

Excerpt from

WHO IS TO BLAME?

BY

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1.

And the others? Oh, the others were merely there for decoration: like the cactuses in those westerns.

As for me, a good little creature incapable of imagining worlds other than the cage in which he has always lived confined, I had no reason to doubt that the universe boiled down to this: me, him, her and the cherished old bars that made being trapped inexorable and rendered open vistas so poignant.

It was school that undermined the integrity of that initial autarchy: strange as it seemed, the lives of my classmates, even the most prosaic, were teeming with grandparents, brothers and sisters, and amorous little cousins.

So it was that I began to mistrust the benefits of self-sufficiency, and to ask myself several impertinent questions: like, what had become of everyone? What the heck had happened to them all?

To hear my parents tell it – or rather, to hear them mainly avoid telling it – our stock might have been extinct for millions of years. Which if nothing else explained why my father dealt with childhood memories with the circumspection that paleontologists reserve for fossils that have reemerged from a prehistoric past; and why my mother acted as if she hadn't even had a childhood, a past, or a history.

Man is a social animal. Aristotle said so. *Iipse dixit*. That may be, but if he had had parents like mine, he sure as hell would not have said that! On the other hand, rigid and pedantic as he was, he would have been skeptical of the rubric “domestic nest,” with its mawkishness so unfitting to describe the burrow in which I grew up: hard as I try, I don’t remember any straw pallets on which to take a nap, or hammocks from which to enjoy the sunset, but only unmade beds, dark pits ready to swallow you up. Isn’t that where stories begin, among tangles of sheets and pitch blackness? Well, even though it doesn’t concern me too much now, I won’t let this story be an exception.

5.

Until a moment earlier, if I’d had to choose, I would have preferred the company of the adults. At this point all I asked was to put a safe distance between myself and the new humiliation inflicted on my father and on my filial pride by a family whose mephitic influence had subverted the natural order of things in just a few hours.

For the record, I knew that under any other circumstances my mother would have made sure we were all in bed by now. No way! We were still there.

I couldn’t help but watch her; and, watching at her, appraise her; and, appraising her, judge her. Settled on the sofa like a regular visitor, intent on paging through old photo albums, she seemed perfectly in her element among people she had spent much of her adult life avoiding, and perhaps secretly loathing.

I suspect (and have since had several decades to think about it) that my impression was faulty due to strabismus. As much as it still pains me to admit it, the sociopathy she usually did nothing to conceal was only half the story. Mind you, in some way I knew it: in fact, having lived in the shadow of her secrets and deceptions, I’d known for some time. If anything, I was irritated to see the glaring vitality emanating from the other half of the story, the one that had been so tenaciously kept from me.

Like an exile finally setting foot in her homeland again, there she was ably maneuvering through the old world as she had never learned to do in the new. I could tell by the way she held her coffee cup in her hand, the way she winked, caught the allusions and readily responded. Never before had I seen her so at ease in the colorful aquarium of society. This meant that the real outsiders were us: me, my father and the blazers, the scarlet letters she had forced us to wear.

The incontrovertible evidence was there, sweating by her side on that damn leather couch. Popping up after dinner without a reason, greeted as one of the household, and now engaged in an intense conversation with my mother, though mostly grappling with as many pizzarelle with honey as her tiny hands could stuff into her mouth, that woman was without a shadow of a doubt Myriam the Bag Lady.

At first glance, one would have thought that she hadn’t yet found time to wash the few hairs on her head since our last encounter, but otherwise she appeared more relaxed and vigorous.

From what I later learned, Myriam Limentani, yet another distant cousin of Aunt Nora, was the heir to a colossal real estate fortune, famous for her equally colossal miserliness. It was said that she managed her considerable patrimony without

intermediaries: at the beginning of the month, at the mercy of a heat wave, arctic ice or furious downpours, equipped with the same tattered umbrella, she would get on a bus and scour the city to personally collect the rents.

Under other circumstances I would have only had eyes for this incognito billionaire. But as it happens, a fellow whose identity I had been wondering about since the beginning of dinner sat between her and my mother.

As will soon become evident, if for no other reason than the paramount importance he occupies in this story, the gentleman deserves one of those lovely, vivid, comprehensive, nineteenth-century descriptions, full of nuance and detail. Unfortunately, however, my memory, degraded by animosity and all too susceptible to tawdry details, chose the wrong moment to be difficult, and the best it preserved for me is the pair of tassels that adorned his suede loafers. Try as I might, none of the many bits of information acquired in the years to come – personal particulars, history, family relationships – are able to rescue him from his fundamental identity as the man with tassels. No, there is no way to remember him any differently.

