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Chiudo la porta e urlo
(lit. “I Close the Door and Scream”)

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Chapter 0
You and the others

“The battle against moronity starts with oneself,” writes Raffaello Baldini.

He writes it in a monologue called “La fondazione” (lit. “The Foundation”). And it reminds me of what Ricky Gervais says, “when you are dead, you do not know you are dead. It is only painful for others. The same applies when you are stupid.”

There.

Let’s begin.

Chapter 1
Jobs

1.1 Consistency

It was the winter we were all afraid that the gas bill would be three times higher than the previous winter.

It was the first time I suffered from the cold in my home.

I always kept the heating off.

In her home, Battaglia was studying under layers of fabric.

Whenever she got up to grab a drink, she looked like a knight with his cloak.

We weren't poor, we were morons, as always.

I have always been one, ever since I was a child.

An admirable consistency, I might say.

1.2 Bills

The first bill I received that winter was for zero euros.

My gas costs, zero euros.

I have an electric stove, I don't use gas for cooking.

I was so happy.

I sent it to Togliatti, she didn't say anything.

The second bill, 19 euros and 23 cents.

I sent it to Togliatti, she replied: Of course, you are never home.

Which wasn't true.

I mean, sometimes I was at her place, but not always.

And sometimes I was also out for work, but not always.

She was envious.

She was envious of the fact that I didn't spend much on gas.

I thought she would be happy.

That she would be proud.

She was anything but proud.

She was envious.

I was so disappointed.

I remember thinking, "Who is this person?"

She was my daughter's mother.

1.3 Job

When they asked me what my job was, I would say that I wrote books.

It was true.

I had published over forty, I had lost count, which sounds like something someone says to brag, but I don't think so.

To start counting all the books I had published so I could then write "By the time this book goes to press, I will have published 47 books" seemed so lame that I preferred running the risk of sounding like I was bragging.

I didn't know how many books I had published, but my job was writing books, even though people thought my job was being a professor.

Which wasn't true.

I mean, it was true, but it wasn't.

1.4 Togliatti

When I used to write about my daughter's mother, I would call her Togliatti because, from the moment I met her, it was obvious that she thought she was the best.

Sometimes, when I was pleased with her, I would also call her Palmiro, but rarely.

She never agreed with me.

Once, a year and a half ago, I told her: "I will always keep a page, or rather a scrap of paper, in my pocket where I will write down all the times you agree with me, from now until the end of time. A scrap of paper will be more than enough," I told her.

She was silent for a moment, then said: "You are right."

"Go ahead and mark it down," she added.

1.5 Giacomo Puccini

I had gone to Brescia for a festival called Capitals of Culture to give a talk on “Saint Petersburg and the avant-garde movements” in a theater in which I had never been before, Brescia’s Teatro Grande.

It is beautiful, Brescia’s Teatro Grande.

I was told it was the theater where Giacomo Puccini’s *Madama Butterfly* had triumphed in 1904.

It was odd that it struck me because I don’t know anything about *Madama Butterfly* or Giacomo Puccini.

What I do know is that Brescia’s Teatro Grande is marvelous and that, while I was there waiting to give my talk, I kept on asking myself, “But what have I done in my life that was so great that they would call me to work in a place like this. Who do I think I am, Giacomo Puccini?”

And, while I was asking myself this, the actress who was introducing me, Elena Vanni, was reading one of my autobiographies, which she had found online.

1.6 Found online

An Australian translator was translating into English *Noi la farem vendetta (We Will Take Our Revenge)*, which was originally published by Feltrinelli in 2007. He needed my biography to submit the text as an application for I don’t know what, so he asked me if the one on Wikipedia was correct. Since it wasn’t, I wrote one for him, which I will copy here below:

“I was born in Parma, Italy, in 1963, I got an accounting degree in '83, one year late (I flunked the twelfth grade twice and then did two years in one), I served in the military in '84-85 (in Falconara Marittima and in Piacenza). In 1985, I went to work as an accountant in Algeria, where I worked for Parma's Incisa until the end of 1986 and then, again for Incisa, from '87 to early '88 in Iraq, in Baghdad. I resigned in '88 and enrolled

in Parma's university to study foreign languages and literatures, graduating in Russian in '94 with a thesis on Velimir Khlebnikov. I did some odd jobs in '95, like bellhop and things like that, and went back to Russia for a few months. In '96, I started working abroad again, in France, in Nîmes, as an administrative manager for a company that was laying a gas pipeline in the south of France (Artère du Midi, it was called). I resigned in the summer of '96 and started writing on September 16, 1996. My first short stories were published in '97, I signed the contract for my first novel in '98, which was then published in March '99 (it was titled *Le cose non sono le cose*)."

