

**Gianluca Gotto**

**“Succede sempre qualcosa di meraviglioso”**

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## Chapter 1

Grandpa always used to call on the same day, always at the same time. The house phone rang every Sunday evening at nine p.m. sharp. And Mom and I knew exactly who was calling, it couldn't be anybody else.

"There he is," she would exclaim. "Just like clockwork." Sometimes she also rolled her eyes when she said it, but it was just an act. I could perceive a certain sense of relief underneath it that came from knowing there was someone out there looking for her, always and no matter what; but also the relief of a grown woman, close to fifty, who could still count on her father.

The phone never made it to the third ring. "Hi Dad," she said, picking up the telephone. There was no need to ask who was on the other end. It was only Grandpa, who refused to learn how to use a cell phone and still called us on the landline.

While they talked about this and that, I would sit at the dinner table in front of the cold and dry empty pizza boxes, another Sunday night ritual. Sometimes I tried to eavesdrop on their conversation, but more often than not I would just pass the time on my cell phone waiting for my turn to talk to him. After five, ten minutes tops, my mother would call me over; at that point I would leave the kitchen, with its white walls reflecting the strong lights from the chandelier and the television's background noise, and I would head to the dark, quiet living room.

I didn't see Grandpa very often because he lived out in the countryside, and it took a forty-minute drive to reach his house. That was actually just an excuse which Mom and I used when we felt guilty that it had been too long since our last visit. The real reason was that we never had enough time. We were both very busy, my mother had her job, and I had my university studies and then the internship. One way or another, we always got home late in the afternoon and were too tired to get in the car.

Grandpa never made us feel bad about it. In fact, he was almost apologetic about his decision to live outside the city, but he always said that for him that house was "more than four cold walls." When we went to visit him, he seemed sincerely sorry for the time he made us waste. And every time, he would cook us something to thank us. We tried to convince him several times to order a takeaway pizza instead, so he wouldn't have to spend time in the kitchen. But he wouldn't budge: he would respond with a smile and say that it was a pleasure for him. It was impossible not to believe him. I watched him with admiration every time: preparing

lunch or dinner for his daughter and grandson was unusual for a man his age and from his generation, and yet he did it in such a natural way and with such joy.

“Having the people you love sitting at your table means having everything,” he commented once while chopping an onion.

We didn’t see each other often, but the bond between my grandfather and me was strong. And that Sunday evening phone call was sacred. Because when you are the child of divorced parents, and the persons who represent the concept of love in your childhood hate each other to the point of wanting to be as far as possible from one another, it is very hard to find some stable points of reference. Or even just to believe that they might exist.

My parents got separated when I was fifteen, after two years of deafening arguments and silences. After that, my existence changed forever. And so did my perspective on the small things in life. The ones that you take for granted when you have them, but that you miss terribly once they are gone. So, maybe, they weren’t so small to begin with.

When your parents split up, you don’t have a home anymore: you have two. Two closets for your clothes, two beds to sleep, two kitchens to have breakfast, lunch, and dinner, two bathrooms to look at yourself in the mirror every morning. Like every new experience, it feels like an adventure at first. Then it gets annoying. And, in the end, it is just stressful. You ask yourself if getting to that point was really necessary.

Your parents carry on with their lives and you have the impression they left you a bit behind, even though they try to make you believe the opposite. Or they strive to bring you along with them, but then you feel like a burden. Other people walk into their daily lives, and therefore into yours as well. You meet these people, and you try to get along with them. Then, perhaps, they disappear just like they arrived, and you are neither happy nor sad. The only certainty is that there is always something new on the horizon: moving to new places, creating new habits, finding new prospects that were once unfathomable.

It is easy to feel lost in this kind of situation that changes all the time. I was lucky. At least I had my grandfather. With his Sunday phone calls and his indefinable way of being present even without saying so, he was like a buoy: always clearly visible in a sea of uncertainty.

