

## Memories of a Miracle

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TOWARD THE middle of a recent September, I crossed Piazza Vittorio bridge, entered the celebrated avenue of centenary plane trees that the philosopher Nietzsche liked so much, passed the dilapidated zoo that, curiously enough, had not yet been turned into a shopping mall, and headed toward Parco Michelotti. It was the end of summer, but summer did not want to give up. For some years now, humidity has blanketed Turin like cotton candy, and we've been living in the tail end of an increasingly muggy, sticky, enervating heat. The experts in their weather forecasts, which I consulted every two or three hours, indulged in epic-worthy ecstasies: the old, gentle weakened area of high pressure in the Azores defeated by a preponderant, insatiable African high. The tunnel of plane trees sheltered me from the light, but not from the virtually solid mass of hot air that pressed on the head like a leaden cloak. I wanted to go as far as the Madonna del Pilone so as not to be outdone by the philosopher, and also to take a look at the church. I stopped every now and then to pick up a leaf, its edges shriveled by the sun. My sister, an avid gardener, had told me that it was not the sun that scorched the leaves like that, but a parasite; even so, the image of them being slowly sizzled would not go away. It was like believing that there was less caffeine in a diluted caffè lungo. Or believing that misery was a moral issue. What had the tree felt? Maybe just a slight irritation, resolved by abandoning the leaf on its own. It was impossible to catch a breath of air, and it still seemed like a long way; the canopy of shadow cast over the walkway promised no relief.

As for the well-known miracle of the Madonna del Pilone, commemorated by the votive pillar, it is obvious that the most interesting part of the story does not lie in the miracle. The little girl who fell into the Po in 1644 was saved by the Madonna, and nothing less could have been expected, either from the little girl or from the Madonna. But whoever invented the story felt the need to add a detail to make it more believable, and came up with a terrifying image: falling into the river near a mill, the little girl was sucked into the vortex, got stuck in the wheel, and was dragged up and down, in and out of the water, at least three times, as in a medieval (or even modern) torture device. Engraved in the memories of witnesses, the girl herself, and other victims, miraculously saved or not, the incident was conceivable and likely to have actually happened. And so what remains in our eyes and in our imaginations is not the Madonna wading into the center of the river and carrying the victim to safety—as portrayed in the naïf fresco over the interior doorway—but the scene of that death, or near-death, tempered

and fragmented over time, following the wheel as it turns, out of the water, into the water, out of the water, into the water, out of the water, into the water.

A FEW MONTHS after being discharged from the mental hospital with the diagnosis of “no cure” for the second time in his life, my father accepted a job planning and overseeing the construction of a house on the hill-top town of Moncalieri. The client, whom I will call M., intrigued my father. You can tell by the way he writes about him in his journal for that year. I know nothing specific about him, and I am certainly influenced by the manner of his death. The fact remains that my father visited the construction site more than he needed to, reporting the progress of the work to M. and lingering to talk with him longer than required (more than he needed to and more than was required as per my impression as a layman who knows little or nothing about the customs and habits of engineers). I imagine them on those autumn afternoons, on either side of a modern, spacious cherrywood desk whose few objects arranged on top—an olive-colored rotary phone, a silver frame, a leather penholder cup, a perpetual calendar, and a neat stack of blue folders—make it appear larger. They have been talking for more than an hour when evening takes them by surprise, inching into the room from tall windows overlooking the piazza. They go on talking, though M. does not think to turn on the Art Deco table lamp with the domelike green lampshade, which my father silently admires—it reminds him of certain poisonous mushrooms in his home village—but which he would never buy, for fear of being ripped off by the antique dealer. They seem like a couple of conspirators, talking in low voices and smoking their cigarettes with surreal calm, while all around them darkness spreads like a slow tidal wave rising up to flood the piazza, along what was formerly the town's only diagonal street. They may have had other matters to discuss besides the project on Moncalieri hill, though I can't imagine what they were. With all due circumspection, however, I can say that part of the attraction (if you can call it that) my father felt for his conversational partner and client derived from their common melancholic temperament.

The adjectives used in that year's journal are telling. When my father went to see him, M. was always *dejected*, *depressed*, *very dejected*, *spent*. Then come the four conclusive notes: 1) *M.'s spent condition is disturbing. He is absent.* A few days later: 2) *M.? He disappears!* Twelve days later: 3) *From Mrs. M. Terrible news! Her husband disappeared 12 days ago and there is no word of him!* And a week

later: 4) *M.'s corpse found.*

He had jumped into the river; he couldn't take it anymore.

The second note is strange: it seems to have been added later, perhaps along with number 3, when my father is talking to M's wife. He seems almost irritated at the waste of time, as if saying, with irony, “I'm looking for him, and he goes and disappears!” As if the joke might avert more dramatic developments, which are clear for all to see. Despite the telegraphic nature of note number 4, the final two points signal the impulse to add something more. A comment had occurred to him, but he realized that it did not conform to the same category as the other notes. Maybe a remark about M.'s depression, or about *his* depression.