It was also thanks to him, to the way he entertained my mother while she went along with him, that I willingly escaped to the sleeping area of the house. As the nannies deposited the “little ones” in the master bedroom hoping for some sort of collective nap, we “big ones” settled into Leone’s room.

“Did you know this is where your mother used to sleep?” he said as if to challenge me. And just to be clear, he added: “I had to accommodate the old furniture in it.”

Not even at Willy Wonka’s factory clearance sale would I have felt so confused and overwhelmed. For that matter, the nautical decor was the ideal habitat for storing a treasure trove of discarded toys and half-eaten candy. There wasn’t a single plaything whose astronomical cost hadn’t tormented me over the years, or a type of candy that hadn’t been forbidden in my mother’s diet, that couldn’t be found here, piled in a corner or scattered about on the shelves. With one voluptuous glance I took in the Playmobil spaceship and a giant pack of Toblerone, pausing on the Skateball under which lay the carcass of an Atari console with its brutally severed tentacles.

Though I too was now too old for both childish toys and the licorice fish crammed into a big glass jar, I was not old enough to resist the cobra of retrospective envy. All in all, so far I’d been good at staying away from the rainforests where that devious reptile generally lurks. But then all of a sudden there it was in front of me with its bilious eyes, determined to infuse me with its lethal venom.

One moment I blamed my parents for not having been able to offer me similar opportunities; the next I was ashamed of having conceived such a petty demand; first I wondered if my mother and father hadn’t deliberately prevented me from associating with peers who could afford comforts forbidden to me; then the following moment I cursed my grandfather for having refused an inheritance that would have made me yet another privileged member of this band.

And since lust serves no purpose except to produce new cravings that are no less insatiable, I could not keep my eyes from resting on Chiara, who suddenly seemed to me to be the most tempting toy in the collection. There she was, on her cousin’s bed, languid, recumbent like an odalisque. Our eyes met, and I wondered if she had sensed my lasciviousness and was as repulsed by it as I was.

Though only at its inception, sexual frustration was experiencing the epic age of early adolescence. There was no female being that I did not feel entitled to undress with my eyes and of whom I would not have taken advantage, had I not feared punishment. My scruples had no moral origin, inspired as they were by a blend of timidity and cowardice that I would never be free of. The virtual harem I was setting up could compete with the gynaecea of emirs and pop stars, but was perhaps even more Byzantine in terms of perversion. What today, not without media disdain, is dismissed as “sexism” was my permanent state, the indulgence in vast, confused and violent cravings. And to deny it would be an unacceptable deception on my part.

I mean, how many girls had I seen on a bed, insouciant, alluring, their adult skirts skimming knees that were still childish? How many had I approached? How many had I kissed? How many had I groped? So many questions and one answer only: none.

“I wonder what Uncle Gianni has in mind for June,” said Chiara, sitting up so she could look at her cousin.

They had already talked about it at the table. At the beginning of summer vacation, the benefactor would give his great-nephew and nieces a trip of a few weeks, usually revealing the destination only at check-in.

“I hope he’s given up on the godforsaken islands.”

When Francesca uttered those words, I realized that up till then she hadn’t opened her mouth. And that this was another reason why I hadn’t paid her the proper attention.

“Mykonos, godforsaken? Are you out of your mind?” Chiara objected. “A paradise. I don’t remember ever taking off my bathing suit.”

“Exactly. A nightmare.”

“For you, being so pale and dreary... Where would you prefer to go, to Siberia?”

“I don’t know. Someplace exotic.”

“Like?”

“Mongolia, Chile, Iceland...”

“I don’t know anyone who wants to go to places like that.”

“You know me,” Francesca said defiantly. “I read a fabulous novel that takes place in Santiago. I swear, I’d go there right now.”

“I was talking about someone sane,” Chiara retorted.

“You don’t even know where Santiago is.”

“I do too know.”

“Where?”

“In a place for losers where losers like you want to go. In loserland, that’s where.”

Francesca didn’t seem put off by her cousin’s attack, maybe because she herself had provoked it. And to think, if someone like Chiara had publicly called me a loser (okay, she’d been doing nothing but that since the beginning of the evening, but implicitly) I wouldn’t have slept for weeks.