I loved him, of course, but I also deeply respected him. Not just because, despite his age and some aches, he was still a strong man who enjoyed hiking in the mountains and riding his bicycle. Not just because he was an interesting person with an active and curious mind. Not just because he spoke little but smiled a lot, and often answered with a smile, as if there were

nothing else to add. Sometimes I could *hear* that smile of his, even when we were on the phone and I couldn't see it.

There was another reason why I respected him and admired him so much. And it involved a story that nobody in the family liked to talk about.

Grandpa had been a widower for about ten years. A tragic situation in itself made even worse by the timing with which death presented itself in his life: two weeks before he retired, my grandmother died in her sleep because of a congenital heart problem of which nobody was aware.

Losing a loved one is already painful, but losing them a step away from the freedom of retirement is excruciating. My grandfather would find himself with all the time in the world but no one with whom to share it. Everyone in the family was concerned that he wouldn't recover, especially after seeing him at the funeral, in tears and barely able to stand on his feet. A broken man. My father supported him for the entire function. When he collapsed next to the closed casket, I think everyone in attendance thought the same thing: "How will he ever be able to keep going?" A question that triggered a second, terrible one: "How long will it be until his funeral?"

Something unexpected happened instead. First of all, Grandpa decided to keep working for another six months. It seemed to us like those business trips, long and far away, were his way to avoid thinking about it, like he refused to grieve. He kept on looking like a distraught man to us, but it was impossible to help him because he was completely shut off in himself and in his pain. We were all worried about him, but then, after yet another work trip abroad, he returned as a new man. There wasn't a trace of sadness on his face, he wasn't bereaved anymore. His behavior, his gestures, were all filled with love now. Nobody in the family could explain what had happened to him, but the change was noticeable.

Grandpa announced that he had decided to retire. From that moment on, he became a point of reference for everyone, because he took care of us all. It almost seemed as if his new mission in life were to keep the family together, a challenging feat after my parents' divorce.

He somehow managed to leave his pain behind and start over, with incredible optimism, turning more and more into the glue that bonded our family. Despite that cruel twist of fate, he never took out his frustrations on others and didn't become a person full of hate and resentment. On the contrary, he never uttered a mean or angry word to anyone.

He became more present than ever. He would call, get worried about us, help us out with the little things, and, above all, he listened. Still, it was as if he were concealing a wound inside him that was still open; and every Sunday evening he gently declined any attempt of mine to turn the attention to his side of the phone. He wanted me to be the one talking, he would

listen, and that was all. There was no way he would share what he had inside with me. And the more I insisted, the more he would shut himself off, so I just made my peace with it and stopped trying.

On the one hand, it was really a self-defense mechanism; on the other hand, he knew how to listen to people the way only those who actually *love* listening to others can. And that was a rare gift.

I always identified two types of people around me. Those who, as soon as you open up a bit, overwhelm you with their judgments masqueraded as innocent opinions. And those who stay quiet but aren't listening; they are like walls, your words just bounce off of them without any chance to get through.

And then there was Grandpa. He would remain silent so that he could fully focus on what I was saying. He never missed a detail and, if he didn't understand a concept, a word, or the meaning of one of my musings, he would ask me to repeat it. I also loved him for this.

He had a rare empathy, the kind that makes you worry for other people instead of constantly thinking about how unfair life has been with you. You would have every right to complain, get depressed, and fall into full victim mode, but instead you don't. Only truly sensitive people can do so, because it means moving past your own suffering so that you are not blind to the suffering around you.

Grandpa was one of these people. Maybe that is why he was the first person to notice my depression.

[...]

## Chapter 39

I woke up in a good mood the following morning. It hadn't happened in months. It wasn't even the alarm clock set for eight a.m. that made me open my eyes. It happened naturally and without any trauma. And certainly not at four thirty.

I got up, went to the bathroom of yet another hotel room, and rinsed my face. I looked at myself in the mirror and was astonished and relieved to notice that the nasty rash that had been above my eye for months was almost gone. I felt good, physically and mentally. I was full of energy and eager to jump on my motorcycle and get on the road. I wasn't manic or depressed. I just felt fine.