1.7 The job I wanted to do when I was a kid

I liked Elena Vanni also because she didn't call me professor.

She was very nice to me.

I didn't think she liked me at first because we had exchanged a few emails and, when I reply to emails from people I don't know, I don't give very nice answers, I realize this.

I'm a bit *incagabile* ("shitty").

Incagabile is an expression we use in Parma to describe someone who isn't very nice.

Before I started my talk, she asked me something she was asking all the speakers who were participating in that festival: what job would I have done if I hadn't become a writer (she didn't say professor, she said writer, very well done).

I don't really answer her question.

I don't tell her the job I would have done: I tell her what I would have wanted to do when I was a kid.

1.8 Two years

When I listen to her reading my autobiography as if it weren't my own, I tell myself that the most peculiar thing is that I flunked the twelfth grade twice.

Now, I'm not saying it to justify myself, but it was a time when I stopped going to school because, around the age of seventeen, I discovered soft drugs and found my calling.

When I grow up, I said, I want to be a drug addict.

It lasted two years, then I realized that it wasn't a suitable career for me and I changed my path. It wasn't really a calling, it was wishful thinking. I would have liked it but I didn't have the talent.

But that is what I say.

Drugs.

1.9 Against the wall

When I quit my job in France, I was desperate.

I would wake up desperate and go to bed desperate.

It was doing so well.

I needed a way out.

I had an idea, but I needed a push.

I was already thirty-three years old and those who looked at me from the outside didn't quite understand how I was doing.

I used to have a job, in France, I resigned, I returned home, what did I want to do now?

I didn't really know.

I had an idea.

My dad, he was called Renzo, I remember that he came to my house, I lived in Parma. He and my mom lived in the countryside, in Basilicanova, in the house that my brothers and I will sell tomorrow.

We sat on the couch, I remember, and he told me "Paolo, what do you want to do?"

“Dad,” I replied, “when I worked in Algeria and Iraq, when I was young, I tried to earn some money but there was no satisfaction; I tried to study, I liked it, but when they asked me to try to make a college career, I don't know, I wasn't really convinced, then I didn't pass the PhD so the problem solved itself. So then I tried to earn some money again, in France. I was gone for four months, working fourteen hours a day to bury a gas pipeline underground; in those four months I never read a book, which is the thing I enjoy the most, and one morning I woke up and asked myself ‘Do I have even the slightest passion for pipelines? Is there anything I like in a pipeline, in this thing to which I've been devoting fourteen hours a day for four months?’ And I answered myself no. So, Dad, I really couldn't continue to lead a shitty life just to get rich and make someone else I didn't even know much richer than me.”

“So, what do you want to do now?”

“What do you think I should do?” I asked him.

“Ah, Paolo,” my dad Renzo replied, “you are already a certain age.”

And, I remember, I thought that was the greatest answer he could give me, my dad, and I replied “Thank you, Dad.”

He was right, I was already a certain age.

And that is when I thought that maybe it was time.

1.10 Go ahead

I was so desperate, in such bad shape, with my back against the wall, that I found the courage to try to see if I could turn my passion, literature, into my job.

And on September 16, 1996, I started to write.

The next day, my grandmother Carmela died.

The first book I wrote, which will never be published, was called *From September 16 to September 15*.

And to those who asked me “So what are you doing now?” I started answering, “I'm a writer.”

And, I remember a friend of mine, when he saw me, he smiled and said “Do you already have a publisher?”

He was making fun of me.

And I, I don’t know how to say it, I was glad.

Go ahead, go ahead and mock me, I thought.

1.11 Pain

That winter, when we were all afraid that the gas bill would be three times higher than the previous winter, I was in Rome at a festival and the next day I was going to go to Parma to sell my mom’s house. It was the house where I had read my first Russian novel, Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, and it was the house where I had seen my grandmother in a way I can’t forget, and it was the house where I had written my dissertation, the greatest undertaking of my life. It was my mom’s house, and my grandfather’s house, and my great-grandparents’ house, it was our house, it was our house of buttons. The year that had just ended was the year of the war in Ukraine, which was still going on, it hadn’t ended; and in Rome, at that festival in which I participated, I had said that for those like me who were in love with Russia, with its language, with its literature, it had been a very painful year. It was made even more painful by the fact that, compared to the real pain unleashed by this terrible war, our pain was nothing, it was insignificant pain, it was worthless, it did not count.

