

LA NOTTE SI AVVICINA

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ROMANZO
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LOREDANA LIPPERINI
NOW THAT NIGHT IS FALLING

translated from the Italian
by Julia MacGibbon

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The barriers are orange, just like the ones that appeared immediately after the earthquake, and the sign ringed with red, saying ‘Stop! Army checkpoint’, is identical too. This time round, though, the tape and the roadblocks aren’t there to prevent entry; they’re there to stop anyone leaving.

When the big tremblor hit they had stood at the bend in front of the roadside shrine to the Virgin of the Little Bird, and one of them, shivering with cold and fright, had remarked that they should have put up a statue of St Emygdus, who protects against earthquakes, everyone knows that, and not a Madonna – one with dark skin, to boot –, just because she’d protected the village from the plague back in the olden days. She was pointless now that the plague was no longer a thing, while earthquakes, those always happen, they’d only

just finished rebuilding, they were only just catching their breath after the sucker punch twenty years earlier, and now just look at it all – razed to the ground all over again. Someone else had replied that you ought to show more respect, adding that saints and Madonnas should be left where their forefathers, in their wisdom, had put them, and had concluded by reminding everyone of something that had always been common knowledge: in other words, that as long as the shrine stayed standing, the plague would never come back – hence, as a matter of fact, the plague *per se* was no longer a thing.

It was a good thing they were arguing, Saretta had decided. Arguing was a distraction. It kept you from thinking, for a little while at least, about what had happened and what they were all going to have to come to terms with: the fact that they had to start over again, one more time, on that cold, ashen morning, with their shoulders draped in the gold of the emergency blankets, with their feet freezing in slippers thrust on during the nocturnal sprint while failing at the first attempt to make it through the door as it shifted with each tremor like a fairground ride and the glasses slid off the kitchen shelf in sequence and smashed, one by one, to the floor. When the soldiers had insisted they enter the tent – the one behind them, the blue one, and

yes they certainly should be taking cover now, it was threatening to rain again – they had nonetheless stayed where they were, in front of the barriers. As if they simply hadn't heard the invitation, they had asked, with voices thinned by their shock, when could they go back into the house, just for a moment, obviously, just to grab a warm coat and a pair of shoes, and perhaps even slip into their handbags – but this bit they didn't say out loud – the picture of the kids when they were babies or the photo of their wedding day, and while they were at it, retrieve the little plastic bag from the wardrobe, the one with the jewellery in it, because that's what always happens, the army keep you away from your own home and someone turns up and takes whatever you had left, and perhaps they're even in cahoots. You can't trust anyone these days.

This had happened twenty years ago, in 1988. Time, meanwhile, had swollen like a river and *One in a Million* had spun around in its eddies (some of them had bickered about the Guns N'Roses lyrics and that line about immigrants and faggots, others had said no that's not it, because then he explains it, he's just a small town white boy, he hates radicals and racists, listen to this bit). *People Have the Power* had spun around too, and the currents had caught up and united that air hostess's heart as it fell from the sky over Lockerbie and carried on

beating for a full ten minutes after the plane exploded, and the live broadcast of the Ceaușescu being executed, which was rebroadcast in full every Christmas, including Elena's dying curse ('May you all go to hell'). And the vortices had sucked in and swallowed all the rest of it: their first mobile phone, their first internet search (for the hotel Janis Joplin had died in), the photo of the man dying of Aids, and the cellists and the lovers and Freddy Mercury's high C, and the answerphone tapes full of messages from people who were no longer alive inside the Twin Towers.

When the waters slow – and today they have slowed to a stop –, there they are, standing in front of a barrier again. Twenty years older now, it goes without saying; adults with families – the ones who'd been children at the time. And of course, some of them now (again, it goes without saying) lie sleeping on that riverbed. The village is the same as ever: a ribbon unfurling between the mountains, the same road running through it from north to south, and the lanes climbing upwards or running down to the water's edge, just as they always have. It's easily surrounded. It's easy to keep out anyone who wants to get in. Even easier to keep in anyone who might want to leave.

The ribbon runs past two bars, a park, a grocery store, a hairdresser's salon, the chemist's, the post

office, a tobacconist's, a *trattoria* and the square where on alternate days there are stalls selling fruit. The village makes its living from olives and lentils, which are packaged in two processing plants up on the plain. It makes a living from intensively farmed red chicory and from pigs which are bred, slaughtered and sold as hams and sausages and chops. It survives, above all, on the pensions of its old folk. It's no different from other small towns or big villages, and neither are its inhabitants. The adults work out at the gym donated by a shoe manufacturer after the quake. They do crosswords and Sudoku, they go to children's birthday parties, they applaud at weddings and funerals. Those who moved to the city find work as civil servants, insurance brokers, physiotherapists, accountants and gas technicians; those who stayed behind take statins, adopt and abandon slimming and detox regimes, and undergo treatments for cancer and, in one case, for leukaemia. The girls listen to One Direction, dream of having blond extensions like Paris Hilton's, and ask relatives who live in Rome to bring them emo t-shirts from the Bacillario shop; the boys practice drumming, dream of taking Ambien like Eminem does, and get relatives who live in Rome to buy them manga which they never really read. There are cats, a few dogs and two pairs of parrots. The routines are the same you

find anywhere: they watch football on the telly at the bar, early evening game shows, and the President's speech on New Year's Eve. When the World Cup or the European finals are on, Italy's tricolour hangs from their balconies alongside Ferrari's red team flag. That's village life.

