

TODAY

1.

He walks slowly in the golden evening light. He doesn't know why, but he felt the need to listen to his own steps.

Like a piece of music that, strangely, he isn't familiar with.

He left the Maserati in the faculty parking lot. He stood in line with his students at the bus stop, right behind a petite blonde girl with all the air of a nymph and wearing miner's boots. The bus arrived right on time, he swung around slightly. The door opened wide and swallowed up all those youthful faces, all those torn blue jeans. Pushes and laughter.

He felt a shameful desire to be like them. On impulse, he leaned his heavy bag on the ground, full of sketches, tables, charts. He felt like giving it a kick. And then leaving it there, like a spurned woman.

But of course he didn't. He is Chair of Digital Communications and Systems and Director of the Laboratory of Digital Signals. He has seven final year undergraduates in his Bachelor's degree course, three of whom already selected and interviewed by the Ivy League and Beijing University talent scouts. He is a consultant for VisLab, Artificial Vision and Intelligent Systems Laboratory, and the admiration he nurtures for Alberto Broggi, company founder and director, is unflinching.

Perhaps that's the only *real* reason why he doesn't leave his dark leather bag right there, on the gravel of the Science Park Area Building 1.

Constructing a self-driving car. Driverless. A car capable of crossing the 8,000 miles that separate Italy from China in three months, all by itself. A car that can "see" with micro-cameras, that analyzes the data collected, that works out the itinerary and drives itself along the road. The first world test was carried out in 1990. In Parma. With the typical Italian ability to use flair to make up for a lack of means: a Pentium 200MHz PC and two small cameras from a low-cost videophone, and we invented robotics applied to cars.

He straightens up his shoulders, proud all of a sudden. I want to be part of this, he thinks. I want to be part of the future.

But there's more to it than that. Be honest with yourself, Ascanio Adorni.

For once.

Is this sweetness that warms the air what's melting his heart? He feels the dizzying sensation of falling within himself. He feels that the discovery awaiting him will be a grandiose one. The most grandiose experience one can ever have. Uncountable. Unclassifiable. Wholly alien to the rational mind of an engineer. Famous. Accomplished.

Married.

And yet.

He left the campus like a prison escapee, crouching behind the last rows of the bus, his faced turned toward the window. So that his age couldn't be too easily seen.

Through the clear glass, the campus went past his eyes as though in a BBC documentary. It seems they really will film it, VisLab has become famous around the world, but also the University of Parma's studies on drones have caused quite a stir. The lawns are perfectly tidy, the pavements clean, the *Sphere* by Arnaldo Pomodoro, in front of the low faculty building, shows how complex the world is behind every smooth surface.

Apparently smooth.

He squints his eyes, a sudden reflex. Yes, he likes his students. He likes their distracted air, he likes their old sweaters, the light they have in their eyes as they listen to his lectures, lined up in rows like the soldiers of the future in the benches of the Great Hall. He likes the fact that they come from all over the world, the impassive Japanese, the boy from Rotterdam with his orange knapsack, Omar, the Egyptian, who works as a caretaker and by night studies to become an engineer and go back to his country to change it. He likes the way they study, earnestly, at the library tables. The way they lie down in the corridors to test the robots they've just built. He likes their glasses, their unshaven faces, the handwritten notices on the bulletin board as though Facebook weren't enough, the battered boxes of liquid Ajax that serve to check the capacity for vision of the robotic arm camera from every angle (curved, rigid, rotating). He likes that air of hope, of trust that inhabits the classrooms, the corridors, the dining hall, the lawns, the small tables of the farmstead where the kids go to kiss when dusk falls.

When the automatic campus gate closed behind the bus, he felt a pang of pain.

Perhaps that's why he got off after just two stops.

And now he's walking.

He walks in the evening that is even too sweet. He goes where his steps take him.

All this soft gold. The roofs so yellow. The luxuriant churches, the half-naked statues of the Saints, the pointed arches, the portals, the mute round eyes of the Baroque facades. And, in the background, the flashing of the green domes, the elegant mullioned windows of the bell towers, the play of volumes of the architraves, and the apses, the trunks, the balconies, the tambours, porticos and fore-porticos, the terraces, and niches, scallops, balustrades, colonnades. Marble lacework and pink stone chiaroscuros.

And statues and statues and yet more statues. Like a secret city of Princes and Emperors and Hercules, Minervas, Dianas, Venuses, Apollos, Psyches, Cupids. Peplos, cloaks, bows, beards, chains, round, strong bodies, living creatures that inhabit the Parma sky and look at the destinies of those who rush around beneath their patient gazes, slightly inclining their chins, pointing with their muscular arms toward who knows what direction. Santa Maria della Steccata. Santa Maria del Quartiere. Santa Maria degli Angeli. San Giovanni Evangelista. La Pilotta. The Teatro Regio.

Heaven knows how beautiful this city is. How it shines. It clenches your heart against the will of whoever happens to pass through it.

It is not a place, it is a caress.

Why does this soul-searching come over him all of a sudden? He would like to lie down like a leaf that's fallen from a very old oak tree, upon the bright green of the gardens in bloom. Here he is.

