

Rosy

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Translated by Sean Mark

In the living room there is a white L-shaped sofa, a rug with orientalising patterns and a small wooden table on it, a brown cabinet holding a few books, a television set fixed halfway up the wall, three small paintings hanging up and one propped up on a shelf. To the left is a kitchen that connects to the garage-laundry room, organized meticulously, almost professionally; to the right, a bedroom with a large double bed in *arte povera* style. An 800-square-foot apartment, all perfectly in order.

An elderly woman throws open drawers and doors, rummages in the cabinets, the utility room, and the closets. Keeping an eye on her, standing in the entrance doorway, are a pair of carabinieri. She works quickly, shoving winter clothes, shoes, whatever she can find, in bulk, into a large suitcase. She knows where the stuff is, yet she proceeds indiscriminately, without looking; the task she's been given disorients or rather disturbs her. What is she supposed to believe? The rumours that are all over the village—talk of devilry, autism à deux, a massacre—or her own feelings about the couple? They were her neighbours and they would often give her things, though she wasn't quite sure if it was to get rid of them or because they were generous—especially her, the wife.

The refrigerator is jam-packed: yogurt, cold cuts, cheeses, dressings and dips, bottles of wine and Coca-Cola. Inside the freezer are pieces of chicken and guinea fowl, pork chops, which are all going to expire. The old woman fills three large bags. She'll give the food in at the local hospice, or actually no, to the Syrians next door, who have two young children. First, though, she puts the meat to one side. It's expensive stuff, and the Syrians are Muslims anyway.

Bunched up in the middle of the courtyard, under everyone's eyes, is what remained in the apartment: the filled-up suitcase, the food, and two eggs, kept to one side as they'd break if they were stuffed in with the rest.

Something's missing. The elderly woman goes back inside and rummages around more frenetically. She's angry, almost, for what she doesn't want to admit—that she never understood those two. As she sits down on the bed to catch her breath, her calf brushes up against a small, round object. Leaning over, she sees something by her feet that she's never noticed before, a row of small drawers with tiny knobs. Stashed underneath the underwear inside are three hundred euros in cash and wedding rings still stored in wedding boxes. Now she has everything they've asked for from jail.

The carabinieri patrol car drives out of the courtyard quietly.

Later, the Syrian family will throw the bags straight in the bin, refusing to eat food that belonged to murderers.

A child plays with the two forgotten eggs, rolling them around the courtyard.

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Now the image can no longer imagine the real,
because it is the real. It can no longer dream it,
since it is its virtual reality. It is as though things
had swallowed their own mirrors
and had become transparent to themselves,
entirely present to themselves in a ruthless transcription,
full in the light and in real time.
Jean Baudrillard

In condominiums in Lombardy, apartments overlook a single, large courtyard. Closed off on all sides, and with only one entrance, the courtyard is a space carved out precisely to be surveyable from every point—a disposition that works rather like an inverted panopticon: from every apartment it's possible to see who's coming in, while those looking out can hide behind curtains or stand just out of sight. This field of continuous visibility makes the courtyard safer, but also turns it into a trap. Each resident, standing at their window, can penetrate the most minute details of their neighbours' lives, keeping track of their schedules, their comings and goings, guests, and quarrels—an intrusion at times unintentional and unwanted. Though the side walls separating apartments limit this intrusion somewhat, noise spreads unchecked in the courtyard, echoing in its empty space. Those living in an apartment overlooking the courtyard can hear everything. There is no possibility of secrecy. There is no protective shadow.

The couple had lived in the condominium for six years. Their apartment was on the ground floor, in a self-contained portion of the building, with its own entrance. That wing was called "The Icehouse," *giazzèra* in the local dialect, because farmers in winter used to fill it with snow and use it as a huge refrigerator.

The couple had no children. He worked as a garbage collector; she as a maid on a per-hour basis. Their schedules were adjusted to each other's needs: he always picked the same shift—from 6am to midday—came home for lunch, had a nap, and then drove her to work, since she had no driving licence; and in the hours before leaving, she'd take care of the housework. Like a well-oiled cog, their life together ran smoothly. But then a girl had moved into the apartment above theirs. A few years later, her boyfriend had moved in with her, and shortly after they'd had a child.

The couple had complained about the thin walls separating the two apartments, about the noise and screaming, and the time they'd had to intervene because they didn't want anyone to end up getting hurt. In their apartment below, they could hear everything—they said they were worried about the child, too, who was just over a year old.

On December 11, 2006, at around 8 pm, the young woman and her son had been killed in their home. The other victims were the woman's mother, a neighbour living on the top floor, and her husband, the only survivor thanks to a congenital deviation of the carotid artery that prevented him from bleeding to death. The women had had their skulls smashed in and all parties had had their throats slit, showing similar, complex wounds resulting from a persistent and uneven hacking action of the blade within the wound. Consultants for the prosecution and the defence would qualify it as butchery. Finally, the apartment had been set on fire.

Those who had visited the crime scene in the following hours—first responders, firefighters, medical workers, and carabinieri—had used the words “killing spree,” “horror,” “slaughter,” and “hell on earth”. Seeing the sheer amount of blood spilled, one nurse had fainted. The term “bloodbath” appears several times in the forensic reports.

