

Ogni coincidenza ha un'anima
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The Soul of Coincidence

Je veux dédier ce poème
A toutes les femmes qu'on aime

My name is Vince Corso. I am 45 years old, I am an orphan, and I prescribe books to people for a living. For six months I have been living in this old, renovated laundry on Via Merulana in Rome, on a temporary rental. I only go to small, second-hand bookshops, I no longer finish chess games I start, and, when I fancy, I listen to Gian Maria Testa or old songs by Juliette Gréco. From time to time I go to bed with a friend, but an autumn and a winter have passed since I stopped believing in love. I have kept one old habit though: every day I go out with my silent dog Django to send a postcard to my father at the only address where I know that, at least for one night, he slept.

For a week now, every afternoon I have been coming here, to this out-of-the-way bar in the quarter where I live. I had not noticed it at first. It is a place with just one room and five little tables, for those who dislike the crowded bars of Monti. The only people who end up here are young couples who do not want to be seen, sometimes friends of the guy with the tattoos who serves behind the bar, the occasional German with a map of Rome in their hand, and a couple of regulars like me. Maybe it fills up in the evening, that I do not know because I leave before then.

I always sit at the same table next to the window and order a glass of red. At the moment, there is only one other man, with a shirt the same colour as the walls, typing on his mobile. From time to time, he smiles and then takes a swig, content, and raises his eyes towards the long line of bottles standing on the shelf. Then he goes back to his business.

I like this place. For the two dancers painted on the entrance door. For the tango or habanera that they are dancing. For that frisson of gambling that the place lends to my waiting. From here I can look out or read for hours without anyone asking questions.

I do not know if the person I am waiting for will come. I do not even know whether they exist, really. But I come back anyway, it feels natural. I have always had a predilection for missed appointments, ever since I launched my first cry on this earth and there was only my mother there to hear it. But she used to say that sooner or later impossible things happen if you are not scared or in a hurry. And that I had the gift of making them happen.

From when I was a boy, maybe. When I would improvise little magic tricks in the hotel kitchens where my mother worked, and I could make a plate disappear from under a napkin, and she and her friends pretended to believe it. But now, who would believe in a guy like me, more rumped than his jacket, with an open book on the table and a glass in front of him, and all those empty seats around?

If only it would stop raining. I am a bit scared, to be honest. I am scared that there is no task that needs finishing. And that this table will stay empty for eternity.

It would be a long story to explain how I have ended up here, waiting for a ghost. But nobody ever comes. So I repeat this story again, to convince myself it will have an ending.

My penultimate patient had been a fortune teller who had been fired from a private TV channel for having lost the gift of tattling about the future. I had watched her take off her emerald green glasses, slip their thin arms out of her hair, touch her forehead with the back of her hand. And I could not help but think that all the others who had sat on my old leather sofa over the past months had addressed me with the same disheartened, fierce, repeated supplication.

Help me, signor Corso.

I would have liked to tell each of them that I wanted to become an actor an acrobat a musician, to always be travelling and to have lots of love to offer. To not know in advance that I could not fix anything.

But this is the adventure life has given me, there will not be another, and so I tell myself that I too live in a port, and that even in my attic people come and go and have sweaty hands that tremble and a story to tell.

I think about stuff like that, sitting in this bar. I write it in a notebook. With the regularity of an accountant, I keep a record of all my failings. Then I stop writing too. From the window I follow the shadow of the last solitary car, pay the bill, and go home.

You are an expert, aren't you?

She had walked into my bedsit with the same unexpectedness as the first spring rains. The early March light had just surprised the inhabitants of Rome outside the metro stations who were immersed in the fever of a city clogged with antennae, trash, and depravation.

She had examined the space with the involuntary and absolute indifference of which the female gaze is capable, and in a single, definitive overview had taken in every detail: the arch of the ceiling, the poster of Buster Keaton imitating Sherlock Holmes, the bed on the mezzanine, the corner kitchen at the back. I was sure she could tell me almost exactly what I had in the fridge. It would not take much: an open bottle of flat beer, two eggs, a packaged vegetarian hamburger, and a tub of panna cotta. The pitiless analysis of a solitude like many others. Rather than the office of a bibliotherapist, the den where I had hidden myself that day resembled the room of an off-campus student but not exactly on the model of a Scandinavian hostel.

I gave a slight, bitter smile and did not reply.

She looked at me in the same way in which she had observed my house and a great desire came over me to throw the job that I had invented to the devil, the nothing that I had made out of life, and that old and dirty city that was more rotten than its ruins. Maybe I was just tired, tired of all that suffering, tired of the sadness that poisons us, tired of my insufficiency.

