

**Fabrizio Sinisi**

***Il prodigio***  
***(lit. "The Prodigy")***

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***Translated by Olivia Jung***

You may imagine, Sir, in what affliction I find myself, that this heaven, this earth, this universe, which I by my marvellous discoveries and clear demonstrations enlarged a hundred thousand times beyond that seen by the wise men of bygone ages, henceforward for me is shrunk into such a small space as is filled by my own body.

Galileo Galilei

It appeared overnight. Many people boasted that they were the first to see it: garbage collectors, bakers, sleepless athletes, writers consumed by anxiety. Among the many silent souls moving in the purgatorial hour between night and morning, it is impossible to say exactly who was the first to stand there, transfixed, gazing upward at the prodigy in the sky. Officially speaking, the sighting was attributed to Anna F. (I will omit certain last names out of reportorial discretion), a sex worker who is fairly well known in the city under the pseudonym Eleusine. “I was returning home after leaving the club where I work,” she said the next day to the reporters of the early afternoon TV shows that are usually watched by housewives. “I don’t live nearby, but I always walk. I enjoy it. The city is deserted at that time of day and, if I’m lucky, I can already see the first lights of dawn, so I looked up and *I saw it.*” An hour later, everybody was looking at it, some were turning their eyes to the sky, others to their screens. I myself saw it in a photo before seeing it in the sky. I remember the moment as if it were now: the vibration of the alarm clock before I even open my eyes, the first notes of “The Final Countdown” by Europe (which has been my alarm clock’s song since my university days), then the anxiety clenching my stomach and the automatic reflex of my hand immediately reaching for the phone – here I am, world, I am here – what happened, what did I miss? I get back into the flow of events, reconnecting with other people’s lives like a drowning man who resurfaces for air: *now*. The photo is already there, at the top of all the news stories, retouched with filters to make the edges crisper and the colors sharper. I stare at it for a while before realizing that the city mentioned in the news was the one where I lived; the sky displayed on the screen was my own sky. I go to the window and open the curtain. And there it is: definitely less clear than in the photos but much larger, immense actually, impossible to take in with a single glance. It looms gigantic over the rooftops like a ceiling about to collapse. It is unmistakably the shape of a face. A colossal smiley, rather primitive – just a few simple strokes of light and cloudy matter, eyes, nose, and mouth as if drawn by a child. It is almost dawn. It is cold outside, many people are still sleeping. Behind the windows, the first shadows pull back the curtains, open the shutters, and raise the blinds like the bellows of a drawbridge. They look up and are stunned: their open-mouthed expression displays the same amazement of children seeing snow for the first time. As things started to evolve in the direction we all know, few would remember that innocent sense of wonder, still tinged with such candor; the bewilderment of looking at something about which you know nothing. Before the inevitable consequences that were still mercifully hidden. And then we start again: the day still has to begin; the giant smiley in the sky might be bizarre, sure, but it isn’t the end of the world. The lights are on, the heating is working, everything is fine. I start getting dressed, murmuring a prayer to myself like someone muttering a curse. I leave the house. In the still semi-dark street, there are only two garbage collectors, a few runners, and a woman bundled up in her coat with a setter on the leash, the only living being in the landscape

who doesn't care about the event: all the humans present at the scene are looking up suspiciously, as if afraid that the colossal face of light is hanging by a thread, like a disproportionate stage prop ready to fall on our heads at any moment.

2

I celebrate morning Mass in front of the usual four people, always the same ones: three elderly – one man, two women – and a young lady, overweight, with vitiligo-speckled skin, whose name I don't know because she comes for the 7 a.m. Mass every morning but runs off immediately after the blessing. The two elderly women are obviously talking about the face in the sky; one of them, Loredana, asks me if the face up there could be that of St. Jude Thaddeus. I ask her why Jude the Apostle and not some other saint, perhaps more famous and powerful – all the saints have their own portfolio of miracles, and the one of Jude Thaddeus is actually rather slim. Loredana replies with the condescension of someone explaining something obvious to an idiot, stating that that is precisely the point: no one ever prays to Saint Jude Thaddeus for obvious reasons – "Who would ever dream of praying to a Judas, given the bad reputation of the other one?" – so perhaps he wanted to clear up the misunderstanding by appearing in person. I reassure Loredana: her theory makes sense, it is theologically sound, but the holy mysteries don't communicate that way. As if I actually knew how the holy mysteries communicate. Fortunately, after a few years, the speech comes out naturally, whether in public homilies or pastoral conversations with elderly housekeepers. It is the priest's autopilot: simple and reassuring topics, delivered in that caring tone of a zealous parish priest – a soft voice like a cartoon bear, which Don Bruno, my spiritual father in the seminary, contemptuously called "priestese." When I hear it coming out of my own mouth, it makes me want to strangle myself because of how fake it sounds. Then I am finally left alone. Eight a.m., my favorite time of day: perfect silence and a clear mind. That is when I go to the gym, if I can. And I make sure I always can. Everyone has their priorities. There is basically nobody in the gym for the early morning workout session, just the occasional manager lost among the equipment with his AirPods in his ears. They don't even see me, they are usually absorbed by some intimate conversation with the Business, mumbling to themselves "push horse, push, push, push," and motivating themselves with a horse-like neigh. It smells like Amuchina (a sanitizing liquid solution), plastic, and fruit-flavored mineral supplements. The idiotic music on the radio reassures me. I work out as if it were a spiritual exercise: the only one I still practice methodically and with conviction – treadmill, squats, lat machine, incline bench, curls, this is my rosary, one repetition after another. My favorite exercise is the plank: on all fours with my body in a bridge position, I support myself on my elbows and the ball of my feet, and hold the position for one minute at a time, after which it feels great to collapse and let a roar erupt from my chest, something I can't

