

Prologue

Now I open my eyes and see them.

As soon as the hymn ends, I open my eyes and see them.

There are no metal detectors at this stage.

Out there somebody can be armed.

Or are they all, and they will compete to see who hits the centre?

Now, on this podium, I'm the perfect target.

I've endured a whole year of threats, including phone calls and threatening letters. People screaming from their cars at our windows, throwing bottles against the entrance to the patio, without caring if they hit me or a mother with a child. "Dirty nigger!" They shouted. "You will not come to Mexico City!" Yet, here I am, a black man, representative of the oppressed people of America and spokesman for the Olympic Human Rights Project.

I made it to the finish line.

I made it to the podium, because only then can a black man have his say. If you are quick enough, you can say it.

And now I hold my fist up, showing my pride in a gesture of defiance.

As soon as the hymn ends, I open my eyes and see them.

Now I open my eyes and see them.

All the guns in the world, pointing at me.

First Tommie Smith. Then, after an unmistakable hesitation, John Carlos. As soon as the American anthem begins, they raise their arms with their fists closed, forming two majestic silhouettes. Or maybe it is a single image that reflects itself, doubling. The gesture instantly triggers a buzz, freezing the applause.

The thick vibrations of the stadium are reduced to a choking silence. The silence takes a moment to breathe. Then the anger of the masses bursts like water from the cracks of a dam. Insults fly in different tongues. Tommie hides behind his closed eyes, his eyelids contracted. He doesn't move, he thinks of his son, little Kevin.

At the projectile from the stands, he is convinced, someone is going to shoot him. John instead keeps his eyes slightly open and his glimmer of a view seeks to understand if, for some reason, his ears are deceiving him. Because it is certain that a good half of the stadium around him, and especially those behind him, has started to sing the American anthem.

And that, more precisely, the words are being spat at them like an invisible swarm of poisoned darts. "We are trained to respond to a shooting," he told Tommie in the tunnel of the stadium, with the eyes of those who are coming out of a trench to meet a ghostly sunrise. "If we here a shot, Tom, let's hit the ground, one of us will be saved." Two bodies stand in a statuesque silent resistance. A hundred and twenty seconds pass.

By the white steps the whistles are now deafening. Tommie Smith has an olive branch enclosed in a small glass case in his left hand. In his right, the one wrapped in the glove, a blue "Puma" sneaker. On his feet are thin black socks on the grass of the race field. On his face is twisted disbelief.

Behind him, John Carlos takes the first steps away from the podium and continues to hold the clenched fist. The leather of the glove, glued to his left palm, is giving him sweaty fingers. He wants to be able to defend himself, just like a few moments before, when his arm was raised in a slight curve: a loaded weapon.

They cross the arena in single file, ready to be eaten. Gods of Olympus suddenly condemned to the gallows. Among them, Peter Norman, who unexpectedly came second, keeps in sight - like a silver star pinned to a uniform. He is a symbol of solidarity with the protest.

It took thirty-five seconds to get up to the podium, Tommie had counted them when they were called to the ceremony and had walked silently, he and John, with their black nylon socks on display and a flash of terror in the eyes at the end. And now that the podium is behind them, far away like the wreck of a feverish nightmare, Tommie struggles not to shake. The countdown runs fast: the same thirty-five seconds, like an explosion, getting closer to zero.

Someone is going to pull the trigger, he thinks. But he meets it with his head held high. "We're up here," he says as he raises his fist again, this time under the chin of the Olympic aristocracy that looks at them from the grandstand.

John, behind him, imitates him again, repeating that powerful gesture to the world.

They trample the last meters of grass and cross the track by cutting across it horizontally, just as an athlete never does. John hears in his head an overwhelming sound, like a hammer in the hands of a madman: "Boy-boy-boy-boy-boy".

It is the word that has been stuck with him since his athletic beginnings. He feels: "Boy-boy-boy-boy-boy" and he thinks he will never stop. Tommie stares at the steps with enormous eyes. Is this it?, he asks. Am I not going to be shot?

They lower their arms, the tunnel is now a few feet away. The turmoil from the stairs resembles the baying of wolves. Along with Peter Norman they pass through, marching straight as a line of men under siege, the sky is a minefield. But one thing is certain: no one shoots at them.

They find themselves in the underpass like slipping into a hallucination. John Carlos shouts something incomprehensible, a vague voice in the heavy air. God, thank you, says Tommie Smith, in a loud voice.

"God, thank you."

It's 20:49 of October 16, 1968. Now there is only one thing to do. "Get out from Mexico City alive."

I PART

THE ROOTS

ROOTS OF AN INSPIRATION

«They always show the picture»

I rest my feet on the carpet, apart from my shoes and jacket, I am still fully dressed. A clock radio above the bed says five something, but five what? The room is bigger than the photos on the site had led me to believe. It's a single extended space divided into two parts by a small gap: bed, desk and TV on one side and a large walk-in closet from where you enter the bathroom. I go in to rinse my face.