He's on the Lungoparma.

He's almost home now.

The torrent is all dried up. The trees on the river banks have rushed over to meet him, stretching out their leafy branches to skim the transparent water. He watches the secret buds in the skeleton of the plane trees, the dark green needles of the cedar trees.

The air tastes of secret scents, alive, irresistible.

His home is barely three hundred feet away, past the Torrent, past the balustrade on the opposite side. Why does it seem so far to him?

The shutters of the pink buildings are closed. Other windows, with their blinds a pale gray that seems to have been torn from the clouds. The suffused lights of the living rooms already sparkle, where the light chatter melts away the day's anxiety. He thinks he can hear the voices of children who chase one another along the corridors of the rooms, the sound of plates in the kitchen, a telephone that rings, one of those old black telephones like the one his parents had in their country house, at Colorno.

And yet no.

In his house there will be silence.

Only polite gestures.

Only half-uttered words, gentle ones. Ones that do not warm the hearts.

No children's voices. No untidiness. A calm elegant life.

"You're home early this evening," says his wife through the bathroom door left ajar. She's getting ready.

This is the evening of the *Première* of the Uto Ughi concert at the Auditorium Paganini. Concerto no. 2. "La campanella". The caprices.

"Floriana told me that the Filarmonica Toscanini is a joy," a voice hidden in the midst of the steam of the pink Carrara marble bathroom provokes him.

Silence.

"Ascanio, is that you?"

Now the voice is alarmed. Nothing excessive though, his wife is always perfectly balanced. But in her tone of voice there is an arched dissonance, an acute pitch that is immediately withheld.

He feels a pang of shame. Again. What has Milena got to do with his being out of sorts?

Milena is perfect. She's the perfect wife. Quiet, calm, yet cultured, kind. Impeccable. The word "chic" seems to have been invented for her. She's elegant even when she comes to bed. She wears a pale silky satin nightgown, with Flanders lace that brushes her nipples, and thin shoulder straps ready to slip down. An operation that Ascanio Adorni hasn't dedicated himself to in a long time, choosing instead to undress in a frenzy, and breathlessly, tattooed shop assistants, coffee shop cashiers with heavy breasts, and his female students. Although none of this should happen, they fall into his bed like ripe pears falling off a pear tree. He keeps them away, tries to dissuade them, but there's nothing doing. They insist. Out of a sense of propriety, he avoids all the students from Engineering and also those from Physics and Chemistry. He chooses Law, Humanities, Media Studies, but only PhDs. He doesn't feel proud about that.

And for some time he's been turning to the countesses. They're less demanding, more grateful. And they greet him like their ancestors used to with Parmigianino, in bed chambers furnished with rustling silks, bathed in the afternoon sun, or languid in the shadow of the night. He climbs up stone staircases designed in a scissors shape, imperial stairwells, staircases with three flights of stairs, and he finds heavy dark oak doors left slightly ajar. For him. And scented old arms that embrace him right away. They don't have much time. They have a husband. The way he has a wife.

The sound of a case that shuts with a loud click. A stool that slides backwards. Milena must be getting up from her beauty care session.

“Well anyway.”

He’s lost, no he hasn’t lost, his aplomb.

She looks at him smiling from her cherub-hued dressing gown, softly opened upon her nice bronze-colored breasts.

She gets up close to him like a cat.

She kisses him behind his ear.

“I’m sorry, it’s been an awful day.”

“Oh no,” she complains, “You aren’t going to spoil the Concert, are you? We’re at the Fornasaris’s for dinner afterwards.”

They’re in the car. Milena’s Fiat Cinquecento L. White roof and the rest forest green. His wife drives with a kind of concentration that exempts him from engaging in any form of conversation.

Once again, a window through which to look. Once again, the same feeling of extraneousness. Once again, the beauty of Parma, but now lit up by the street lamps, by dark blue reflections, by small luminescent dream-like lanes.

“What’re you thinking about?”

Oh, so Milena feels like talking tonight.

“Nothing.”

“Tell me.”

“Nothing.”

They don’t speak, and in the meantime the small elegant car draws a track of green forests on the tarmac, on the cobblestones.

“I got confused,” Milena blurts out, and bangs the palm of her hand on the steering wheel as though it were its fault.

A bend, then another. The obedient little car is looking for the right street.

And all of a sudden, he sees before him all the immensity of San Francesco del Prato.

He feels a shock he is unable to control. One he is unable to explain.

He leans out the window.

“What’re you doing?” Milena asks, looking at him sideways.

He sighs.

“Nothing.”

He presses the button that raises the window and re-enters his mobile prison meekly.

He stretches his back muscles, leans all of himself against the backrest of the seat, and says in a mellow voice that rather surprises his wife, “That church fascinates me.”

“Yes, it would be nice,” says his very practical-minded wife, “if it didn’t have the iron gratings and the leaden plates instead of doors.”

She turns toward Ascanio, points two fingers toward his face, but he turns back to look out the window. Milena’s slender fingers barely manage to brush the nape of his neck.