The smell had set in right away, a mixture of burned plastic, wood, paper, and flesh. The four thousand litres of water that the tanker truck had expelled to extinguish the fire had trickled down the stairs, all the way to the courtyard, carrying every residue and scrap. And all that blood.

After it had happened, the other residents of the condominium were afraid. They'd hurry through the gate, go inside, and mind their own business. When they couldn't dodge the reporters' questions, they would say they knew nothing about the evening of December 11 and hadn't heard a thing. If they were pressed hard, they might open up a little, but would immediately regret what they'd said and ask not to be quoted or named.

She was the only one who didn't dodge the questions. She would chat with the reporters, telling them everything she knew. If something seemed shaky or didn't match up with what she'd said the day before, they would make her start over again.

On December 19, she appeared for the first time in a local newspaper. She and her husband were not home that night, she said—if they had been, she added, they'd probably have been killed as well. She'd then told the reporters about an altercation she'd had with the young neighbour: “I was airing a rug in the yard, when she came out and started shouting, I don't know why, basically we started arguing. Then she pushed over my drying rack and a chair I'd brought out with me and slapped me twice. Only I didn't have the strength to react, she was bigger than me and I went down like a sack of potatoes.” Fortunately, her husband had stepped in to defend her. The young woman had also fallen—was she pushed? did she slip? the stories differ—and she had reported them to the police.

The other residents had always preferred not to get mixed up with that wing of the condominium. They kept quiet even when the arguments took place in the courtyard, when the insults and swearing came in through the open windows. The young woman and her husband argued all the time, and those who lived next to them were sucked into their turmoil.

By January 6, she was taking up half a page of a local newspaper, with a headline above it. The journalist noted that she was willing to talk to the press at length, while speaking to her husband was far more uneasy. When she'd been asked if she knew that investigators were treating neighbours as suspects, she had shut down the reporters, much to their surprise: “You've got it all wrong, we had nothing to do with it. We were interrogated like everyone else.

We even said to the carabinieri, ‘If you’ve got a lead, tell us.’ But obviously they don’t, otherwise they’d have told us by now.” She and her husband were calm, very calm, had done nothing wrong and had nothing to fear—they could even take a blood sample if they wanted. That night, they’d gone out to dinner without having made plans, because that’s how it is with her husband: he tells her he feels like going out and they go out. Where had they gone? To a pizzeria in Como, but she couldn’t remember the name (it would transpire later that they had been to McDonald’s), and when they got back, they’d found the courtyard full of firefighters and carabinieri.

She then went back to talking about the quarrels upstairs between the young woman and her husband: “Who told you they got along? She didn’t want him around [...] But don’t get me started on that—we’ve got to live here, we’ve sacrificed so much for this apartment. Even if we wanted to leave, because we’re afraid, it’s not like we can just snap our fingers and buy a new one.”

On January 8, at around 10 am, she’d slipped out of the house, to pick up a pair of shoes she had taken to get fixed. In the commotion she had forgotten to bring her scarf. Everything was still, Piazza del Mercato empty. Before opening the door to the shoemaker’s, she had shaken her head persistently, like a dog trying to get water out of its ears.

Two minutes later, in the stale air that smelled of leather and sweat, she was crying in front of the counter. Her sobbing was unrestrained and seemed childlike to the man. One of the families where she worked had young children too, what would they think? Would they fire her? She was afraid of losing her job, and if she lost her job how were she and her husband supposed to pay the mortgage on the apartment, and the instalments on the camper van? The camper van was neat and still as good as new; they kept it parked outside and well looked after. Now reporters were banging on her windows, gravel had been thrown at her, and she’d been called a murderer. She couldn’t take it anymore.

“Who’s doing this? Who’s bothering you?”

She didn’t answer. Whenever anyone asked her to give details, provide information or a name, she would spread her arms wide. In the village, they said:

she was a gossip, a blabbermouth, who never shut up;

she couldn’t say the same thing twice the same way—things happened in one place and then another, at one time and then a different one;

she couldn’t be reasoned with, was always confusing things, and there was no way to point out that she was contradicting herself;

if special needs teachers had existed back in her day, she definitely would’ve been given one;

when she spoke sometimes a little childish voice came out that was disturbing.

That same day, at 2pm: the arrest.

The patrol car had left the courtyard slowly, steering carefully clear of the hordes pressed against the gate. People had come from all corners of the Erba area, with signs and placards demanding no mercy be shown to the couple. Egging each other on, they shouted: let them rot in jail; they’re not mad, they’re evil; give them the death penalty.

The two were sitting in the back, with the carabinieri in the front. A loose scarf around her neck, an army green jacket open over his stretched-out belly.

Earlier, inside the house, she had addressed the carabinieri in desperation: “Why did you say it was us? We’ve done no such thing.”

“Absolutely, ma’am. Unfortunately, reporters have been saying...”

“You want our apartment? Take the apartment. I’ll empty out the drawers. But why did you say it was us?”

“We didn’t say it was you or the gentleman. We don’t speak to reporters. We’re here to defend you.”

Even earlier, agitated, she had refused the microphones being pushed towards her: “We’re not murderers! We’re nothing!”

Finally, the car had stopped in front of the grating of the Bassone prison, through which the squat, peeling building could be seen. “Good luck,” one of the carabinieri had said, with downcast eyes, before making them step out of the car.

