

Before dying (Part 3)

Marco Sette

"There are characters who believe they can triumph over the world and take possession of it, and then there are those other few very noble souls who prefer to renounce and distance themselves from it".

(Ludwig Achim von Arnim)

Twelfth night

By midnight Ricardo was exhausted. He would have liked to leave already a couple of hours earlier but he found himself practically held prisoner and forced to go on talking and singing and dancing with his now fraternal dock workers. Frenetic, noisy drunkards. It was like being at the fun fair. Everything was turning round. In a whirl of bodies, breath, slaps on the back, hugs and kisses that the dock workers dared exchange even on the lips, pushing their faces together as if trying to hurt each other. This custom had rather surprised Ricardo but he hadn't the courage to refuse. He didn't want to anger them. He had the impression these people's mood could change very easily, passing from love to hate, from a fond embrace to murder in the bat of an eyelid...

The room was almost completely filled with smoke, in spite of the open windows. The rain had raised a heavy cloud of humidity and the air now stagnated in the light of the lampposts, like a gigantic wad of grey cotton-wool. Then there were those two individuals. A him and a her. They had made him sit next to them to eat. They had started talking, not as noisy or as drunk as the dock workers, but just as insistent. The woman was fleshy and showy, long brown hair and breasts exploding from too tight a bodice. Ricardo tried hard not to stare at them.

How long since he'd had sex? He couldn't remember any more. To tell the truth, he couldn't remember who it had been with the last time, either, perhaps a prostitute in a moment of dire need... even though for him it was almost impossible to have sex with prostitutes... it embarrassed him too much and he always had the impression he should say something but he didn't know how to say it, or exactly what to say, but the sensation was there, distinct and immobile in the pit of his stomach.

Fortunately, the very few times that fierce need had led him to opting for mercenary sex, Ricardo had always encountered willing and patient women. Maybe because he didn't choose them too young. The younger ones seemed too aggressive and dangerous. Usually, he would stop by certain older women, more or less his age, plump and smiling, who seemed quiet and maternal and Ricardo was convinced he deserved women like that. After all, it was more normal. Now, as he looked at this particular woman named Ainda, he recognised the clear match with his preferred female type, the placid

cow type... and he really liked cows, did Ricardo!

Instead, he didn't like the man at all. The sullen face looked mean and for as much as he desperately tried to laugh he could only produce a grimace, like a horrible slash. The individual's name was Aldo. So he had said. He had also said how much he admired Ricardo's plan and how he understood the social and political value of such a gesture. Ricardo tried repeatedly to explain, because Aldo just didn't seem to want to understand, that he had no political or social plan and that it was in no way a demonstrative gesture but the simple epilogue of a life, he was no longer useful. Not even to himself.

"And mind you, I'm not saying it out of desperation or acrimony," he went on, trying to make himself understood for the last time over the deafening noise of the whistling and the wild shouting, "I only want to not be here, not be around any more!"

And while he was articulating his reasons, very much hoping to be understood once and for all, he noticed that something in Aldo's eyes had changed, as if a light had come on... and this last time the smile seemed sincere. When Aldo insisted on accompanying him home, Ricardo couldn't refuse.

Until that moment, the woman called Ainda had hardly spoken, but as soon as she heard he wanted to leave she insisted on accompanying him, she absolutely wanted to see where such an unusual man lived.

"You've made a hit, my friend," whispered Aldo, in his ear.

Ricardo was too confused and tired and quite frankly a little drunk, too, but he felt excited by Ainda's looks and smiles and he didn't object. He said, "Alright, alright, I'll offer you a beer."

Before reaching the tavern, Aldo had coached her.

At first Ainda had been quite upset. "I come out with you and you take me to seduce someone else! No way! Who do you take me for?"

Naturally, he had been careful not to say things like "Me or another, what's the difference? Isn't it your job?" An answer like that would have earned him a slap round the face. Ainda was not the kind of woman to be dealt with like that.

