BLOOD RIGHT - by Francesca Melandri

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Prologue

2012

Today Attilio Profeti has died and his horoscope says: "The day ahead of you is going to be nice and pleasant".

Indeed, father: what can be better than dying in your bed at ninety-seven, after winning The Game?

"You will have a plethora of opportunities especially in relationships and with loved ones".

This is also true: we are all now here for you, waving goodbye.

"You will make an interesting encounter in the evening".

No, I do not believe this, instead. Neither you have ever hoped to meet Someone, in some hereafter.

I only know this: here among us, the living, you can't return. The dead are refugees, asylum seekers. They were given a Denial for the rest of eternity.

You will never see your home again. You have *gone out*, now, like all the rest.

Chapter 1

2010

Esquilino, the highest of Rome's fateful seven hills, reeks of kimchi, kebab, masala dosa. Its apartment blocks have high ceilings but not always an elevator - like Ilaria's, for instance. She is used to the six floors and doesn't mind the exercise - she likes it, actually. But today she's kicking hard every step she climbs, as if it were an enemy. A thick whiff of curry comes in through the window overlooking the courtyard, it fills up the stairway, it assaults Ilaria's nostrils. It doesn't offer enough distraction from her rage, however. It just makes her twitch her nose.

Rome turns its back on the sea although it is not far away, and often, in the afternoon, its breath flies over the central areas along the river and slips right into Ilaria's windows. In those moments, her small apartment on the top floor wells up with a kind of nostalgia: a longing for vastness, horizons, ocean routes - stuff like that. It's taken her quite a few years to realize that it's actually fault of the iodine carried by the breeze. Ostia's sea, yes, but sea nonetheless. More often than not, however, even the air of the Mediterranean can't dispel the intrusive smells rising from the Esquilino kitchens. Several times a day, at all times of the day, they spread in the crowded courtyard at the heart of the block - it's more than twelve condominiums. Years ago, a stomach flu gave Ilaria a high temperature and repulsion against any food; to calm the retching provoked by those smells she had to seal the windows with tape. […]She has been living here long enough, however, to know that there's no way she can shut them off completely. So she's decided to endow each different one with the name of a perfume: here's a nice whiff of *Eau de Maghreb*; there's a puff of *Obsession D'Inde*; ah, the interesting bouquet - fermented cabbage and garlic - of the more rare *Koréa Extréme*.

The late August dusk barely lights up the stairway: the light bulbs haven't been replaced in a while. Darkness, however, doesn't assuage Ilaria's anger as she climbs up.

A few hours ago, while she was buying stationary items for the soon to start school year, her car was towed away. It wasn't in a no-parking area, it wasn't on a disabled-only spot, it wasn't in a double parking. However, tomorrow, Colonel Muhammar Qaddhafi’s motorcade will transit along the banks of the Tiber. And everybody knows that the car of a dictator during an official state visit cannot cruise along ordinary cars, not even if they leave a wide space for its passage. Which is why the mayor of Rome ordered the municipal police to tow them all away. When Ilaria was done with her shopping, in place of her old Fiat she found a gaping void, cordoned off by a white and red tape.

(...)

So that is why she's now climbing the stairs with her head down like a raging bull. She passes the door of the dormitory of Bangladeshis on the first floor. On the second, the unauthorized B&B. On the third, the red and golden good luck ribbon of a Chinese family - her greatest allies in the fight to convince the other apartment owners to pay for an elevator. On the fourth floor, she's welcomed by a grainy voice:

"Hi, Ilà".

The door on the landing is ajar and a profile as rough-hewn as pumice stone is peeping out. Ilaria is certain that the old lady is capable of recognizing every single step climbing these stairs.

"Hi, Lina", she answers politely but without slowing down. She passes her and walks further on, towards the fifth and second-to-last flight of stairs. However Lina doesn't close the door.

"There's a nigger waiting for you".

Ilaria stops on the landing and turns around.

"What?"

"An African. Completely black. He says he's looking for your brother. I didn't want to tell him which floor you live on but he was already climbing up anyway".

"Oh. He must be a friend of Attilio. Thanks, Lina".

"Hey, Ilà, remember: if he bothers you, just scream. My nephew is coming for dinner, he can come and help you out..."

"No problem, thank you. Enjoy your dinner with your nephew".

Ilaria resumes her climbing, but much more slowly, her gaze no longer on the floor. When she reaches the bottom of the last flight of stairs, she sees her visitor sitting on the top step. He doesn't even wait for her to reach the landing to speak:

"Sorry. Hi. Attilio Profeti lives here?"