I don't think my father would have jumped into the river if he wanted to end it—much too damp. I don't want to speculate about what method he would have used. A psychiatrist told my mother that he was not *suicidal* (I would think I had made that up if my sister hadn't remembered the same word). I picture the psychiatrist telling my mother, “Don't worry, Mrs. Canobbio, he is depressed, but he is not *suicidal*, as they say in English.” I have nothing against psychiatrists, but that must have been what happened; my mother would never have used an English term otherwise (she didn't know English). My other sister, on the contrary, insists that at the time of his first crisis, in February 1968, he was unquestionably *suicidal*: he tried to jump out the window.

What's certain is that from time to time he continued to threaten to end it; we thought he did it so he could whine to my mother and get some attention. He was not very convincing and his moaning did not impress anyone. Or else my mother had so effectively trained us to appear indifferent, leery and skeptical, that no matter how much he whined he had no hope of swaying us. If that's what kept my father from killing himself, I'd say it worked quite well: clever of you, mama. But maybe he was not *suicidal*, so treating him with indifference did not change things.

MANY YEARS later, in 1981, I was in my room and I heard him crying and moaning in the kitchen. I was crouched on the floor, hunched over a giant map of Spain, where I planned to spend my vacation that summer. Vast distances, wide-open horizons, adventures. *Châteaux en Espagne*, as the French say for the Italian *castelli in aria*, castles in the air (in English they say both: *castles in the air* and *castles in Spain*). For a while I ignored him. Usually my mother stepped in to divert him and the matter resolved itself. That time it kept on and on. From Barcelona I planned to go down to Seville and then up through Andalusia and Castile and into Madrid, where I would try to see a bullfight, fiesta and death in the afternoon. My index finger traveled the roads, tracing on the map the winding route that would take me all the way to Segovia; I didn't plan to go any farther than that, I didn't want to overdo it. In particular, I told myself, avoid the Extremadura region, no sense looking for trouble.

Instead of stopping, my father seemed to cry even harder. It made me wonder whether for some reason my mother hadn't heard him, although it was unlikely. So I got up, took one last look at the map of Spain, and started toward the kitchen, not so much intending to calm my father down (I didn't consider that my job) as to look for my mother and let her know that the crying had become more intensely piercing than usual. What appeared to me at the entry to the small pass-through space that led to the kitchen—we called it the *disimpegno*, disengaged, but as was often the case, the word revealed its opposite, because it was impossible to disengage from the inextricable world of our relationships—was a kind of *tableau vivant* (a French expression also used in English). Framed in the kitchen doorway was my father, sitting at the table in front of the blaring television set, crying in a whimper that was a kind of yelp, gnashing his teeth and clutching a carving knife in his right hand, its tip pointed up toward the ceiling like a candle or torch, as if the blade might enable him to dispel the impenetrable darkness into which he had sunk. In the *tableau's* left panel, framed in the doorway to the little utility room beyond the kitchen, my mother was darning socks, or sewing a hem or knitting (she didn't knit much, but occasionally she did). Her eyes were fixed on her work, her hands were occupied but barely moving within the cone of light cast by the lamp; she was the picture of calm and serenity. Looking at her more closely, I saw that I was wrong: she was not a picture of serenity; in fact, she was a picture of contained anger. Or, perhaps, she was a picture of weariness, exhaustion, despair. But she was also the picture of a superior, imperturbable, and compassionate madonna, like the one in the fresco who takes the little girl by the hand in the middle of the river and leads her out of the water, while the child's mother anxiously frets and despairs on the shore, not yet realizing that her daughter is safe.

I need only close my eyes to evoke the image of that tableau. And I never tire of contemplating it, though I am well aware that it is not a good sign, it's not healthy for me to feel the urge to observe that scene once more. As if nothing else in life interested me more than poring over the attitude of their bodies in that space, the direction of their gazes, the expression on their faces. My mother's *idealized classic serenity* contrasted with my father's *heightened pathetic mimicry* (I encountered those two expressions years ago, perfect for defining them, and I never forgot them).

I went into the kitchen, took the knife out of my father's hand, and put it back in the drawer. I sat down to watch television with him, and after a while he calmed down. As far as I was concerned (insofar as what concerns me matters), I was extremely calm. I was bothered by the fact that my father had been holding the knife like that, because he could have hurt himself, but I certainly wasn't worried about him plunging it into his heart or throat. We never believed him, not even at times like that (or so I think now—maybe I'm wrong). When he calmed down

after going a little crazy, he would take on a comical look, like a lifeless puppet tossed backstage at the end of a play. Half an hour went by, no more than half an hour; I don't remember what we were watching, I don't remember if my mother joined us, I don't think so. What I know for certain is that I did not go to her, because she didn't need me; she apparently didn't need anybody. And at some point my father got up, at peace after the fine evening, got a glass of water, and went to bed. And I went back to my castles in the air, back to Spain, as if nothing had happened.□

*(Translated from the Italian by Anne Milano Appel)*