Inside the prison, the inmates were already asking for them: hand them over, we know what to do. All night they’d been tapping their cutlery against the bars. They were calling for her to meet the same end as the baby, with her throat slit. As per the warden’s orders, the couple would be kept isolated and under constant surveillance, and given separate meals to avoid poisoning. They couldn’t risk the couple not making it to trial.

On January 10, locked up inside the Bassone prison, the two confessed to having committed the massacre, thereby becoming “the Erba monsters.”

In May, after five months in pre-trial detention, they recanted their confessions and declared themselves innocent. After withdrawing the public defender’s mandate, they would hire a private defence counsel.

A year after the arrest, early on the morning of the first hearing, there were already chaotic scenes outside the courthouse. A long line of people waited to secure a ticket for a seat, while over a hundred journalists would be divided between the courtroom and the press room. Journalists would be chosen by lot—no hierarchy or privilege could guarantee proximity to the killers, the chance to see their faces in person.

The couple had entered, escorted by carabinieri, from the basement of the courthouse and had sat in a cage set up to the left of the room. The cage had been repainted yellow for the occasion—the smell of paint still in the air—and measured six foot by thirteen. They sat centre stage, in the same clothes they were wearing when they had been arrested.

Before the trial began, the presiding judge had allotted ten minutes for photographers, including those who hadn’t been able to get into the courtroom. The assault was lightning fast, the barrage of flashes irregular, overlapping, intense. Those who could had even slipped their arms through the bars to shoot the pair up close. She had turned to the wall and lowered her gaze; he was impassive, unblinking.

Throughout the hearing they had watched what was happening before them with aloofness, then with childlike attention, and then with unreadable smiles. Throughout the

hearing they had held hands. She had caressed his wrists after they had removed his handcuffs, had tucked his shirt collar under his beige pullover, leaned her knees against his, fed him a piece of bread, laid her head on his shoulder, and with flushed cheeks curled up next to him. They had whispered things in each other's ears and smiled, his hand resting on her thigh.

This is how the press reported the event:

"Tender 'monsters' shed no tears—spouses treat court like their living room."

"Rosetta and Olly are more interested in touching and smelling each other than following the trial [...] Rosa and Olindo's mawkishness is galling [...] their caresses fail to move or soften us, and just make us angry. Their affectionate displays irritate, like the little notes he writes for her in prison: 'I love you, dear wife, and always will.' [...] They are united—diabolically—to defend their quiet, aseptic life."

"The two of them, with faces like common beasts, sit together in a cage. [...] He caresses her thigh, which is clad in customary jeans despite her plump form, as today's bad taste dictates. For the paying audience that fills the hall, they exhibit the reassuring gestures of a marital tenderness that is stale, but no less irritating for it [...] Olindo and Rosa have chosen to put themselves on display, for exactly what they are: ordinary people. [...] People who do not think, do not read, do not dream, do not judge. People who just consume. [...] Perhaps I should suppress the instinctive contempt I feel before their stupid, withdrawn expressions, stubbornly void of thought."

"Autism à deux. Since the world is not there. [...] All there is is closed-circuit communication: messages that seem carried by imperceptible electrical stimuli, transmitted from one body to another, the deciphering of which should be entrusted more to the ethologist Konrad Lorenz than Dr. Freud. [...] Apparently, in the first few days after the crime she was the dominant one. Today that's no longer the case. The roles have switched. It's obvious. Now Olindo is the sphinx. A sphinx wearing light moccasins and white socks. [...] Unless there are any major surprises, these will be the last days they spend together, uselessly holding each other's hand."

On November 26, 2008, Rosa Bazzi and Olindo Romano are sentenced to life in prison with three years of daytime solitary confinement on charges of: premeditated mass murder with the aggravating circumstances of futile motive and heinousness; destruction of a dead body with the aggravating circumstance of concealing evidence; attempted murder with the aggravating circumstance of preventing identification; attempted arson; and unlawful carrying of a weapon for the purpose of killing.

The verdict hinges on three pieces of evidence, in the following order: the couple's confession, the survivor's identification of Olindo Romano, and the blood stain of one of the victims found on the footrest of the couple's Seat Arosa.

The ruling is confirmed by the Milan Court of Appeals in 2010 and the national Court of Appeals in 2011. This is from the judges' report: "And lastly, the words of the defendants themselves—captured in ambient wiretaps, in spontaneous statements, during interrogations, or in Olindo Romano's dense annotations of the Bible the prison chaplain had given him—give stark illustration of the gradual intensification of their feelings of frustration coupled with dissatisfaction, which, festering over years of solitude, and unchecked by an almost complete

absence of ties of friendship and family, were then transformed into an atrocious plan of destruction. It was a heinous plan seen as necessary and just, to eliminate anything that in the eyes of the defendants could constitute a threat to their armoured and self-sufficient affective balance—a balance built on an exclusive relationship for two, which over the years has never accepted ‘intrusions,’ and has become the sole source of strength, sole reason for living for both parties, going so far as to nullify them as individuals and to compel them to recognise themselves only within a couple dynamic. So much so that they show no sincere repentance for what they have done, are entirely devoid of emotional stimulation in relation to everything around them, and are capable of emotional reactions only when confronted with the prospect—that is unbearable to them—of having to live without one another.”