Giovanna Baldini tidied one side of her hair. The black dress she was wearing showed her ankles. She must have been a little over sixty but she was still a very attractive woman. She opened her hands, closed them again. She could not stay still on the sofa and her nervousness ended up annoying me.

The air in the room became limited and dry.

Listen, I said after a long and embarrassing silence, I want to be honest with you: up until last year, I taught Italian and History to college students whenever they called me to substitute, and that's all, I'm sorry. I'm not an expert in anything. I don't even have a remedy for a simple headache. Do you know about imposter syndrome?

The lady did not move a muscle.

It's a condition that's spreading, even amongst my patients. But I think I've caught it in a chronic form. Anyway, don't worry, no matter what your problem, some writer somewhere will have thought about it and all you need to do is go into a bookshop to find the answer.

No, that afternoon I did not want to listen to the explanations of another unhappy person who I was unable to help. Nor did I want to tell myself yet again and out loud, that I just needed to stay quiet, learn to care, not to cure or be cured.

But Giovanna Baldini did not get up from the sofa, as I had hoped. She took a breath and spoke in a detached voice, a million miles from my worries.

I have no condition to confess to you, don't worry.

So why are you here then?

I need the advice of a specialist. I'll pay you twice your usual fee for all the hours that you're willing to dedicate to me.

I picked up a pencil from the table. I admit I have always had a weakness for anyone who speaks immediately and openly about money.

I presume that to undertake a profession such as yours, one must have read a good many books, and in particular remember them, am I right?

Modesty kept me quiet on my reasons for becoming a bibliotherapist. I also kept quiet about the fact that, for me, reading has always been a way to learn my limits.

Are you willing to put yourself to the test?

I would have liked to reply that over the last few months there had not been a moment when I was not being put to the test. But I preferred to maintain a careful and obstinate silence.

I need someone to find the book some particular words come from. Do you think you'd be capable of doing that?

Giovanna Baldini tried to explain herself better.

If I dictated some disconnected phrases to you, would you be able to identify the book that contains them?

Is this about authorial rights?

No, it's a private issue.

She had laid the bait. Now it was up to me to choose to keep listening or show her the door.

It's for my brother. He's losing his memory. The doctors call it Alzheimer's disease but that's just a way of simplifying things. A different name needs to be found for every illness. It's the brain filling up with holes, you know? First the short-term memory is lost, then every memory. There's no norm: some people become aggressive, others depressed, some lose their sense of direction. The only thing the ill people have in common is their destiny: aphasia and pretty soon the inability to look after themselves.

And what stage is your brother at in this case history?

He's been becoming confused and forgetting names for a while. My husband used to joke about it. We all miss a beat at times with age, it's normal, right? But no, it wasn't normal. The first one to realise that something wasn't right was my brother himself. At first, he shut himself up in a proud melancholy, very unlike his usual self. We thought it was just down to the discomfort of getting old. But at a certain point, he asked us to take him to a specialist. So, one morning we went with him to the Nuovo Regina Margherita hospital. He was keen to undergo the tests for senile dementia. You see, my brother is more than 20 years older than me. He's the son of an earlier marriage.

A marriage between whom?

After he was widowed, my father got married again to a much younger woman.

I nodded. Giovanna Baldini took up the thread of her story again.

At the end of the appointment, the doctor asked us to sign a form but my brother couldn't remember how to write his name. My husband thought he was making fun of us because he had always been a great joker. The doctor didn't. The doctor took it seriously and prescribed some medicine. It didn't help much. In the following weeks his behaviour became increasingly strange. He would get angry because he couldn't find a book on the shelves and he insisted that it was the fault of nocturnal animals who messed up his library and even hid his money. One evening he called me, very agitated, begging me to have a wooden box made to put him in when he's dead and to keep it ready and waiting in the house. He insisted that we trust no one because everyone has a doppelganger and the doubles keep switching, I had to always remember that. In a short time, even his speech started to become tainted. In the middle of a conversation, words that had nothing to do with anything would pop out, then whole phrases, like when there's interference while you're listening to a radio programme. We had to give in to the evidence: he couldn't live on his own anymore. As long as it was possible, we provided a nurse for him at home, a new one each month because he needed care day and night. But the disease was inexorably advancing and on the advice of the doctors who were looking after him, we were forced to admit him to a specialist clinic not far from here, in via delle Sette Sale. Just round the corner from the beautiful old house where he lived. Now he spends all his time walking up and down a corridor. Once in a while he sits down in a chair but when he sees me he starts to laugh in that beautiful, contagious way he's always had when his eyes become small and his body jumps in quick little hiccoughs. After a while everyone else around him starts to laugh.

When did it start?

A couple of years ago, not more. But everything has gone down hill in recent months.