I try to get rid of the last remnant of that dimension between dream and wake that still clings to me. I dry my face and turn my phone on. Then I try and compose myself: San Jose, California, 5.10 am in the morning of April 28, 2016.

JennieRae, the homeowner, will go out in the gym in twenty minutes, then drive to the light rail stop in front of the congress hall where she teaches high school maths. They don't expect me though until four o'clock in the afternoon. I have an appointment at the Special Archives of the Martin Luther King Jr. Library at the San Jose State University campus where they has kept records of their former students Smith and Carlos.

This is where I will start a period of external research, the final part of a long study. It will also be there where I have my first encounter with someone who has been intimately linked to this story, but not until tomorrow. For now I sit down at the desk and resume from where I left off, when - now it is clear to me - it did not occur to me to stay awake until the evening and overcome the nine-hour time zone.

On the two corner walls where the desk is set, I have attached A4 sheets on which photographs of important moments of Tommie and John's life are printed. Before restarting the computer I decide to open the sacred ring-bound notebook; it is four centimeters tall and the pages are dealt with scores of stunning lines, family trees, conceptual schemes, and rows of quotations. In some cases these are crossed out. I had long established that in the book I was writing, only the symbols of African-American history that were relevant to Smith and Carlos would be present.

Those fragments of the path of a people that could be filtered out of their subjective perception; but consulting this notebook has become a ritual. Then I think of the meeting that awaits me and, perhaps unconsciously, now that I have come up here I feel even stronger the need to recall the many guiding spirits that have kept vigil on the same steps as Tommie and John. And not just about them.

I start browsing and reading: Malcolm X as a child - then Malcolm Little- looks out of a window on the top floor of his home and sees the glittering torches of held by the Nebraska Ku Klux Klan. The man, alone and unarmed, faces them defiantly (coincidentally Malcolm X's parents have the same

names as John Carlos's). Over the page, Nina Simone is dismissed from the Philadelphia Conservatory despite her incredible vocal talent.

A rejection which in addition to causing her despair also teaches her the desire to fight, the anger to embark on a journey without backing down. Then there are two full pages on the birth of the Black Panthers in Oakland, at a barbecue, in the autumn of 1966. Some of Tommie's brothers live in that area.

Marlon Brando and writer James Baldwin from Berkeley described during the funeral of Bobby Hutton, the first martyr of the Panthers; following quotes from Brando's speech on a truck. (Tommie Smith and John Carlos never joined the panthers).

I still browse the notebook and find words describing the tears of Martin Luther King caught up in the fury of Selma; those of Muhammad Ali and Sam Cook singing the chorus of 'The gang's all here'.

I still search, between the pages, without actually looking for something specific. I find: all the prohibitions of the laws of racial segregation (the so-called "Jim Crow laws"), a long list, ordered, written out in black pen that marks the leaves like clay engraved with thin Sumerian characters.

The prohibitions are sectioned, state by state, from 1880 up until the middle of the sixties, with the following areas highlighted: public places, education, crossbreeding, housing, health care, public transport ...

On the next page, there is an infinite list of songs and musical artists with anecdotes, side by side with an asterisk to indicate those who liked Tommie (Bill Cosby the jazz player above all) or two asterisks, for those preferred by John (Aretha Franklin, Otis Redding).

This is followed by John Carlos's unconditional admiration for Paul Robeson (with notes: football champion, he played Othello in the theatre, then in cinema → declares in favour of Soviet policies → swept away by McCarthyism), that of Tommie Smith for the champion basketball Wilt Chamberlain (a black winner, though one who was physically abnormal).

Then I come across a loose sheet of paper, folded. I open it and at the top there is a printed picture and something written in large red handwriting. The photo of the podium in Mexico City. The writing is a quote from John Carlos saying: "They always show the picture, but they never tell the story." And here I stand. That's where I was left, I think. This is exactly what I need.

"They always show the picture. But they never tell the story." When I read Carlos's statement, I remembered, with my great astonishment, a memory I had forgotten. The memory was of the first time I came across the image of Mexico's 68 protest.

It was the beginning of 1999, I was eighteen, and I was blown away by the image of two black athletes with their fists clenched on the cover of a manual called *The Age of Sport*.

At that time I had to choose the three subjects to be submitted for my final exam paper. The poses of the two (the third figure was cut) and their resolve inspired something within me akin to the effect of the daring harmony of Degas's dancers, which I chose for Art History, as to the power and the lightness of Italo Calvino.

When the book came, however, I was bitterly disappointed. Inside there was everything: the origins of football in Japan, the spread of jeu de paume in France, the noblest tennis ancestor, Ottavio Bottecchia bent over the handlebars during the Tour of 1925 and Nuvolari's businesses, the role of gymnastics in socialism and the tragedy of Munich in '72, all the way up to the overwhelming burst of commercial sponsors in world sports at the beginning of the 1980s.