On one of her last days as a free woman, Rosa Bazzi appears behind the gate of her courtyard. In a tracksuit and a pair of terrycloth slippers, she walks towards the camera, until she reaches the gratings and puts her head through the bars, her face appearing in close-up. She smiles as she approaches: “Can we close the gate now, please?” She uses the first-person plural, asking permission for something it’s her right to do, since the cameramen have intruded in a private courtyard. From a balcony behind her, we hear the voice of an elderly neighbour: “Tell them to get lost! Or I’ll call the police!”

“They’re not happy,” Rosa says to the reporters, and spreads her arms wide, as if to say: it’s not me who wants to kick you out, it’s the other residents. A flattered expression appears on her face, suggesting she feels a faint pleasure in being filmed; her look at the camera is fleeting but self-important.

The clip only lasts twenty seconds, but from then on it will be shown repeatedly, for years, by newspapers and news programmes on every network, even four times within a single story.

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Acts have their being in the witness.
Without him who can speak of it?
In the end one could even say
that the act is nothing,
the witness all.
Cormac McCarthy

When they enter Bassone prison, immediately after the arrest, the couple are subjected to a special and very strict precautionary measure: around the clock surveillance. There's always an officer watching them, watching what they do minute by minute, to prevent any attempts at self-harm. They are not allowed to have any objects with them—their cells are bare—and they spend endless hours doing nothing at all. No social exchanges; sensory deprivation.

Olindo has been put in the part of the prison known as "Observation," the final stretch of the infirmary, consisting of windowless cells that are often empty. Locked up all day, he broods in total solitude.

Rosa is also separated from the other inmates, but she has been put in a cell in front of the guardhouse, from where officers keep an eye on her. These women relate that she sits on her bunk for hours on end, staring into space, absorbed in a gentle, uninterrupted rocking motion. They are concerned about her health, also because of the violent crying fits that seize her and leave her in a state of catatonia. The warden gives these officers permission to talk to her. If at night she isn't asleep, whoever's on duty chats with her, lets her tell them what detergent is best for the stove top, and how long to soak food-stained clothes. The officers even file a special request that the warden let her do some chores and odd jobs to keep her busy.

In March, they both start to see a psychologist as part of a suicide risk prevention programme. Two months have passed since their arrest, a period in which they have faced, on their own, isolation, loss, and bewilderment. After a lifetime spent together, inseparably, they have been cast into an unfamiliar reality.

"From our very first meeting, she would run off at the mouth," the psychologist relates, "as if we'd known each other for a long time, and I knew all about her and her past. Her neighbours were her main subject of conversation. She complained about them and would recount incidents without giving times or names or precise circumstances."

Rosa's words overwhelm the psychologist, disorienting her, with a gradual acceleration that precludes any possibility of communication. It takes weeks to calm her down, slow her speech, and establish a dialogue. What strikes the psychologist most is the excitement with

which she is received. Rosa has an unrelenting desire to be listened to; for the first time in her life, she is the object of the interest of strangers who call her by name. The psychologist worries that this apparent enthusiasm is concealing the mobilization of a massive defensive system; traumatized and disconnected from the world around her, Rosa fills the air with her voice to counteract the emptiness engulfing her.

One Saturday, though, Rosa doesn't get out of bed. Body slumped, almost lifeless, all she does is weep. Disengaged from everything, she floats flush with reality.

The officers rush in and talk to her—the warden comes too—and they try to distract her, make her sit upright. The psychologist is called in for the emergency and exceptionally permitted to enter the cell. Left alone with her, she watches Rosa sob and scans the room, which is empty except for a couple of photographs hung on one wall:

Olindo—young, tanned, wearing a purple T-shirt—shows off a large, shiny catfish with a slit along its belly; he is standing in the bathroom doorway and behind him, in the half-lit hallway, is a photograph of the 1990-1991 AC Milan team, with owner Silvio Berlusconi in a small box in the upper left-hand corner; in black and white, Rosa is sitting behind her desk at school, hands resting on an open textbook; she's wearing a dark apron with a bow and collar of a lighter shade; her shoes, fastened by a large buckle, are dirty and worn; she looks into the camera and seems to tighten her lips to hold back a smile; a brown bob falls on her full cheeks, her fringe is crooked, and two hoop earrings glitter conspicuously. Hanging on the wall behind her is a huge map of Italy. Her head is in the middle of the Tyrrhenian Sea, squeezed between Sardinia and Calabria.

With the psychologist at her side, Rosa slowly resurfaces, and is able to bring herself to a sitting position. She looks at the photos too, smiles at the vision of Olindo holding his conquest in his hands. She calms down. It's missing him that is unbearable, she tells the psychologist. The psychologist says nothing.

As weeks go by, Rosa learns to adapt like any other inmate—the survival instinct is physiological—but her conditions worsen. Her already diminished capacities deteriorate; she switches between adjusted behaviour and acute crises, when she gives into uncontrollable sobbing, asthenia, and insomnia. During the night, she addresses an imaginary person, whom she believes is there with her in the cell. She calls her “the other Rosa”—a hostile, “evil” person who keeps her awake and whom she thrashes around to defend herself from. She complains of severe headaches that keep her from sleeping but also from thinking. Her stomach is cramped, shrunk to a fist. She drinks little and barely eats. All of a sudden she'll slam her wrists against the edge of a table and injure herself. She does this repeatedly, reopening wounds when they heal. The psychologist cannot contain her; Rosa is overwhelmed by an emotional state beyond control or comprehension. Aggressive, vindictive, shattered: these are the words often used to describe her.