So Aldo used a different strategy. He told her about the meeting with his boss and the President... about the chance to get back in the game, take off again... which could mean money and easy living for both of them even if Ainda didn't need it because she'd already reached

the top in her activity and mixed with the people who counted and could do what she liked with her life... but surely she would have understood. Aldo was certain Ainda would have done it for him. Obviously, he avoided telling her the final purpose of this 'job'.

"But aren't you jealous? I mean, with you in the house, seduce him in front of you! Wouldn't it make you mad?" "My love..." he said (and he'd never used the word 'love'), "I'd suffer like crazy, believe me, but it's too important, really, it means everything to me, starting again... you can see what a bad way I'm in. If it hadn't been for you I'd be dead by now, I know you'll do it for me..."

Ainda was truly shocked. Sometimes she could not understand the man, yet they'd known each other since they were children! He was twisted and bad-tempered like a restless animal, a constant torment... he had always been this way, that flickering light in darting eyes, dancing around, as if wherever he stopped he wanted to go somewhere else... but then wasn't this what she liked about Aldo? Knowing that in his continuous restlessness she was his only harbour? There, yes, she was the peace for Aldo's burning senses... always armed, about to strike, triggered... to the point of self-destruction, when there was nothing to fight... yes, she would do it! So as to feel him more hers and so that he could feel how much she was his, inside him, all the way, until the end!

Then when she saw Ricardo, she liked him.

He was slim, slight and with discreet manners. In comparison, Aldo was an animal. He could have squashed him like a fly if he'd wanted to. And yet Ricardo aroused something inside her... something soft and tender, just as Aldo had that carnal, animalesque effect on her... opposing senses but equally strong.

In the long dark car Ainda and Ricardo sat in the back while Aldo did the driving.

Ainda was as excited as a student on her first evening out.

It was a short trip. She joked with Ricardo and laughed as she whispered in his ear and took the opportunity at every bend in the road to slide up against him... Ricardo was excited and red in the face, Ainda could feel the warmth of his cheeks every time she moved close to speak, a few centimetres... burning.

Aldo kept watching them in the rear mirror.

Twelfth night again

Ricardo's house was spartan and poorly lit. A few odd dim bulbs hung from the ceiling, allowing the feeble light to spread slowly over the scarce objects decorating the house, estranged from their context like wreckage on the dark surface of the ocean.

Ainda just said, "Oh!" Then asked where the bathroom was.

Aldo looked around, surprised to see how similar the house was to his own. He didn't think a person could exist with his same absolute lack of interest for furnishings. He was beginning to like this man, pity he was go-

ing to have to kill him and dispose of him without so much as a funeral.

From what Aldo could understand, Ricardo had no intention at all to subvert the system, let alone send a message to the world, it seemed ridiculous to say it but there, in the fantomatic *Bear's Tavern*, Aldo had realised that the excessively excited and joyful reactions of the dock workers were the result of a colossal misunderstanding. Ricardo had told him and Ainda that he had tried to stay away from the *Tavern* for a while but that Sebastiano and Manlio had looked high and low for him, to the point of distributing flyers to advertise his appearances at the tavern. They wanted him to tell everyone about his vacuous existence. That's what he said, 'vacuous existence', or perhaps 'stupid', Aldo couldn't remember the exact word now but in any case it did mean that for Ricardo himself his life was not worth so much commotion... so why kill him and go to all the trouble of getting rid of the body when the man was going to kill himself anyway?

To be sure, the President had said that he didn't want any publicity surrounding the event, he didn't want it becoming an example of repudiation of the social life the state had so meticulously programmed for them all.

"After all, our efforts, the Maxi-screens and the Super-climbers and the Eco-greenhouses and all the rest, what good would they be if someone dares to be dissatisfied? No, no my dear inspector! (the President had used those very words: 'my dear inspector...'). This Ricardo cannot die any way he likes! Take his leave at the peak of his working capability, count himself out! Very sorry, but we've done all this for him, too. And we'd like at least some appreciation. If this man really did want to die he could at least have done it without so much noise! You see to giving him a helping hand, my dear inspector.. (he actually repeated 'my dear inspector') so that the matter doesn't set a bad example... we would show you our appreciation, much appreciation," said the President.