And, in the end, a large man, like me, dressed in dark clothing, like me, approached me and said, in Russian, “Ваша боль – моя боль,” Your pain is my pain.

And I remember thinking, “What have I done in my life that was so good to deserve such an audience?”

1.12 Morons

Later, there, in 1996, when I had started writing with the goal of turning that thing, writing, literature, into my job, something very strange happened.

I was in downtown Parma, in Via Cavour, which is the street to take a stroll on, where people go to be seen, and there were actually lots of people. I heard a voice behind me saying: “Hey, moron!” and I turned around, convinced he was calling me.

He wasn’t calling me.

But, I remember, I was happy.

Why was I happy?

1.13 Morons one, two, and three

If they asked me who I thought the greatest Italian twentieth century poet was, I would say Raffaello Baldini. He didn’t write in Italian: he wrote in the dialect from Santarcangelo di Romagna and then translated his poems into Italian. And I read his translations and I read them in the sense that I would read them at home, on my own, and I would also read them outside, in bookshops, in theaters, and for a really long time I read, one after the other, three poems called “Coglioni,” “Tom,” and “Coglioni (2)”.

1.14 Why I was happy

When I was working, when I was the administrative manager of that joint venture that was laying a gas pipeline in the south of France, Artère du Midi, when I realized I didn’t have a passion for methane gas and turned in my resignation and started writing a few days later, that is when my relationship with moronity, changed. And I realized it in Parma, in Via Cavour, in September 1996.

That is, before, in France, I was inside the organizational chart, and I was committed to moving up, I had to build a career, and in order to move up I had to prove to the others that I was smarter than them; every now and then, when I seemed to succeed, and they would raise my salary, and they would promote me, I was so happy;

and if, as it happened, I would do something dumb, I would try to hide it, not to divulge it, you can see why.

In Parma, in Via Cavour, that time I heard someone call out “Hey, moron!” and I turned around, me, that was a story.

And I was happy because I realized I no longer had to prove that I was smart, I had to find stories. For instance, the embarrassing moments, which were natural stories, beautiful ones, that didn’t have to be dramatized, they were already drama.

And I found one.

And then I found more.

1.15 “Coglioni” (lit. “Morons”) by Raffaello Baldini

“It’s easy to say morons, but they, and I know more than one, they think they are better, they don’t know they are morons, and they get married, they have children, and the children are the offspring of morons; and I get it, the dad is the dad, and you should love your dad and respect him, but, I don’t know, don’t these kids realize it? When they talk to their dad, don’t they see it, don’t they hear it? Or are they morons as well? That’s the struggle, among morons, - so there, yes, no, there are times when they let it slip: my dad is a moron, but in another sense, in the sense that he is good, that he is a gentleman. This, however, is a discussion, so how would it go? Are gentlemen poor morons? Let’s be clear, a moron could be a gentleman, he could be good, but he could also be evil, even morons can be good or evil; being a moron doesn’t mean that, as a moron, you can’t be well dressed or wear glasses; it could also mean, listen, what I’m saying is that a moron could also be smart as well as a moron, it is an exception but it does happen. Being a moron is one thing, morons could be anything, they could have an education, even have a degree; but if they are ignorant, if they are ignorant morons, those are a disgrace, there is no reasoning with them, it is like talking to a wall, especially when they are arrogant. And, I get it, when I say that a moron can be anything, one could get confused and say: ‘So if someone is a moron, what sets him apart? What does being a moron even mean? What is moronity?’ Well, that is a

question, it is a struggle, how can I put it? Let me think, isn't there an example? There, morons do things backwards, and you see them making a mistake, you know how it should be done, you try to tell them, even in a nice way, but nothing, they just keep on going; you try to help them, to get them on the right track, and they just look at you with an expression like: 'What does this dumbass want now?' So, you end up getting mad: 'They're morons!' you exclaim, venting your frustration in a public square, and someone is also listening to you in the square: 'You're right, they're morons, but...' 'But what?' 'What can you do about it? There are lots of them, they're in charge.'"