She tells the psychologist about always feeling neglected by her family—by her mother especially—and about being physically abused by her relatives, and forced to work when she was just a child. For her, there were no plans, no dreams, no vision for the future.

The psychologist asks her if she can imagine a life outside prison without her husband. Impossible, she says: there is no life for her outside, and even if there were, it would be unliveable because the threats would never let up. She can't say who or what is threatening her, yet she is certain she is in danger. The psychologist presses her, "What if you get out? What if you're exonerated?"

"I'd like to be put in an institution run by nuns. I'd like to spend the rest of my life there. An institution with bars on the windows so no one can ever come in and hurt me."

The sentence is coherent and fully formed. It is surely the product of some rewriting by the psychologist, who was herself at pains to point out Rosa's difficulties understanding and organizing speech, establishing logical connections, recalling memories, and putting them in order. She speaks in disconnected, implausible snippets; she mixes real events with the products of her imagination, with no awareness of doing so; she is in the grip of a mental confusion that intensifies with anxiety or any charged emotional state. She shows delusional—and very fluid—ideation, at times completely unmoored from reality.

There remain large zones of uncertainty, the edges of which no one has traced. No data has been collected to attempt a reconstruction, to increase or improve our understanding—of the extent of her impairment, for example, and how it affected her other faculties, and her suspected illiteracy, which the psychologist does not probe and whose causes may not be attributable to poor quality schooling. "I can't say for certain that she can't read and write," the psychologist says, "but when she brought me her appointment request forms they were never filled out by her—the handwriting was someone else's, only the signature was hers. There was a serious personality disorder, there were several clinical issues that needed to be investigated. It didn't matter if they were guilty or innocent—the two had been brought to our attention, and it was our job to take care of them."

In April, Rosa's thoughts turn suicidal—her life is over, there's no point carrying on like this. Just one thing, though, her husband has nothing to do with it, and they should let him go. She is desperate and bursts into tears; the impossibility of them being together is destroying her.

He writes to her whenever he can, whenever there's something new to report, whenever he knows she's faltering, when he gets word she's broken her finger by banging it violently against the edge of the bed: my darling, dear bride, my love, little dove, duckling, little girl, little sparrow, sweet Rosebud, little mouse, my dear Rosa Angela, joy of my life, my sunshine, my dear bride, life of my soul, hope of my spirit.

She waits to be allowed to see him, asks that they let her take care of him like she did at home: "Olindo depends on me for everything." She wants to wash his clothes and iron them.

The hardest thing is learning to live without one another. Each of them continues to live their separate lives, but the couple has been divided, and this division has brought to an end the only world that was real to them. They complemented each other. She is unable to fill out a postal order; he is incapable of looking after himself. They are two people who had found outside themselves a solution to their own inabilities.

They were never alone because the other was always there; they were completely isolated from everything else. Having distanced themselves from their families, and with few

friends—friends are like shoes, Olindo would say, the tighter they are the more they hurt—no children had ever been countenanced, perhaps because, with the limited resources available, having one would have meant disrupting the way they functioned. But this childlessness becomes a subject of speculation:

she can't have one

she had an abortion after a car accident

she had a tumour

she had an extrauterine pregnancy.

Then it becomes a motive for killing the child.

Olindo spends whole days in the darkness of his cell. He refuses to go outside, to eat, or read. To get him outside, the psychologist requests permission from the warden to hold their appointments in the “walking area.” They walk side by side on the grass that is struggling to grow and is patched with bare hard earth, or they sit on a bench from which they can see the long, fortified gate and, beyond it, the sparse, wild undergrowth.

He is guarded during their first meetings. He declares he has no faith in “shrinks,” or in the representatives of any institutions for that matter. His rancour stems from his experience with neighbourhood disturbances. He repeatedly reported the altercations, prolonged animosity, and harassment he has been forced to endure by his neighbours to the police, but they never intervened, so he holds them to be the ones truly responsible for what happened. Everything about him is defiant—his tone, his posture, his facial expressions, his gaze.

At their first meeting, Olindo introduces himself as “the Erba monster,” and the psychologist later discovers that he did the same thing in the prison, even with the officers. She finds it strange. No one, going to prison for the first time, claims such ostentatious responsibility for the crime they’ve been accused of; usually prisoners don’t talk about what they’ve done, or do so only to stress their innocence or provide explanations that extenuate the blame. They talk about their despair, the trauma of being separated from their family, or their anxieties about work or money—an argumentative framework that appears common and comprehensible. Olindo, instead, is so excessive, and expressive, as to seem ridiculous. The flagrancy of his actions reminds her of children waving plastic weapons in the air, fantasising about wartime exploits.

This is the time, too, of foolish, avoidable, disciplinary sanctions. He answers back to officers, won’t tidy his cell, doesn’t keep his schedule. He converts into anger the anguish of confinement, of contact with other inmates, and his fear for her. He asks about her constantly, with conscious apprehension, about her well-being, whether she is eating, whether she’s been crying. He frets at the mere thought of her. “If one day I was to leave prison without my wife, I couldn’t live,” he tells the psychologist. “I’d rather stay here and share this fate.”