Today the whole village is out in the street, standing with their backs to their houses, and no one's rushing to get back in: gathering in groups might be dangerous, a single drop of saliva could be a death sentence, but the silence in the rooms of their homes feels deathly anyway. And so, isolated in the little group that they'd sought out regardless, they lean out to see if the Virgin of the Little Bird is still standing, but the soldiers are lined up behind the barriers and the shrine is hidden behind the bend in the road at a point they can't get to. They're fairly certain it must have toppled over. Or – obeying the conventions that govern all miracles – has simply vanished, rising into the sky like a dove.

Today they're not huddling together to keep warm and to comfort the more fragile among them, the ones who, twenty years earlier, had wept without hiding their tears because, the minute they'd managed to set foot in the street, they'd felt a gust of wind at their backs like a giant sighing, and, spinning round, had seen the house crumble and, in that instant, their lives exposed for

all to see, naked to the world, their smart winter coat hanging from the open wardrobe door, the table still laid with the red tablecloth they used every autumn, the loo seat still up because men never remember, they never do.

This time round, they're carefully avoiding physical contact. It's hot. It's boiling. It hasn't let up since June and now it's mid August and there hasn't been a drop of rain, not one evening breeze, and up in the mountains, in the bit that's bare of trees, the grass is yellow and dry. But the heat doesn't account for the sly glances they throw at one another, sideways glances that glide over Anna's chest – and not because of the necklines (V-shaped, sweetheart, sometimes lace-trimmed) that she has taken to wearing, summer and winter alike, ever since the divorce. That was beforehand, when you went to Anna's for a haircut so that you could look at her tits in the mirror: today it's to check if her breathing's regular or laboured. Others peer into Pietro's face. People used to cross the street to avoid enthusiastic disquisitions regarding his collection of 1980s porn and the fact that the good old days, when, with half a line of the white stuff, any bird was yours for the asking, were forever over: today they're looking into his eyes, and into everyone else's, for the glassy signs of fever.

That's why they're locked into the village. Because of the fever.

Saretta observes it all with her fists tightening inside her pockets. Everything is falling apart. They are not who they used to be. It's no use harking back to the time of the earthquake, back when they helped one another out. Back then they were living in metal shipping containers, on the patch of open ground near the football pitch. They ate together in the same big tent, and if one of the children was still hungry there was always an adult ready to push half of their own pasta into the little one's plate. There was always a woman who sat down next to the camp bed occupied by someone who was unwell, ready to chat about last year's village fair and how thin poor Lady Diana was getting, you could see she wasn't happy. Together, they had waited for the houses to be propped up, for the rubble to be carried off, for the saveable furniture to be locked into the big containers at the other end of the pitch. They had raised their glasses when the houses had finally been made safe – and it had taken years and not all of them had lived to see it – and together

they had watched over the village until it prospered, sated with the food and money donated, the gifts, the attention, and even the curiosity of tourists who came to admire that life renewed, where it had been and as it had been, and even in the same old colours – the yellow and pale pink of their homes.

Now everything is being repeated, but in a different form. Back then they weren't divided. Back then they didn't mistrust one another, they didn't spy on each other, they weren't afraid. They had put the fear behind them. They had managed to make their escape from the gaping walls, from the cracks in the shape of lightning like the mark of the angel of death, from the flattened roofs – so there was no reason to be afraid. Even if, now and then, the ground churned beneath their feet, they were safe. They were alive.

But now they themselves are the source of the danger. That's why they are being kept confined. Because back then, back when the earthquake happened, there weren't all those trucks blocking off the tracks that lead up to the mountain and down to the river. The grocery store hadn't been stripped empty but, on the contrary, was kept generously restocked by the emergency workers and, later on, via public donations which overdid the chocolates and sweets. The loo paper had been plentiful. The bar had reopened in a

prefab and in the evening you could have a glass of wine and play cards and watch the telly, or simply stare out at the mountain, just like always. Parcels of food and medicine hadn't been brought passed the roadblocks by a lorry with the driver locked in his cab. It had been up to them to organise the distribution of bottled water and the boxes of pasta and coffee, one at a time, don't push. There had been no lines to stand in. There had been no one trying to skirt the queue or yelling that they were getting too close. There were no urgent instructions being given. Don't touch each other, or keep it to a minimum at least. And, above all, there had been no doctors encased in white suits with breathing equipment attached to their masks, like those awful films: doctors who enter the homes of the ill to declare yes, it is that fever everyone's talking about, and yes, they do have to be taken off to the quarantine station inside the big tent which has, once again, been erected alongside the football pitch, and which is huge and sinister and, this time round, ringed with military personnel.

Loredana Lipperini Now that Night is Falling

LA NOTTE SI AVVICINA

An ancient evil, embodied in illnesses, in unsolved crimes, in carnages: a theme dear to the author, here intertwined with supernatural phenomena that make the readers fight their own fears.

2008: the year that changed everything, the year of the economic crash, when indifference reached its peak. In a little isolated village, surrounded by soldiers that prevent anybody from going in and out, unsecure, fearful and angry people live: the feral mothers who make social services take too much interest in Maria and her children; Chiara, alone and lost in her world of visions, dreams, punitive angels; Saretta, seventy years old, with her total dominion over Vallescura, the village hurt by the earthquake which hides a secret and seems to attract evil.

LOREDANA LIPPERINI is a writer, a journalist for “la Repubblica” and the voice of “Fahrenheit”, Radio 3. Her blog *Lipperatura* has been a meeting point for literary, cultural and political debate since 2004. She published gothic novels under the nom de plum Lara Manni and the essays *Ancora dalle parte delle bambine* (2007), *L'ho uccisa perché l'amavo* with Michela Murgia (2013), the children's book *Pupa* (Rose Sélavy, 2013). Bompiani published *L'arrivo di Saturno* (2017), the collection of short stories *Magia nera* (2019) and the new edition of *Non è un paese per vecchie* (2020).



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