After packing my backpack (which I did automatically by then, like a ritual), I went down to the lobby, where Guilly was already waiting for me.

"You said that waking up at four thirty means that you're sad," I said.

"Right."

"What if you always wake up at a different time, what does that mean?"

He laughed and shrugged his shoulders.

"It probably means that you're happy! And when you're happy, don't ask yourself why. Don't think about it too much. Just be happy."

That day, as we continued down the same road, we alternated between seaside, cities, mountains, where the green was the greenest I had ever seen. We had been driving for four hours and, just as the road was getting increasingly narrow and winding, it suddenly started to rain. As we went uphill, my motorcycle vibrated frightfully in a couple of turns, giving me the impression that the back tire was skidding a little on the wet asphalt. I quickly turned on the front headlight to signal to Guilly to pull over. We stopped by the edge of the road with our bikes still on. It seemed like there wasn't another human being for miles, we were surrounded by nothing but very thick jungle. The green of the leaves was even darker now with the rain. It was only three in the afternoon, but the sky was shrouded in big dark clouds.

"How far are we going today?" I asked, raising my voice to speak over the sound of the engines.

"Until Phong Nha-Kẻ Bàng National Park," he replied.

“And how much longer until we get there?”

He looked to one side and the other, then stood on his tiptoes to try to see beyond the slope of the road, which went up and down.

“I’d say half an hour,” he answered.

I nodded and set my motorcycle in gear, ready to get going, but he turned his engine off. I looked at him surprised and he motioned to do the same. I reluctantly did so, I didn’t want to stand there in the rain. I just wanted to reach our destination, take a boiling hot shower, and have dinner. Once both our engines were off, I noticed there wasn’t a sound besides the pouring rain. We were plunged in silence.

Guilly looked up at the sky. Raindrops fell on his face, getting lost in his wrinkles and beard. He looked ecstatic, as if he were receiving a message from the sky.

“Can you feel it?” he asked me.

“What?”

“The sound of silence. Can’t you feel how relaxing it is?”

I focused on the sound of the rain. It was different from how it sounded in the city. Here, the raindrops fell on trees, cultivated fields, mountains. That sound was enveloping, warm, and reassuring. After hesitating for a moment, I also tilted my head up and closed my eyes. We stayed like that for a few seconds, just letting it rain on our faces. Then Guilly turned his engine back on.

“You’ll see how spectacular this place is. Nature is dominant here.”

He took off and I followed him. After a few kilometers and several narrow hairpin bends, we made it over a hill; just as we started making our way down, I saw something that took my breath away: on my left, past the road, there was a vast expanse of prairies, rivers, and hills. It felt like being on the set of *Jurassic Park*, except this place was real and it was there, in front of my eyes.

What struck me most was the vastness of what was there before me: I felt small, just like Guilly said. I had never seen such an expansive view in my entire life. Unobstructed by skyscrapers, buildings, houses, factories, highways, or other manmade structures. It was all Nature. I understood what Guilly meant when he said that it was “dominant.”

The road kept on going downhill until we reached the prairies that we saw from above just a short while back. From there, it continued straight as a sword, cutting in two that landscape that was both luxuriant and barren, without a living soul except for the occasional cow grazing oblivious to the rain. Every now and then there was an intersection with a road on our right that went who knows where. All of a sudden, Guilly’s turn signal went on and, shortly

after turning, I noticed a large sign on a rocky hill that said “Phong Nha-Kẻ Bàng.” We had arrived.

Or at least so I thought. At a certain point, the back of my motorcycle started to slide. I slowed down abruptly, which was a big mistake, because at that point the back tire skidded on the wet asphalt, making the vehicle uncontrollable. I removed my hand from the breaks and let the bike slow down to a stop on its own, since there wasn't anybody traveling in the opposite direction or behind us. Around us, nothing but fields, cultivated or abandoned. In the distance, imposing and majestic hills. Then only dark green, torrential rain from the sky, and mud on the ground. We were on the most remote road in Vietnam.