He doesn’t speak about the crime directly, talking instead about everything he thinks led up to it: the arguments, the hostility, the lack of intervention from the carabinieri, the mayor, the police, those bloody people moving into the condominium. He admits that he confessed, but talks about the content of his confession, about what happened, without ever using the first person.

He was happy to be a garbage collector. He knows every junction, every road in Erba and its surroundings. Driving the truck around alone at dawn, while everyone else is asleep, gave him a sense of freedom he didn't want to give up. He could have looked for a job as a surveyor: he had managed to graduate from night school, where he'd enrolled to improve his position in construction and stop doing manual labour. But he'd never had any use for that diploma or, perhaps, hadn't even tried to use it; his job with Econord suited him fine, affording him a quiet, predictable life—a routine that repeated every day, identical in its schedule and movements. There were no unexpected occurrences and no need to react to the unexpected, no variation in the pattern. A simple life, that was what he needed. The psychologist suspected low self-esteem and apathy.

As a hobby, Olindo built small objects out of scrap materials he picked up here and there while working. Habits, for him, were pleasures, and pleasure lay in the anticipation and certainty they would be repeated, day after day, in an endless chain interrupted only in the event of death or serious illness.

His disposition was to meticulousness, order, occasional obsessiveness. Uprooted abruptly from his everyday life and thrown into an alien world, he felt shattered, like he'd disintegrated from within. Suddenly, everything had been placed outside of his control.

As spring comes to an end, this kneejerk response to the initial shock recedes, and a more forthcoming, less tense, even perhaps more trusting person emerges. The psychologist can't say what might have triggered this transformation; one day Olindo shows up and seems serene, almost composed in his gestures and movements. He has regained his calm, along with a keener sense of reality. He begins to write—to his wife and to himself—revisiting memories of his former life; he makes collages out of pieces of newspaper; he comes up with encrypted codes to which he alone has the key, which he constantly changes. These codes attract a great deal of speculation, as mathematicians and analysts are called in to try to decipher them and reveal their hidden message. But nothing is hidden there. Like a surrogate for his old hobby, it's the code-making itself that holds the key to understanding what's going on. In a place where Olindo's constantly under observation, the psychologist says, the code is his only form of privacy. Of his writings, she says: "The inner confusion that governs them was so great it made me think of a vice of the mind—a disturbance in functioning, something that had jammed and was desperately looking for a way to fix itself."

Having left behind neighbourhood quarrels, which have now been emptied of their emotional load, Olindo returns to himself, regains contact with the present. He speaks of being plagued by brain fog, of being unable to piece together the sequence of events following his arrest. When he tries to recall what happened, he draws a blank. His trouble remembering and ordering events, and the frustration that ensues, lead him to stop thinking about it altogether. His mood changes again. He stops writing and spends his days lying on his bed looking at the naked light bulb above his head. He takes on a fatuous tone he will never abandon, which was perhaps how he spoke before the crime.

He wants to put an end to his life. "I've already lost a lot of weight, I know I can keep going," he tells the psychologist. "I'll behave myself until the trial if they let me see my wife.

If not, I'll carry on with my plan." He mentions a suicide pact that he claims he and Rosa made, both agreeing to take their own lives if they're not allowed to live together. Being with each other would be enough, no matter where or how. This is where the idea of a marital cell comes from. Everyone had dismissed it as press hyperbole, a strategy pursued by the defence to plead insanity, perhaps even by the couple themselves to give an impression of naivety that would soften their culpability in the eyes of the jury. Yet Olindo really believes it.

In a report from Bassone prison, sent in May to the Ministry of Justice, the investigating magistrate's office, and the Como prosecutor's office, the warden raises concerns about the couple, asking that a trustee or legal representative be appointed to look after them and their interests. "I have recently been receiving reports," he writes, "of atypical behaviour in Olindo Romano, who would like a marital cell to share with his wife."

It's crucial for Olindo that the two live together. He reiterates it often: "If Rosa was here with me, I'd be fine—maybe even better off, because I wouldn't have to worry about the mortgage, the accounts, household matters." An idea that most people find amusing appears to him desirable, indeed perfectly attainable. "Marriage is an institution of the State. When I married my wife, I promised to be with her through the good and the bad. This is the bad, why can't I be with her?" he asks over and over. He wants to preserve the marriage and doesn't understand why the state should prevent him doing so. The psychologist tries to make him face the impossibility of his request, which isn't practicable in reality. At each meeting, though, he comes back with the same demand, asserting his rights, because marriage is protected by the Constitution, and the bond can't be broken, is above even human law. It must be allowed to continue, even in prison, even for two people like them, who are accused of murder.

He applies the same logic to criminal responsibility. He tells the psychologist on several occasions he believes that he and his wife should equally split any sentence he'll potentially receive. The idea becomes the object of much discussion, in which it's difficult for her to bring him around to see things differently. He sticks to his position, considering it not only possible, but right—things are as he says they are, and must be changed if they are not.

His thinking is rigid, inflexible, and unchanging, resembling that of a child or a preadolescent, where adulthood should have brought a degree of fluidity or plasticity to his ideas, the ability to understand and share other perspectives. He is infantile and impressionable, lacking confidence in his own abilities. Profound depressive phases alternate with a difficulty channelling emotions, and a tendency to overinterpret, attaching hostile meanings to benevolent situations. In practice, he feels persecuted, exhibits paranoid tendencies.