But the two athletes on the cover, used to represent - and sell - this era of sports, were limited to mere names in the colophon. Approximately fifteen years after I started my research, I would go on to find dozens of similar cases. Books on the history of modern Olympics, on athletics in general or on political movements of the Sixties (not only in the United States), and even an interesting Italian novel about free jazz, were limited to just "showing the picture".

I fold the sheet in half and put it back where it was. I touch the iPad and backlight to make the same photo appear on the screen. Not a photo of the podium in Mexico City, but the symbolic photo taken by John Dominis, who was then photojournalist of the magazine *Life*.

In fact, on October 16, 1968, and in the recurring nightmares of Tommie Smith, the only 'shot' was fired at him. So the American anthem starts, raised fists, bowed heads and ... Bang! A hit!

John Dominis did not leave much evidence of this shot, but thanks to the help of his assistant and the precious suggestions of a friend, I created a small list of theories.

I draw on the sheet and look around: the distance between the podium and the media reserved area (all on the lawn and in a non-enclosed space) twenty steps (about six metres).

The camera used was a Nikon F Photomic TN 1967, mounted on a 85mm (or perhaps 105) fixed optic. Was he surprised by the protest? Yes. (Dominis in a very rare testimony in this regard had said, "I barely realised what was happening, and just while I was taking the shot"). How is one supposed to react? From photojournalists.

He approaches (but he doesn't get too close), he moves to the left and crouches. He follows the movement of the two arms stretched and mirrors the momentum of the image upwards (more instinctively than artistically). He creates a frame in which Tommie Smith's closed eyes are perfectly at the centre.

It offers a snapshot of the faces of the three winners (excluding the race judges who in almost all other photos and video images impersonate the subjects).

They are holding the black sky up at the top, but their feet and the Puma trainers are not in the shot.

The effect of all these elements together means that the photo tells the story of two men protesting, and does not frame an environment in which a protest takes place.

The bottom of the page reads like this: "My technique with people is this. I'm a kind of fly on the wall. I try not to interfere, sometimes I turn around, trying not to be noticed, but if they do notice me, I make sure this has no effect on the shot. John Dominis".

I retrieve the file, the photo is always there. Every time I look at the photo I have a moment of suspense mixed with fear. At first I focused on the closed fists, or on the three figures as a whole.

Now I can not help but fix my gaze on the tiny wrinkles of tension around Tommie and John's eyes, primarily Tommie's. He is not only filled with the terror of being killed by a racist gun man, but there is also the fear that his son might grow up without a father.

At the time of winning the 200-meter medal in Mexico City, Kevin Smith, Tommie's eldest son, is only six months old, the same as my baby when I started seeking the faintest, and often most overlooked, traces of this story.

He slept on my chest in the middle of the night while I lay on the couch, and thanks to the light of a lamp, I dropped Tommie's words into interviews, which resembled nothing of declarations, more like desperate confessions.

When I detach myself from the picture I try to prepare some questions for the meeting. I try to put my various notes in order, but I just realize that I can't wait till four in the afternoon. I cannot stay here. So I decide to go out.

It's still early in the morning in this time zone, so I have to adapt quickly. JennieRae's apartment is part of a complex of sandy cement. It is a new structure, but it looks like it has been abandoned for centuries. The night before I had to go back twice, since the search for a house number had not brought me in front of any door or gate. There was only a slight gap that split the path through a hedge, and the sign of a video surveillance company. Then, that hard grey oasis had sucked me in.

The dozen duplex windows overlooking the stretched square are all closed and the garage shutters are nearly all down, apart from a light bulb hanging on a pale wall inside a garage where two boys in t-shirts wash a car and stare for a long while. They look me over, here - I would learn quickly - they call it profile checking: White, middle age, normal dress. Eventually they make a nod at me.

I leave behind the pool full of floating twigs and the stack of mailboxes without names and surnames – just silver codes. I walk across to the overpass; where I decide to cross the road. The cars let me cross and the traffic stops, but nobody sounds their horn. Then, very slowly, the car serpent kicks back into life. In California it is a more serious offence to run somebody down than it is to shoot them, something they all seem well aware of.

I set off in the direction of Tamien Station, one of the Caltrain's main stations, and the terminus of almost all bus lines in San Jose, the most important city in the south of the San Francisco Bay.

It is also the town where both Tommie Smith and John Carlos spent the most important years of their athletic careers. I have all the information at my disposal on my phone: the roads, the journey times and the way to get to places, but I consult my hand-drawn map because I prefer to walk, ask questions, and decipher the sketchy outlines in my book that will eventually lead me to the university.

It's only at this moment, after more than a year of tracing the intricacies their lives, that I realise - and I'm saying this as the fog starts to clear and then headlights cut through the fog - that instead of the Fourth Street in downtown San Jose, I'm approaching something more alive, driven by an intimate necessity, and not by design. With every step in the direction of the San Jose State University, I am aware that my choice to walk is perhaps linked to some kind of strange fate, in that I

have never been so close to the two kids, the two teenagers, the two great men named Tommie Smith and John Carlos.