It felt like driving on soap, but I managed not to lose control. The motorcycle came to a halt. I put my feet down and, when they touched the road, I breathed a sigh of relief. I leaned over the handlebar, exhausted. All the while, getting wet in the rain. I looked up when I heard the sound of Guilly's engine.

“Hey there, what's going on?” he asked. He was smiling, even under that relentless downpour.

“I'm afraid I got a flat tire.”

Without saying anything, he parked his motorcycle and walked up to mine. He carefully inspected the wheel. “A nail.”

“A nail?”

“Stuck in the tire. It's in so deep that you must've ridden with it for at least ten kilometers.”

“Shit,” I exclaimed. “Why does this bullshit always happen to me?”

Guilly laughed and I glared at him.

“Life is a river. We flow with it!” he replied, opening his arms and smiling.

“Huh?”

“We have to go with the flow, Davide! With this rain, this road, and this nail in your tire. Just go along with destiny, because you never know, this accident might be the beginning of something good.”

I looked at him for a while, while a strong and relentless downpour drenched us head to toe. Guilly was wearing a questionable brown raincoat that looked fifty years old. A flash of lightning lit up the sky, followed by a frightening clap of thunder. I was starting to get worried: Nature really dominated in that place. There was no shelter, there was nobody. And under that torrential rain, he kept on smiling and talking about... loving destiny?

“What do we do now?” I asked. I was starting to lose my patience.



"I think you can make it to the next town center," he answered.

"How far is that?"

He made a face and looked around.

"I don't think it matters."

"Why not?"

I almost had to shout to make myself heard over the roar of the rain. More lightning and thunder, but less strong this time.

"What other option do we have?" asked Guilly.

"Guilly, cut the bullshit, please. For real," I said. I was tired, fed up, and completely soaked. There wasn't an inch of my body that was still dry.

"It's starting to get dark and I'm cold..." I complained.

"Exactly," he interrupted me. "Do you want to stay here in the rain? Sometimes it doesn't matter how long it takes or where you're going. Sometimes all that matters is to keep going, keep on moving. This is another one of Taro's non-rules: don't be a rock, be the river."

"Be the river?"

Guilly laughed. In doing so, he tilted his head up and his hood fell over his nose. All I could see was his open mouth.

"If you stop, nothing can change. If you move, something will happen. That's what it means. There's already enough rain coming from the sky, I have no intention of staying here feeling sorry for myself," he said.

"But where can I go with a flat tire?"

"It's not flat. The nail got itself stuck pretty well in the tire. A stroke of luck in this misfortune. See? You can make it for a few more kilometers, I assure you. You can do a lot more than you think."

"But Guilly..." I started.

He laughed, jumped on his motorcycle, started the engine, and took off. I watched him, stunned. Then, fearing I would really be left there, alone, in the middle of nowhere, I turned on my bike and started following him at low speed.

My motorcycle was swerving like a bucking horse, but it was easier to control if I drove slowly. The road seemed like it had been cleared just for us, it was completely deserted. After driving for a couple kilometers with bated breath, Guilly's turn signal went on and he took a right. I was next. I tried to turn without tilting the motorcycle, going at ten kilometers per hour, leaning my body forward. If somebody had seen me at that moment, they would have thought I was a total moron. Luckily, there wasn't anybody around.

I kept on following Guilly for twenty minutes, until I glimpsed a village in the distance. I exulted and the shout echoed in my helmet. We kept on driving, slowly slowly, Guilly with his perfectly stable bike, and me with my back tire sliding like a ski, until we passed a hill.

I breathed a sigh of relief when we reached the town. There were people, shops, restaurants, and the ever-present guesthouses. I was looking forward to the moment I could take a boiling hot shower and wash off that damn rain.