This is their situation in the spring of 2007, before the first-instance trial, serving months of pre-trial detention. Shock, imprisonment, and the fracturing of their marital life have exacerbated their traits—a condition the psychologist has no hesitation in calling pathological, and which pre-exist the crime. These are two people who, lacking everything, had found in each other a veritable container, exhausting all personal needs. The other had become an extension of the self, the only possibility of projecting oneself beyond it and surviving as a social being. There was no investment in relationships outside the couple because everything they needed was present within. It was an all-encompassing, symbiotic, and dependent relationship, in which, of the two, Rosa enjoyed a greater degree of autonomy. Olindo's

presence contributed to limiting her propensity for delusion, her extreme and overwhelming emotiveness, and he would bring some grounding to her outlandish thinking. For him, a man without his wife could at best become a tramp.

The two functioned as one person, in a fusional state whose inner core it was impossible to reach. This was the conclusion reached also by the prosecution, which during the first-degree indictment said: “Those two are much more than a couple; they’re a quadruped.” In their shared cosmos, there are marital cells for couples and sentences that can be split between them, and there is no greater anguish than being separated—the only prospect that truly threatens them.

In prison, both are prescribed anti-anxiety medication and antidepressants.

In the summer, the psychologist goes away for a short time. During their first meeting after she returns, Rosa tells her that she did not commit any of the crimes she confessed to. She says several times that she never went upstairs to the apartment above theirs. The psychologist isn’t there as an observer and has no authority from which to probe; they are detainees awaiting trial and her role is only to assess their mental stability to prevent acts of self-harm. She doesn’t gather facts or evidence, doesn’t investigate the veracity of what she hears, and yet she cannot stop them from speaking. Though Rosa slips up on details, digresses, and loses track of her words, she always goes back to repeating that she has confessed to things she did not do. The reason she gives for this lies in what the magistrates told her: if you don’t confess, you won’t see your husband ever again. The moment she knew she was lost was when she gave into their words.

Olindo also comes up with an account of that evening, a detailed narrative from beginning to end—what they did, where they went, at what time. He says that late in the afternoon he lay down on their sofa and fell asleep under the red blanket he usually uses for napping. He was woken up suddenly by Rosa, asking excitedly to go out for dinner in Como. She insisted—hurry up, she said—and they left around 8pm, just before 8pm, maybe 7:30ish. He confides to the psychologist that he thinks that during interrogations he was subjected to violence and put under excessive pressure. It’s not something he’s sure of, because he doesn’t even know if the words he’s using are the right ones to describe how he felt, what led him to take on the blame for four murders. Thinking about it months after the events, he realizes how hazy his thoughts are, and the unlikelihood of what he was promised: if you confess, you’ll be out in five years. Olindo has pulled himself together, and the anguish he feels is now commensurate with a naivety he’s newly aware of, and which he observes from a distance.

The psychologist suggests that both of should them relate the whole story to the public defender assigned to their case since its beginning. It’s not her job, and doesn’t concern her relationship with them, but she senses it may be important, and she urges them to proceed. She doesn’t know that in the spring the prison chaplain had already heard that same story. And she doesn’t know that the public defender has already been replaced.

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No one
bears witness for the
witness.
Paul Celan

When he gets the call from his former colleague, what the lawyer knows about the massacre is what everyone knows, what he's read and seen on TV—the eyewitness, the confessions immediately following the arrest. He also knows, because he has plenty of experience, how judicial reporting can work: local journalists contact the prosecutor's office directly, and the national press then parrots that same reporting, second guessing its source. If one journalist in particular is deemed credible, that is the version others endorse—perhaps because they don't have time to read up the documentation, which may be long-winded or misleading, or not yet shaped into a clear narrative—and they trust and repeat it.

The lawyer, too, trusts his former colleague, a criminal lawyer from the Como Bar who began practising in the 1960s and hasn't stopped since, boasting that none of his clients has ever been given a life sentence. He's known as “the lion of Como” for his impetuosity in the courtroom, his stentorian voice and intimidating physical presence, with his imposing demeanour, thick white hair, and blue eyes. He's also known as “the lion of Como” because of his short temper, outbursts which are followed by sudden, childlike flashes of kindness. He, in turn, had received a rather distressed phone call from the chaplain at the Bassone—the priest who regularly confesses Olindo and Rosa, as he does with all the inmates who wish to. With this couple, in particular, he has forged an immediate bond, because they trust priests—trust is the key to this story—and they feel very alone.

When Olindo had confided to him that spring that he didn't commit the massacre, the priest must have felt very unsettled. He may have doubted the soundness of the information, may not have fully believed it was true; he may have been wracked with the decision of whether and how to act, considering also the silence to which he is bound by role and circumstance. After some torment, though, he decides finally that he can't keep this information to himself—he has received it in confession, and both she and he know and embrace the sanctity of the sacrament. He resolves to report it to the Como prosecutor's office. Weeks go by. He goes back to the prosecutor's office. More weeks go by.