afford to let myself do again until tomorrow. I am usually very busy, rushing from a conference on Dante's *Paradise* to an episcopal assembly, from a parishioner's funeral to a university classroom, from shooting an episode of *Eccoci al punto* in the Canale 5 studios to meeting a councilor; I am always in the grip of my abstract worldly frenzies, so working out at the gym is the only moment I have to meditate, my only exercise in asceticism. As I am leaving, Manuela at the reception asks me if I have any thoughts about that face in the sky. A guy in a tank-top steps out of the locker room, "It's the apocalypse!" he shouts and laughs. Manuela giggles. "I wish," she says, "at least I wouldn't have to come to work tomorrow."

3

I am teaching a university class at eleven a.m. Normally, there wouldn't be a place left to sit in my classroom: I am the teacher in the media, the famous professor, the three hundred seats in my lecture hall are always filled, which is my greatest source of pride. But not today: the auditorium is full of empty chairs. They tell me that it is because of the face in the sky. "But why?" I ask a sentinel in the first row, "It's a cloud, it's not hurting anyone." She tells me about the rumors of a chemical leak or some unspecified epidemiological risk that have spread online; as the rumors gain traction, some people have gotten really alarmed, mothers and grandmothers panicked and advised their kids and grandchildren not to come – "just to be on the safe side, you never know." I enquire about the source of these rumors. The young lady shrugs, "*Vox populi vox Dei*, the voice of the people is the voice of God, professor." I give my usual wonderful lecture nonetheless – it makes no difference to me if the people in attendance are few or many, if they are students, churchgoers, or housewives. When I am in front of a microphone, I am like an actor going onstage: twenty people or two thousand is the same for me. I play with the audience like an experienced actor, switching between registers as if they were the gears of a sports car: a storyline, some humor, then a serious tone, followed by a pause, a striking quote, and a conclusion. As Don Lucio, the dean of the university, always tells me: "You're not a priest, Luca, you're a man of the theater, a showman!" It is the mask I wear to conceal my shyness, I reply wryly even though it is the honest truth: I am one of those who come out of the womb terrified and remain so throughout their lives; cultural chatter is my preemptive strike, the barrage that allows me to cross that atomic desert that is my relationship with the Other. Not Lucio: he is a priest in harmony, with an identity perfectly in sync with the world. I once asked him why he became a priest – it was a question I used to ask everybody when I was freshly ordained, before realizing that it made people uncomfortable. When I asked Lucio, he shrugged and opened his hands toward imaginary celestial uncertainties and said, "Because." It was basically the default answer: most priests don't actually have a revelation or a call from above or a metaphorical fall from a horse on the road to Damascus, or

even an extraordinary surge of faith. It is more like an inscrutable combination of character traits, childhood experiences, habits, and pressure from caring parents and friends; in other circumstances and with minimal changes in context, it would have led them to the desk of a notary's office or behind the wheel of a bus instead of leading them to an altar. For many of them, becoming priests was like taking a competitive exam for a job at the post office or the railways. Nobody likes to talk about it, and when they are forced to, they dodge the question or make jokes. It is always sad to see humans treat their own destiny with so little dramatic force. Not that I can lecture anyone about this, mind you: no one has lost the bet of his vocation more than I have. Lucio and I are not so different after all. We have lunch together every Wednesday. Lucio loves chatting with me, and he cares deeply about this lunch tradition for some unfathomable reason. "Luca," he says as soon as the bread basket arrives, and I immediately think he wants to talk about the face in the sky. But no: "So what's this story about Folker? Do you know anything about it?"