Guilly took more time than I thought was necessary to find a place for the night. I would have gladly picked the first one, but he seemed to be looking for something specific. Every now and then he would slow down and stand up on the foot pegs, like a pilot celebrating after winning a race. I had noticed it several times, that pose of his, he would do it to get a better look around; but it was only then that I realized how absurd (and dangerous) it was for a man his age to act that way.

He finally pulled over, not in front of a guesthouse or a hotel. But in front of a restaurant, full of local people wearing heavy coats, hats, and gloves. Some ladies even had closed shoes, something I hadn't seen until that moment. We must have been in a part of Vietnam where it gets cold and rains a lot.

I pulled over next to Guilly and looked at him puzzled.

"Are you hungry?" he asked.

"Guilly... can't we find a room first? It's cold, I'm soaking wet."

He didn't pay attention to me and turned his engine off.

"Right now, we have two problems," he said. "We have to find a mechanic and a room. If we don't stop for food, then we'll have another issue: hunger. Instead, if we stop here, we might solve one of the first two problems. Or maybe even both."

"In a restaurant?"

"Places like these," he said, pointing at the restaurant with two dozen people busy drinking coffee or eating steaming bowls of soup to seek comfort from the cold, "are full of people. Therefore, they are also full of opportunity."

I quietly followed him inside. Like many Vietnamese restaurants, there weren't windows or an entrance door: it was all under a porch, in the open, despite the cold. All the patrons were Vietnamese with the exception of a guy with crystal blue eyes sitting in the corner. He was nursing a beer too dark to be the Bia Hoi beer that Hang had made me try.

When we walked in, I was concerned they would give us dirty looks. We were foreigners, dirty, tired, and drenched from head to toe. But nobody even glanced at us, something I was really starting to appreciate about Asians.

We sat down and ordered some food. We both got some hot *phở*; it was the best thing you could wish for in this kind of weather. Like every place where I had eaten in Vietnam, the waitress wasn't wearing a uniform or even an apron. She was a young lady in jeans and a t-shirt. If she hadn't walked up to us holding the typical waiter's notepad in her hand, I would have mistaken her for a customer.

Guilly scanned the room, as if he were studying the situation. I didn't disturb him. In the meantime, I took off my jacket and hoodie, both drenched. I was left in my t-shirt, so I took advantage of the nearby space heater, enjoying the hot air blowing on my goosebumps.

Now that there was some heat, that we had a roof over our heads, and soon there would also be food in our bellies, I felt bad about the way I treated Guilly: it was unfair of me to raise my voice at him.

"Listen, Guilly, sorry for earlier."

He smiled without saying anything.

"I overreacted. I'm sorry I treated you poorly."

Once again, he remained silent. He joined his hands in front of his chest and lowered his head, smiling.

We were quiet for some time.

"You said to be the river and not the rock in the river..." I continued.

"One of the basic concepts of Buddhism is that everything is constantly changing. Everything changes, always. Nothing ever stays the same. We change and the reality around us changes. That is why life is a river. It only flows in one direction, forward, and there is no way to make its water flow back. The river is a symbol of constant change because it never stays the same. It is different, in every moment. The river can never stop, no matter what you do, it keeps on flowing. You are just deluding yourself if you think you can stop it," said Guilly.

Our steaming bowls of *phở* arrived. He didn't even glance at them. He thanked the waitress and kept on talking.

"That is what life is: a river. Now, you can approach it in one of two ways. You can be a rock, get stuck in the riverbed, and resist the water's flow. It involves effort, suffering, tension, and stress. Just like everything you were feeling earlier, out there in the rain. Or you can choose to go along with that endless flow without resisting it. That means accepting that everything changes, all the time. Living lightly, in full harmony with the constant state of flux. Those who learn to love uncertainty find the key to serenity. Because life is full of uncertainty. There is an ancient Buddhist proverb that says: 'Don't worry, nothing is under control'. Being mindful of this means becoming the river yourself. Becoming one with the deepest essence of life."