Compared to her brother’s lush peak virility and the acerbic voluptuousness of her cousin, Francesca’s appearance had something unfinished about it, as it were, as though precariously poised on the edge. As if the words “Work in progress” were written on her forehead: something was about to happen, there was no doubt about that, all right, but what? With her hair drawn back in a penitential chignon and a delightful upturned nose, she was the “flat-chested” type that Demetrio didn’t like, but I didn’t mind. Then again

you had to take into account the ghastly Cyndi Lauper-style eyeglasses. Everyone knows that teenagers are reactionary and bourgeois when it comes to aesthetic tastes: at that time nothing was less attractive to me than quirkiness. Moreover, the myopic lenses, shrinking the pupils, compromised the luster of eyes perceived as violet-blue. And what about the tic that made her tighten her eyelids unnaturally? Well, that didn't bother me either; in fact, I'd always had a soft spot for tics.

She had appeared at the Seder in beige pants, a pale blue blouse with a French collar and epaulettes (in keeping with the style in those years), and boating shoes with white rubber soles. An androgynous outfit, blatantly unassuming, as if proclaiming a lack of vanity befitting her moderation. But now, now that she had decided to speak, she seemed more confident in herself than her appearance portended.

"In Chile," said Leone. "Santiago is in Chile, in South America." He was rummaging through an impressive record collection that took up half the wall (now that was a plaything that was certainly cause for gut-wrenching envy!).

Chiara, not wanting to appear either dumb or ignorant, especially in front of her cousin, said, "I know that of course. What I meant was, they'd never allow us to go to South America."

"And why not, pray tell?"

"Because it's full of Germans. That's where they all went to hide."

"You stole that one from Uncle Gianni," Leone mumbled.

"I did not," Chiara said, turning red.

"Come on, he sees Germans everywhere," Leone pronounced. Having finally found the record he was looking for, he was taking it out of its sleeve. "When my father bought the Mercedes, he didn't speak to him for months."

"You see, Chiara," Francesca said in a schoolmarm tone, "if you weren't a party to the dispute and if you were the daughter of Nazis, you'd be a Nazi too."

"Are you kidding?" her cousin snorted scornfully. "Where do you get off saying that? Why do you always have to say such weird, offensive things?"

"Don't get excited. It's not like I called you a Nazi."

"You did too!"

"It's just that you always leave it to other people to tell you what's right and what's wrong. Probably if you'd been born into a Nazi family you would have been the biggest Nazi of all."

There was no rancor or derision in the words Francesca had just spoken, as if she wasn't aware that her explanation made the insult even more offensive.

"Hey, come on, Franci, knock it off," Leone said, losing his patience.

"Yeah, cut it out," Chiara echoed him, finding it hard to follow her cousin's exercises in relativism. On second thought, it seemed like she was really eager to sabotage the accord between the siblings.

That was when I noticed it. What might roughly be termed "fraternal complicity." I saw it come alive in the look Leone gave his sister, which Francesca caught at once. In a certain sense, it was a communion of spirits that I had expected from the beginning, and that until then no one, not even the histrionic Gianni Sacerdoti, had been able to offer me. To tell the truth, I'd had a first taste of it when Aunt Tullia had arrived, seeing Leone rush to his sister and ask her if she and their mother had made it to a certain place in time to meet a certain great-aunt. For a moment, listening to them

whisper about such personal matters, I thought I understood how their relationship worked: his inquisitive eagerness, her sardonic, allusive smiles were part of a private rite, at once intimate and hermetic, the best way to keep prying people at bay.

This time I didn't let the symbiotic import of that knowing look escape me, nor did I underestimate it. There it was, proof of long-standing familiarity, an affection capable of settling controversies and smoothing out incompatibilities. I had often envied those who had brothers or sisters. Only now did I understand the emotional and protective implications inherent in such bonding. Although they were very young, you could tell that they had spent their lives together and that, in the words of George Eliot, they had just left behind the golden gates of childhood.

The touching thing was that they didn't have much else in common. It was as if nature, in a Biblical division of talents, had given the eldest the dark good looks and the youngest intellectual autonomy. He was too tall, she was not tall enough. At the same time it could not be said that Leone was a fool, much less that Francesca was ugly, but neither could it be said that the former was interested in winning the Nobel Prize and the latter in competing for Miss Universe. Complementary and concordant, different but bound by mutual consideration, I thought they went really well together and that my Aunt Tullia and Uncle Bob had done a fine job.

"He can take us wherever he wants," Leone said, "as long as he doesn't use us as a cover for his screwing around again."

"What are you talking about?" Chiara said indignantly, but you could tell she wasn't indignant at all, in fact she was quite amused.

"Come on, don't be a prude. We all know what that dirty old man's obsession is."

"What obsession? What are you talking about?"

"Pussy. That's what."

"What a thing to say!" Chiara was indignant again, this time for real.

And to think I'd always thought that such obscenities were the prerogative of convivial male camaraderie.