Not being able to stand the shadow of an oversight, mistake, or gigantic misunderstanding—he thinks about the two of them, locked up separately—he finally resolves to call the old criminal lawyer, who, recently widowed and retired, spends his days playing poker and doing what he pleases. In another scenario the lawyer would have declined, but since the call comes from the priest and he is religious in his own way, he thinks about it. To avoid the possibility of even a little remorse further down the line, he asks two young colleagues—a man and a woman—to take up the defence, just long enough to take a look and put any doubts to rest. The two do not feel like refusing—how can you say no to a mentor?—and, as they approach the case, decide against reading the confessions, even if they know their content,

which was excerpted on television and in newspapers. They first want to get to know the defendants, to minimise any bias and leave room for their own impressions.

It's late June and the sun is at its highest, beating down all day on the concrete grounds surrounding the prison and on the roofs of the cells. It's stifling inside. The lawyer is waiting to meet with Olindo for the first time. He contemplates a defence on psychiatric grounds, the only one that seems plausible to him right now, if indeed there can be one. But he also contemplates none, still reserving the right to turn down the assignment.

Olindo shows up in a checked shirt, with an awkward, cartoonish gait. He is broad, barely five feet tall. He sits down and immediately starts talking. His primary concern is that they haven't yet been assigned the marital cell. He goes over the usual reasoning: the State cannot divide what God has united, for better or for worse. The lawyer loosens the knot of his tie slightly. He'd expected to find himself facing the Erba monster, but instead this Barbapapa-like man is giving him a crazy speech, rolling his Rs in a singsong voice. He struggles to hold back a smile. Promptly, Olindo moves on to his second point: dividing up the sentence between them, which is again justified by the superiority of marital union over any other law of the State. The lawyer stands up, excuses himself, and walks out of the interview room. Behind the door, with a hand covering his mouth, he bursts out laughing. Because he hasn't yet read all the files, he doesn't know about the warden's report calling for the appointment of a trustee for the couple, in light of the "atypical" behaviour observed by the correctional officers. He recomposes himself and re-enters. He invites Olindo to continue, to share anything he deems important. Olindo launches into a convoluted narrative, which the lawyer struggles to make head nor tail of, still influenced, perhaps, by his initial impression. Only two things are clear: Olindo says he never went upstairs to the apartment above, and wonders therefore how the eyewitness can claim to have seen him. "Sorry to interrupt," ventures the lawyer, "but didn't you confess?" Olindo opens his eyes wide, "Yes, I confessed, but I didn't go upstairs and do the things I said I did." The lawyer is incredulous—Olindo has nothing on him, no papers, not even the detention order, and can say anything and its opposite—and leaves the interview room with a strong suspicion that he has just met a nutcase, and with a sense of unease that will stay with him for days to come.

He doesn't talk about it with anyone in the law firm, not even with his colleague. He's afraid that they'll take him for a mythomaniac. And yet, after opening the case file, he discovers a completely different story to the one circulating everywhere. The eyewitness recognition is anything but consistent, so much so that the witness himself, after waking up from a medically-induced coma, has the identikit of a stranger whom he identifies as his attacker sent to the prosecutor's office; the only biological evidence, found in the couple's car, is contaminated by carabinieri stepping into the car after being on the crime scene; and the confession is in fact several confessions—fragmented, reported, and excerpted from the summary minutes rather than a faithful transcription of the interrogation audios.

He knows the confessions are the weakness in the case. In common credence, there's no reason to take responsibility for a crime other than having committed it, despite judicial history being riddled with people who have falsely accused themselves for the most diverse causes. And the confessions of the two, in their stunted form, have been plastered everywhere:

in newspapers in cafés at the start of the workday, in the evening news broadcast to kitchens and living rooms at dinnertime, in gyms with treadmills and large TV screens hanging from the ceiling. And then, with the case all but closed, along comes the priest. Why did he get involved?

To confirm the oddities he has discovered, or disprove them once and for all, he decides to pay him a visit.

It's a sultry summer, with no wind for respite. Inside the church the air is light, and there is silence in the semi-darkness. They sit next to each other, on a pew at the end of the aisle. The lawyer keeps his hands on his knees, a halo of sweat forming on the thin cloth of his trousers. He has the urge to smoke a cigarette. "Let's do it like this, Father. I'll ask you a question and you don't have to answer. If you stay still, I'll take it as a yes." The other man nods imperceptibly. Both keep their eyes on the altar.

"Did you confess Olindo Romano?"

The priest is motionless.

"During confession, did Olindo Romano tell you he was innocent?"

The priest is silent, his pupils dilated. The flames of the votive candles flicker. The lawyer waits about ten seconds, looks at his hands and at the print they've left on his trousers, then he looks at the priest. He gets up and walks out of the church.

During their first meeting, all she can do is cry. In the bare interview room, they face each other. Rosa keeps her eyes downcast and her shoulders hunched. Her sternum is closed, sucked in to form a hollow, rising and falling with the repeated sobs. It's impossible to even make yourself heard, and the lawyer is uncomfortable. I'm not a psychologist, she tells herself, to justify her feelings of embarrassment and helplessness. She gets up and calls the officer. Rosa is escorted back to her cell.

In the car park outside the prison, a few tufts of grass have survived the concrete. The lawyer sits in her car and thinks. As a girl, she volunteered in the geriatric ward of a large hospital in northern Italy, and she feels like she did during those early days, when she tried to fight off the desire to run away before the sight of suffering and the smell of old, sick bodies that overpowered the detergent and disinfectant. Prison and hospital have the same effect on visitors from outside—they wear them out. She is exhausted.