome blinked twice.

"It's the signal," the man said. "Let's go."

As an automaton, Puglise pulled his foot off the ground.

"I don't want to," he said.

"I don't have time to waste with you tonight." "Keep on moving, the journey is very long."

Two more steps, he suddenly felt his feet were swelling. His throat was dry. His cigar bite was burning his fingers. He suddenly woke up.

"Shit!" He murmured, pulling himself up on the couch. He then turned off the TV. There was light outside. His shirt was soaked with sweat. His heart beating fast. The usual fucking dream, he thought.

He was dreaming the same thing over and over since the end of Summer. At the beginning, he had only a few, then he started having many more. He must have fallen asleep right after changing channel. At around 9pm he was watching a movie with Dick Powell, a Marlowe with a less biting set of lines and a lot more sorrow. The cops were chasing after him right after he closed his eyes. It had never happened to him. He would have made it through anyway. That was the moral of the story. He should have not let himself forget it.

He then filled a bowl of Rico, shaved, and – after changing clothes he took the roll and went outside.

Between the ticket he got for parking on the yellow stripes, an hour and a half queuing to pay his bills, the anarchists' parade blocking the traffic, and a long talk with Revelli, the trusted photographer who for twenty years developed his rolls was crying with despair. Puglise, in the meantime, was able to partially get his gun licence renewed and had left already.

The policewoman who had taken the payment without wasting any time was a beautiful forty-year-old lady, maybe a bit too zealous wearing a quite cheap tint that was making her look older.

"Do you have any cartridges to declare?" She asked without even raising her eyes. Puglise said no.

"You don't seem to be one who shoots a lot, huh?" She said joking.

"Maybe, but every time I shoot, I hit the nail on the head." "Anyway, are you free tonight?" The woman said looking at him. No, he said, giving her a shit of paper. "I'm sorry," Puglise said coming out. It wasn't that the policewoman was not his type, that was obvious. That invite came out automatically. That was a future investment dictated by habit and aimed at survival.

A shadow always needs contacts, informants, people to ask for help. Their phone numbers were never enough, especially after almost forty years of career. He had been changing jobs

all the time, got sick repeatedly, and had left jobs over and over again. He eventually realised he had impoverished many, way more than expected.

For the moment, he could still count on Capasso and a couple of key employees. But he did not have to give anything for granted he said to himself as he was entering the office. He then turned on his computer and sat in the office. The clock on the desk was marking 3:45pm.

It was a pretty expensive model, a gift from an old affectionate customer. It was still splitting the second. Exactly the opposite of Puglise, who had to conclude the final report for Gribaudo and had locked gears. He tried to charge himself by browsing the notes on the tiger while reconstructing the last ten days of investigations. Gribaudo's wife had given him a long twist inducing him to believe that he had nothing to hide. All he needed to do was wait and be patient.

The target and the companion had arrived at the Duke of Aosta driving two separate cars, booking two separate rooms, and eating at two separate tables. They were both hiding themselves amongst other dermatologists. Then they carefully left the room when they felt safe to do so meeting up again in the chalet just outside Saint-Vincent, exactly the same place where they were pinched before.

Puglise started working with the keyboard and scheduled the times, destinations, itineraries very carefully. He only omitted the second round they had made in front of the fireplace, lingering on it even more than they did in the first place.

Those details would have added nothing, he thought, apart from humiliation. A discontent customer is never a good thing. They needed tact and measure, nothing else.

"They don't pay us for nothing, don't you know?" Safrakis had explained that to him clearly in the first place: "We are shadows, not voyeurs."

Correct, and that was not a small difference. It was indeed a big difference. He then called his client on the phone.

Alberto Gribaudo, two eight and six-year-olds, married thirteen years earlier, accountant, he eventually took a very long time to answer the phone. He was waiting while the phone was ringing. Puglise begged he would have wanted the invoice. "The material is on delivery tonight," he told him with no hesitations after answering the call.

Gribaudo seemed to be relieved, as if knowing the moment in which he would have been able to help him dodge the low shot that life was about to dump him.

"I'll wait for you at the office, on 36 Corso Re Umberto." "I am well aware where he works," Puglise said abruptly. "A quarter to eight, cash or cheque."

He was ten minutes earlier.

Both Revelli and him had done a great job, photos were perfect. Although his work was already looking pretty obsolete, he thought the analogue had a whole new feeling. Aurora Gribaudo was not a natural blonde, Puglise had guessed, but she had the chance to confirm that by checking the 30 x 42 prints. Cheating on her husband was making her very happy as she always smiled. She would have probably smiled less if she only knew she was about to be bumped.

He then put all pictures in an unaddressed envelope together with the negatives. He glanced at the rear-view mirror, stepped out of the car, and pointed straight at the intercom.

The building looked exactly the same, the only difference was the camera on the door and the timed lighting. At Safraki's time, he had spent a considerable part of his professional life there, where he had some success, enough to think he had been great.

"Third floor," answered Gribaudo.

Puglise took the stairs. Once on the second floor, he stopped in front of the door of the older agency, S.p.i.a., Associated Detectives, Safrakis and Puglise. He found his client two landings upper. He had a friendly smile, almost convincing. Then he followed him in.

The offices, five rooms with only the names of the company's employees on their doors, were all quite silent and aseptic. "Then," he entered the corridor and asked: "How did it go?"

"OK," he answered abruptly.

He gave him the envelope. Gribaudo hesitated before opening it. He then followed him into his office and asked him to sit down. He then turned around his desk and lightened the design lamp on it. After that he grabbed the letter opener.

Among the customer's fingers, that set of photographs seemed to be the classic wrong hand in a crooked match.

The chicken then started playing against the clock trying to make it up, playing with the cards. He was trying to remain impassive. He knew they were looking at him. He was indeed hoping to get everybody's attention. He wanted everybody to know that he knew that already. He only needed the evidence. Probably he was only hoping to show off his new girlfriend.

And then, while you are there, standing up waiting to accept the invitation to sit down, then you realise you had to console it too. It's a scene you had already seen a thousand times. You're vaccinated, the only thing you wanted to do was cashing out and leaving. Yet a part of you suggested to stay, reminding yourself that there was still what distinguishes you from the half-saws and allows you to stay in the business. A question of humanity and survival.

Gribaudo was fine with the shooting. He put off the photos, broke the report and went to the balance.

"Hold it," he said, preparing a cheque, "if it is earned."

Puglise checked the amount, "no discounts, full fare."

"I would need the invoice," the accountant added.

As a script, he thought sinking his hand into the trench pocket. And many greetings to the first payment on the black retirement fund.

"She is one of a kind, Puglise," He said.

"It's not the only one who thinks it."

"I imagine. A lawyer friend has a client's hands that may need a discreet professional like you. Always having the time."

Puglise appreciated.

"Tell him to go to the agency tomorrow," he said.

"Even if it is Sunday?" The accountant asked.

"There is no better day to get rid of consciousness," Puglise replied. And with a fake smile he left.