But he’s somewhere else.

We’re strange, us Parmigiani, he thinks. Who else would have thought of turning a church into a prison? And what a church, Good God! A fundamental monument for the history of

Gothic art in Italy. A sanctuary frescoed by the best Renaissance artists. Imposing naves, chapels as deep as squares, the oratory, the presbytery. And a throng of plump Franciscan friars, with their big bare feet in sandals and their habits with the hems all muddy, praying and cleaning and polishing and chanting. All happy, because the minor friars are always merry, lucky them. Then all of a sudden, out of the blue, comes some decree issued by Napoleon who had just annexed Parma to the Empire and everyone is out, cells are needed, there'll soon be a revolution and in the meantime there's fighting between the French, the Bourbons on this side, Napoleon on the other, make room, it's not prayers that are needed but shackles.

"Don't you think," he whispers in a caressing tone of voice, "that turning a church into a prison is simply a marvelous oxymoron?"

"That's because you're anticlerical through and through," laughs Milena.

There they are.

From the outside they appear to be a happy couple. Solid. Capable of sharing jokes and witty comments. They're good-looking, too. She's small, petite, as perfect as porcelain. He's solid, tall, strong, with the muscles of a Greek god and a rugged face, a thick-lipped mouth, small wrinkles in the corners of his eyes, the slightly receding hairline of his fine hair ever so slightly sprinkled with white metal nuances. It's their lips that divide them. Milena has thin, straight lips. Ascanio's lips are sensual and swollen. It's hard to imagine them kissing. Actually, they haven't kissed each other in a long time. Yet he must have kissed her, even if just a little, perhaps right in front of the altar, in the Cathedral, that day there, so as not to displease his notary father-in-law and all the other guests dressed in suits and flowered hats.

Having to establish the starting point of the line of his marriage, Ascanio would choose the oblique line that goes from his own right eye to his father-in-law's left eye, which was glaring at him from behind Milena's lace-encrusted shoulder. In that look, there was a whole decalogue of compulsory behaviors, the penalty being the recalling of the bride and her substantial assets back to the paternal roof. Ascanio agreed to the contract by slightly shutting his eyelids, and his father-in-law took it to be enough.

Why does that contract come to mind this very evening?

Milena is the perfect wife. She even plays buraco with the other wives. Her betrayals aren't even proper betrayals, they're drops of Lexotan. They are a perfect, happy couple.

"Matilde told me a story about Paganini," says Milena, as though lost in her thoughts.

Why is she interested? Milena's conversation is polite and elegant, but it does not call for much more than a few monosyllables of assent, and for twenty-five years she has left him free to deal with his own affairs.

But this time, while the small green car crosses Barriera Bixio and wriggles swiftly between rotaries and traffic lights, toward the Auditorium named after Maestro Niccolò Paganini, the violin virtuoso, the musician who was possessed by the devil, and made women faint much more than Mick Jagger, and screwed just as many, his wife's words attract his attention.

Like a green-eyed monster.

He re-awakens.

“What story?”

“I thought you were sleeping.”

“So soon?”

“Well, you’re someone who’s always ahead of the game. And then, doesn’t that car that drives itself take you away almost every night?”

His wife’s voice is neutral. In the world inhabited by Ascanio and Milena Adorni, her husband’s nights outside the marriage bed are always dedicated to work. And inquire no further.

“Well then?”

He’s impatient.

And she’s very surprised by his impatience.

“To make a long story short, you know that Paganini was a bit weird, don’t you? I checked Wikipedia and can tell you he was ugly, thin, toothless, corpse-like, but then he walked onto the stage, walked to the middle of the scene, gripped his Stradivarius and became an Apollo. The women would swoon at his feet. Even Elisa Bonaparte, even Paolina Borghese.”

“And the story?”

“Please be patient. It seems he was quite the devil. Someone who cast spells. A fiend. He played with his eyes shut. There were no scores for the solo parts, he was terrified someone might copy them.”

“And so?”

“Whenever the orchestra players tried to discover his secrets by stealing his violin, they always found it was out of tune.”

“So?”

“He would always play and tune it during the concert. A guy who taught Music at the University of Berlin wrote that his style was an impossible *tour de force* for a human being, and that his imagination took shape in real time. In other words, it wasn’t music, it was witchcraft!”

Impatience throttles his words.

“Come on, out with it.”

And here Milena cracks one of those odious half-smiles that Ascanio manages to distinguish even in the semi-darkness inside the car, without needing the shafts from the other headlights.

The kind of smiles that consolidate elegant marriages.

He keeps his silence.

And that’s when his wife releases the killer blow.

She does so with an aseptic tone. But with too many pauses. She’s seeking a powerful effect, no doubt about it. Paganini is not the stuff of engineers. People who never lose control, that’s engineers. After twenty-five years of marriage, an engineer takes on the characteristics of a goniometer. He measures angles. He has a graceful shape. But once the angles have been measured, what’s he good for?

“It seems as though his scores contained harmonics that ...”

Pause.

He is silent.

“Well ...”

He is silent.

“... cause a fall.”