And what's the book you're looking for got to do with your brother?

He studied languages all his life. He worked as an interpreter, he's been a consul, an ambassador, a sinologist. He's travelled the world: Asia, Africa, South America. Languages are his passion but maybe now I should use the past tense. In his house he has a library that any university would envy. Books from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and countless texts that he had rescued, he used to say proudly, from the bonfires of the Chinese cultural revolution, and which perhaps no longer exist anywhere else in the world. He even collected every type of dictionary: Urdu, Tamil, Swahili, Zulu... He liked to see the shape that the same word had in different countries.

Giovanna Baldini rubbed her eyes, then turned back to look at me.

He was always filling notebooks with incomprehensible alphabets. He loved literature and he would boast about being able to read the poets of at least seven different countries in their original language. He spoke Madarin fluently, as he could for almost all the romance languages, and he understood Arabic. It's a real waste that he's about to lose all that knowledge or has already lost it.

I put the pencil on the table.

Your brother has been very unlucky.

Yes, to think that translators or those who use languages are amongst those least affected by Alzheimer's around the world.

But you still haven't answered my question. What's the book you're looking for got to do with him?

When his condition worsened, he kept giving us the impression that he had something very important to tell us. He would try, fight with the words like a maddened animal who didn't know how to calm down. But in the end he would have to give up, exhausted. All he would manage to do was put a few broken, meaningless syllables together. Now he doesn't try anymore. For a polyglot like him, losing language is the worst joke that fate can play on him. Like if a musician could no longer use their hands. But for a few days he's been repeating the same few phrases without getting stuck. Phrases that don't have any connection between them. The effect is almost funny. It's like an incoherent nursery rhyme, sewn together by a couple of swear words. Who knows what well he's dredged them from, whether they belong to him or to someone else. We all thought they were fragments that originated from his childhood. Until one afternoon, during a visit, the doctor casually made an observation: this man has read too much, they said. And the thought came to me that the phrases he repeats could actually be quotations. That's why I've come to you. I'm convinced that they are from a book. My brother was an avid reader, it wouldn't be at all strange if he had kept the traces even of an individual book amongst all those that he had read in his life. They say the disease only leaves the memory of music intact, but maybe literature occupies the same part of the brain. He could quote you long passages of the classics off the cuff. *The Spring and Autumn Annals*, the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, Horace, Goethe's *Faust*, a huge amount of poetry. It's just a theory, but if this book exists, I would like to know which it is. And if you find it, I could read a few pages out loud to him every day. It wouldn't stop the progress of the disease, but it could slow it down, seeing as it's one of the last things he remembers. I'm sure that it would be a really useful exercise and it would do him some good.

Giovanna Baldini took a piece of paper out of her bag.

I've written down here a list of the words that have mysteriously re-emerged from his mouth. There are about thirty over six phrases. Unfortunately I don't have any other information. It's pointless asking Google. You try any combination you like, nothing comes out.

I thought that it was not a more unusual story than those I had listened to over the last few months.

I know very well that I'm trying something that has neither head nor tail and that won't take me anywhere. But I'm very fond of my him. He's been a real brother, not just brother-ish, a *fratellastro*. He taught me that that word is only used in Italian and Spanish: *fratellastro*, *hermanastro*. In other languages the expression is different: half-brother, *demi-frère*. *Mezzo fratello*. Honestly, for me, he's been a nearly-parent. When he would pick me up from school, my classmates thought he was my father. I liked to let them believe it. While he was at home, he always protected me, helped me. He taught me to read. He swore that no one had a more beautiful little sister than me, and when he started to travel he always wrote to me and brought me presents. As I grew up, he would even send me money. If I needed anything, I could always ask him. Speaking of which, before I forget: here's your advance for time and expenses.

She placed a considerable down payment on the table and got up from the leather sofa.

I really hope to hear from you soon.

I got up as well. It was an excessive amount.

Forgive me, signora Baldini, but I'm not the right person, believe me. Yours is a puzzle that has no hope of being solved. Pick any novel and read it to him, your brother will like it just the same.

In spite of what it cost me, I pushed the banknotes she had given me back towards her.

Giovanna Baldini ignored my gesture.

Please, I love him very much and I don't know who else to turn to. You have my number. If by any chance an idea strikes you, call me, any time.

She left before I could stop her. I felt the slam of the door echo around the room like a skipped heartbeat and I stayed on my feet in the middle of the room, alone, awkward, and speechless. Django rubbed himself against my legs, demanding I stroke his long, dark muzzle.

I placed a finger on the groove that descended from his eyes to his nose and started to massage it. Then I picked out an old disc by Noir Désir, *Le vent nous portera*, put it on the record player, and turned up the volume.