Ricardo appeared in the living room holding a small glass filled with black liquid.

"I've brought you a herbal liqueur. Do you know if it would be to the lady's liking, too?"

Would it be to the lady's liking? What language does this character talk? Aldo forced himself not to make fun of him and said that Ainda didn't like strong liqueurs, maybe a little sherry if he had any, otherwise not to worry, Ainda wasn't there to drink...

And so saying, he took Ricardo's arm and started to push his 'Trojan Horse' inside the walls, so as to speak... "Dear friend," he murmured, in a tone Ricardo found both unctuous and ostentatious, "You will have noticed that Ainda has taken a liking to you... this business of the suicide has got her going... you know what women are like, they seem polite, generous and unselfish, but underneath they get excited by a bit of blood and they love winners and losers alike, the important thing is to be tragic, they can't resist, like at the corrida, or when they go to the stadium and enjoy the violence of the wrestlers, ferocious fighters who they believe

could even kill for a kiss... that's what excites women, the predisposition of arriving at life's extreme consequences, as if it were like that in love, as well... and you, my dear Ricardo, are running towards death with open arms and not caring one bit about the pain, you laugh in its face like the most hardened murderer before the gallows... you are a tragic hero, my friend, let me tell you, and Ainda is a real woman, with a heart full of tenderness ready on offer where there is most anxiety and pain..."

Ricardo was stunned.

He had listened and observed the strange guest become impassioned and grow red in the face as if Ainda's heart had been in those very words. He was about to reply by advancing considerations on the importance of personal relationships when Aldo stopped the words in his throat, and, taming his enthusiasm, concluded, "Then, in case you have any doubts, no scruples, my friend, between Ainda and I there's just an age old friendship, that's how I know so well what she's like, if she gives you a hint or shows willing, don't wait around, go for it, life's short."

At that precise moment Ainda came back into the room. At first Aldo thought that he couldn't have done better: he had taken advantage of his friend's premeditated absence to prepare his victim, but now Ainda came back in smiling he found he didn't like the plan so much... what he had said to Ricardo had had an effect on him as well and was bound to have had the same effect on that shy little man... or had he scared him?

Ainda took his hand and asked to be shown around the house.

Ricardo did so happily, like a good little boy with the teacher.

Aldo swallowed his liqueur in one gulp while the couple disappeared into the gloom of the corridor.

Twelfth night again and again

(where Ricardo makes love for the last time in his life)

Ricardo was to remember very little of that night. In the sense of visual images, defined things... but he would not have forgotten the physical sensations, the touching, the movements and odours...

Aldo had stayed behind in the living room and was looking towards the dark corridor with angry impatience. He wanted to get things over with as soon as possible but he didn't want Ainda frightened by the blood and violence; apart from anything, removing the victim from there was very risky. And dissecting him in Ainda's presence was out of the question.

Aldo had never been jealous, it was a new discovery for him. "Must be age...", he told himself. He had to wait. Suffer and wait.

And then move out of his 'Trojan Horse' and strike. But he would have done it afterwards, like the Achaeans with the Trojans. The hunter prefers to strike when the prey is resting unaware.

In the darkness of his bedroom Ricardo watched the weak and intermittent coloured reflections of the towers as they filtered through the window and illuminated the naked skin of Ainda's shoulders, her breasts as they moved softly and slowly over him, the long hair as it caught between his lover's parted lips and which entered his mouth when they kissed.

He hadn't had the time to press the switch and a hand was caressing his neck.

He turned and lips were kissing him, he opened his mouth to ask what was happening and a soft tongue, swift as a snake, blandished his own and took his breath away. Each movement enveloped him, seduced him, stripped him. Then he just wanted to let himself go... but not knowing quite how to go about it, he copied Ainda's movements. He had forgotten that once he could do it much better.