"Is that what we're doing here, by chance?" I asked.

Guilly smiled. He removed his chopsticks from their pouch, placed them between his fingers, closed his eyes, and whispered his prayer. "Yes, that's exactly why we're here," he said when he was done and slowly picked up some noodles with his chopsticks.

"If you want to become the river, you need to learn how to lose yourself," he then continued.

"Lose myself?"

"Precisely, because it means going along with the flow of life. Not planning anything ahead, just dealing with the situations as they come. This is the best way to grow as a human, because the river of life will always bring you to new places, to face challenges that are always different. In doing so, it will allow you to enjoy multiple landscapes instead of the same unchanging view that the rock has, stuck and stubbornly resisting the constantly changing reality. The best things in life happen when you lose yourself."

"Really?"

"Think about when you fell in love for the first time. Was that planned? No, you decided to get lost in that person's eyes and see what would happen. People are terrified of losing themselves, because Western society convinced them that it is the scariest thing ever. It told us that our life has to be a small, safe cage. And we accepted it, refusing to see what's on the outside. We have gotten so used to the idea that getting lost is dangerous when, actually, it's just exciting. When your heart beats because you don't know what will happen, there, that is when you feel alive. That is when you become the river and confide in the universe. And as the river, whatever might come up along the way, you will love it."

As he spoke those words, I thought about the recent period in my life. Dark, disastrous, problematic, extremely sad. Had I ever gotten lost in all those months? No, I just locked myself up in that same cage that Guilly was talking about. Even if it depressed me. Maybe I should have just lost myself? The doubt that he might have been right was strong. After all, the point of that entire trip was to leave all certainties and beaten paths behind and venture into the unknown. And I have actually never felt better.

"If we had gone to our hotel rooms immediately because we were cold and tired, we would have chosen to be a rock. Walking in here means being the river. And now we just have to wait and be patient. Sooner or later we will run into someone or get involved in something. If we do our best, we will get what we want. Actually, even more."

We ate our *phở*. That boiling hot savory soup hit the spot. When we finished, Guilly cleaned his chopsticks and put them away. He then started to look around. When he met

someone's eyes, he would smile at them. The Western guy responded by smiling back and raising his beer, as if toasting. Guilly lifted his empty bowl of *phở*, then burst into laughter. The guy imitated him. Shortly after, he walked up to our table carrying his beer. He sat down without saying a word and looked at us for a few seconds. Guilly was smiling, as if he somehow knew what was about to happen.

"You don't see many new faces in this place. Tourists usually go to cafés, not to restaurants for locals like this one," he said in English with a strange accent that I had never heard before.

"You're Irish?" asked Guilly, but it sounded more like a statement than a question.

"Yay," he replied with a hint of a smile. He drank a sip of beer and went back to looking at us. It seemed like he was studying us.

"What are you looking for?" he asked, getting closer to us, as if we were in a secret meeting among criminals.

"A mechanic," answered Guilly in the most natural way. "For a motorcycle."

The guy smiled, as if he had been told a joke. When he realized it wasn't, he froze for a moment.

"Are you kidding? I used to be a mechanic!" he exclaimed, delighted.

"And what are you now?" asked Guilly.

"I own a guesthouse with my wife."

"Here in Phong Nha?"

The guy nodded.

"Where's the motorcycle? I can give it a look now," he said, all happy.

Guilly nodded his head towards our bikes parked outside, in the pouring rain. He jumped out of his seat, but Guilly stopped him by raising his hand. He looked him straight in the eyes, with a serious and focused expression on his face.

"Thank you," he said in the end. And he joined his palms in front of his chest.

The Irish guy smiled and walked away. The waitress came over to clear our empty bowls from the table. Guilly thanked her. Then he turned to me and said in Italian: "I think we've just solved all three of our problems."

"We just got really lucky," I commented.

"No, Davide. We went with the flow of life, even during a time of difficulty. We were the river and not the rock. So life brought us exactly where we wanted."