In the dim light, the first thing Ilaria notices is that his skin is exactly the same colour as the old wooden doors on each side of the landing. His bluish lips. The legs as long and thin as straws. The T-shirt with the name of a famous football player.

He looks twenty five years old, maybe even less.

"Who are you?", she asks.

"I look for Attilio Profeti".

Ilaria points at her brother's apartment, facing hers.

"He lives there".

"Is he still alive?"

"Of course he is alive!"

"He has eaten a crow then!"

Ilaria frowns.

He explains, didactic and smiling: "He must be very old".

The young man's right eye is yellowish, webbed by thin red lines and half closed. His gaze is a perfect straight line, however, without blurs. It reminds Ilaria of the gaze of children engrossed in play, or of certain old people in good health who speak neither too much nor too little. She has never seen it in an Italian man his age.

"My brother is in his thirties. You must mean my father, Attilio Profeti sr; and he doesn't live here. But who are you?"

"My name is Shimeta IetmGeta Attilaprofeti ".

"What?"

"Shimeta IetmGeta Attilaprofeti".

Ilaria's head leans towards her shoulder. Four thin lines appear on her forehead.

"Listen, I know this is a joke..."

"No, it's not".

He speaks Italian with almost no accent; only his T's have a hollow sound, as if played on a drum.

Ilaria gathers the last scraps of patience she can still muster at the end of this ghastly day. "I get it. You look at the name tag on the interphone. I just don't see how you could feel like climbing all these stairs. Come on. Go away now".

"My name is Shimeta IetmGeta Attilaprofeti", he repeats patiently, no trace of offense in his voice. "And if Attilio Profeti is your father, then you are my aunt".

Ilaria stares at him, her wide eyes making her suddenly look much younger than her age. She starts laughing.

"Your aunt!" Laughter lifts her shoulders. "I can't believe this. Your *aunt*!"

She snorts and shakes her head. Well after she composes herself there's still mirth lingering on her face. "What is it, a new trick? Well, I didn't know this one. I thought I had seen them all, in this neighbourhood. Ok, you win". She rummages in her purse and takes out her wallet. "You made me laugh and believe me, today that was no easy task. Keep this". She hands him a five euro note. "You earned it".

The young man hasn't moved a single muscle while she laughed. Nor does he lift his hand now to fetch the money. He rummages in his pocket too, instead, and takes out an ID.

"You do not understand", he says as he gives it to her, lifting himself on his feet. He's not as tall as he looked when sitting but possibly even thinner. "This is my real name".

She takes the ID.

It has a green cover. Ethiopia, it says, and underneath there are more graceful letters, all curves, oblique lines and serifs. Ilaria opens it. Everything is written on both alphabets. The one she can read says: Shimeta IetmGeta Attilaprofeti.

Ilaria is one of those thin women who look better and worse than their age. Better, because of her willowy, agile limbs. Worse, because the forty-something-year-old woman’s skin on those willowy, agile limbs makes them look like an aged teenager. Plus, since a few years on her face there is a discreet but persistent shadow of uncertainty - a clear mark of impending old age.

When she was young her big eyes, mahogany hair and fine features allowed her to be given, although just, the confortable label of 'pretty girl'. Not that she ever cared much. Actually, now that she is crossing into middle age she is relieved at having been spared the curse of exceptional beauty which has struck, in one way or the other, all the men in her family. She knows that, being a woman, her life would have been heavily conditioned, if not stifled, by it. Not to mention the sad show put up by her peers as they proceed to celebrate the bitter funeral - tawdry or aching - of their youth's perfection. Also, Ilaria is one of those people who are not so much ambitious socially as existentially - in other words, she expects to be appreciated, even loved, not for her looks but for what she *really* is. Which is why she has often been alone.

And also now she is alone, facing this.

She is not afraid. She doesn't fear this young man might hurt her. She doesn't scream, as Lina suggested she'd do, to call for help. Simply, the exotic ID she now holds in her hand has dug a hole inside her, a sort of absence, a momentary but complete erasure of all causal relationship between perceptions and thoughts.

She is still frozen when the young man's hand darts towards her with a bird of prey's speed. She covers her face with her palm in an instinct of self-defence but he's only aiming at the ID. He grabs it and puts it back into the pocket.

"Attilio Profeti knows who I am", he says. "Ask him. He is my grandfather".

Ilaria's fingers are still gripping the five euro note so tightly that they have started tingling. She covers her eyes with the other hand and sees the clear ones of her father. She would like to be with him, to hear him say that yes, there are things Ilaria must know but this time, unlike the other, she will not need to rewrite and reorder her whole life.

"Oh no", she thinks, "not again".