Gestures were frenetic and slow, clumsy and accurate, there were kisses and rubbings, there were lips searching lips in the dark, noses seeking odours, drawn-out distorted and hesitant words between sighs and gasps...

Ainda's naked body on Ricardo's naked body, lying on the bed, already said.

Reflections through the window like shining tongues wetting triangular portions of skin, loose hair, slow and languid movements. That too.

There wasn't much else.

The colour of nipples seeming to cast violet brush strokes in the dark.

The taste of skin and kisses. There. That.

Ricardo would never have been able to forget it.

Not even dead.

While almost straight away he had forgotten Aldo in the living room, waiting.

"Don't hurt him".

Ainda murmured as Aldo drove her home through the semi-deserted and quiet suburban streets. "Don't hurt him".

"Don't worry," he lied.

Thirteenth day

For Ricardo the thirteenth day was as languorous as a kiss. Also because he thought of nothing else than the kisses of the night before.

He had taken a slow walk as far as the Eco-greenhouse number 7 and stayed there all day, seated on a bench: the birds were flying, the dogs were chasing the birds, the children chased the dogs and the coloured balls bounced from one child to another before inevitably ending up where they shouldn't, in an enclosed lake, in the peacocks' cage, against the guard's back or on the armoured glass of the military Super-climber.

It was a very beautiful day. Ricardo couldn't remember ever having seen a day with so much light, so crystal clear, so radiant. But perhaps he was the only one to see it like that. Perhaps it was a really dreary day, Ricardo thought, like certain decadent late Autumn days, when the leaves pitifully resist falling from the tree, as if



"Room" by Marco Ceruti.

they wanted to stop time, the inevitable destiny of things... no, it would not have been like that for him, the decision had been taken and he would not be changing his mind for one night of sex, however sweet and tender that night had been, like a warm retreat to nestle in forever...

Ricardo knew that even an overwhelming passion would follow its own inevitable course and would die, sooner or later, and the hope of making it last longer could not compensate the painful spectacle of a crumbling love affair.

Every living thing, whether beautiful or ugly, was naturally doomed to end. It was the reason that had convinced Ricardo to die: he didn't want to witness the fading away of life. The melodramatics of decadence.

Could it be said that life ended for lack of love?

It was an odd idea which struck him.

At the same moment he was hit in the chest by a football and the surprise left him breathless.

Straight after, a boy with lots of red curls and freckles printed like a map on his round face caught the ball and shouted, "Sorry, sir!" He ran off in the dust. Like life lighting up and switching off.

That's strange, thought Ricardo.

The unexpected hadn't happened to him for years. Just that football and *The Bear's Tavern*. As if, by deciding to end things, life was revealing itself to him in its loveliest form, in its splendid, natural simplicity...

But he wasn't going to change his mind, not for Ainda. Not for the luminous vitality of that day. He did not want to live through the ruin of another relationship and above all he did not want to see his own physical decline, the ageing process, the failing strength and mental deterioration, the leaves inexorably yellowing and falling from the plant, in spite of trying to resist.

Ricardo felt a little giddy. Perhaps it was all the fresh air he had breathed that day. He stood up to take a walk

when who should he see in front of him but... Aldo!

He was tempted to ask after Ainda, but instead said, "Hey! What a coincidence!"

Thirteenth day again (the word *Delicacy*)

It had been easy, too damned easy. The next day he had waited for him outside his house, he had followed him to the Eco-greenhouse, he had observed him while he watched the children playing and the dogs running after everything that moved in the park, he had spied on him attentively while he gazed at the crows and the pigeons and the fantastic designs made in the sky by other flocks of smaller birds. In that precise moment, he had realised that Ricardo really was totally harmless, as if the words the evening before hadn't been enough. No man involved in a revolution spent his days literally doing nothing. Ricardo was a man with no clear objective, except death. That is what he told himself.

After all, he wasn't going to cause him any damage. Just bring his intentions forward by a few days, so as not to risk the uproar the President feared so much.

Aldo would have started to work again. He would have been back on the crest of the wave. They would have called him in for meetings, they would have given him the delicate cases, the ones that required his tact, his intuition, his 'Trojan Horse'.

But he had had to confess the killing to Ainda, who attacked him violently kicking him and hitting him with her fists before breaking down in tears, before screaming in his face, "You bastard son of a bitch, you liar! Get out of my life, I don't want to see you ever again! That man never hurt anyone, on the contrary! You didn't understand!"

Life had tricked him! Go away!

You only had to see how he smiled, the other evening! But you, you will never understand delicacy! The word 'Delicacy'.

That's what you killed, nothing else!

Once I loved you for your suffering, now I hate you for how you let that suffering transform you! How can you not see it! Look at what you've become! You could have saved yourself!

Instead, what did you do? When you had the chance, when you started to think about it and regret it, the only thing you could think of doing was turn back! How can you not understand?

Ricardo could have been your chance, you should have learnt something from him!

But you're too taken with your hate and your ambition, you're blind!

You're not a man, you don't deserve to be called one! Just get lost!"

She had sobbed, and he hadn't known how to put his arms around her.

He had gone back to his office. He had reported the outcome of the mission and he had been commended in private by the President and by his boss and reintegrated in his operational rank. Then he was assigned another mission to be carried out by the end of the following month.

Now, in the darkness, Ainda's outburst came back to him, her desperation and her words, one in particular had impressed him: 'Delicacy'.

But what did it mean? Thinking about it, he remembering his mother's caresses when he was a child... then the flight of the birds in the Eco-greenhouse, the gliding and the spreading of the crows' wings and the changing patterns made in the sky by the flocks of birds, that's it, and how Ricardo watched them, before he approached him and asked him to follow him... yes, perhaps that was 'Delicacy', the way Ricardo had stroked his trousers when ordered to kneel, the way he had straightened his clothes when he had understood he was about to be killed, he caressed them as if they were the only thing he could say goodbye to before leaving, before dying...

'Delicacy'... actually, he had also asked after Ainda. "I would have liked to say goodbye to her," he had said. And then the way he had thanked him... but couldn't he have thought of it sooner?

Ricardo hadn't been afraid to die, he hadn't protested or tried to escape, quite the opposite, he had thanked him! He'd said, "Aldo, you have no idea how much I have wished for a similar end, for days I've been asking myself if I would have the courage to go through with it, the final step, the 25th December... I don't know, I dreaded being overcome by fear, afraid of the pain... instead this way it will be so quick and I couldn't have asked for it to happen in a better place, amongst all this greenery... on this radiantly sunny day... I don't know why you want to kill me, Aldo, perhaps because of the other evening with Ainda, but it's not important, I'm grateful to you... just give me one more moment..."

Then he closed his eyes and as he remained in silence a smile slowly appeared on his face. A delicate smile.

Before going back home he stopped at *The Bear's Tavern*. He wanted a drink and he happened to be nearby. As usual, it was full of dock workers, noisy and drunk. Manlio came over and as if he had always known him offered him a place at a long table where the regulars were tucking in to an enormous turkey. Aldo sat in a corner.

"This is normally Ricardo's place, our beloved Ricardo... if he should still arrive, if it's not too much trouble, I would move you to the next table... you understand, our Ricardo doesn't like drawing attention to himself and even less talking to everyone... but if they want him to tell them something they sing his name and in the end he'll stand up and tell them nothing special, something about his life, something real... like the life of all of us... well, if it should happen I'd ask you to be kind enough to move..."

Aldo nodded. He ordered meat with potatoes.

He let himself down uncomfortably on the wooden chair and with expert calm set about getting drunk (*End of story*).



Marco Sette is a roman novelist, but he is also responsible for marketing in his common life.

He won the poetry prize of *Città di Castello* in 2010 as author of the book "*Bagarre for a massacre*" successfully interpreted by the theatric group *GNut* during the theatrical competition called "*Unlikely stable*". He was also author of the book "*Lady with crows and dogs*", a collection of eight short stories in which salvation is possible only away the bitter life of every day.