

Before dying (Part 1)

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)

First night

The loudspeakers recited the monotonous and unrelenting ritual phrase: Remember to take your *Lennox* pill before going to bed!

November was almost over, in a few days it would be Christmas and with the festive season, before reminding everyone from 8.30 pm to midnight to take their *Lennox*, there would be the publicity for the toys of the moment, those advised by the European Council.

On the giant television screens the TV and sports personalities would be inviting the public to purchase this toy or that piece of jewellery or that Christmas cake for the family, children, wives or girlfriends.

On all the TV screens every day in December, before 8.30 pm when the nurse would remind everyone about their *Lennox* pill.

Ricardo smiled about this. He wouldn't be seeing this Christmas, just as he wouldn't be seeing any other from then on.

By the 25th December he would be dead.

He tilted the bottle of *Lennox*, delicately took the cream-coloured pill and swallowed it with a sip of water. He was calm, almost contented. He hadn't communicated his intentions to his boss yet, nor to his family. He would have started to talk about it the next day, 1st December; there wasn't a precise reason for ending his life in that particular month, but that was what he had decided. He wasn't concerned about spoiling the Christmas holidays for his relations, either. On the contrary, he thought it would have given them more time available to see to all the tiresome arrangements for the funeral. As long as they recognised the body, that is.

That body... Ricardo had never grown accustomed to it and ever since childhood he had always thought he was someone else when he looked in the mirror, to the point of convincing himself that his mind had been put in another body following some bizarre experiment.

The day after telling his parents of his suspicions he found himself in the psychiatrist's waiting room. Since then he had decided it would be better to keep his ideas to himself.

The idea of suicide had come about by chance, after forty seven years he believed he had lived through enough experiences, time, people and situations. Not that he had been an adventurer, a man of success or a great lover. Although he had a first class degree, Ricardo had worked at a computer in a commercial consult-

ants' office for twenty long years. Other than that, he had always lived quietly, had loved just two women, of which one, his ex-wife, had given him a son.

He was satisfied with his life, it was the way he had wanted it.

He had adapted to it without excess commitment or effort; he did not like the antagonism of a dynamic and competitive existence, excessive responsibility, asserting himself in the world or over others. He preferred to avoid the effort. He had completed his university studies above all to gratify his parents and also because a refusal would have caused upset and arguments he didn't feel he could bear. When he found the job with computers, he told them that with the experience he would have a good career. He was lying, of course.

He also recovered from his divorce without excessive distress.

It had been his ex-wife's idea to get married and he hadn't found any reason not to. Then the wife decided to separate because, she said, behind that fascinating appearance of calm that had so attracted her, there was nothing. Just the emptiness of a man with no expectations. Who is fine the way he is. Who doesn't want anything. Who only does what you tell him to. A man like that was unbearable, according to his wife.

Ricardo agreed with this observation and the separation was consensual.

He just felt sorry to have to tell his son that from then on they would only see each other at weekends. But anyway, the son had discovered a new video game that day and didn't really take much notice.

Just as well.

First night again

Outside it had started to rain. He opened the window to hear the loudspeakers urging everyone to take their *Lennox* pill. The voice was enticing, comforting.

Since living alone he would open the window to listen to the voice before lying down in bed, even if he had already taken the little pill. He felt cosseted and caressed by that soft sound. The sunset shouted all possible shades of pink and violet above the tops of the grey towers. A marvellous spectacle.

Ricardo felt the warmth spreading in his chest, he felt peaceful, happy and serene.

The son was grown up now, had finished university

and had found an important job suited to his technical studies. Ricardo knew that his son's job involved electronic engineering and the creation of microcell transmitters to apply to the brains of animals destined for slaughter to stop them crying out.

He was a successful professional.

They met two or three times a month and had dinner together at least once a month.

Ricardo felt very embarrassed on those occasions. His son was always busy on the phone, either for work or for love, even during dinner. He had many women, his son, and it made Ricardo feel proud. His son had taken the right approach to life.

His son's name was Adelante.

His name alone would have distinguished him, Ricardo's wife had said.

In fact, during meals or their brief conversations, Ricardo noticed how his son answered him in such a firm and precise way, he observed the rapid glances towards his mobile phone, which was also a small computer transmitting instantaneous updated economical news as well as a vast number of other things.

While his son went about dealing so punctiliously with these mysterious operations, Ricardo was happy to see him so involved in events. So involved in life.

Ricardo, instead, preferred to stay on the outside, a matter of taste. That's how he saw it.

When the important things in life have been accomplished, a child, the economical security of a more or less permanent occupation, becoming part of a stable society, with fixed values, codified behaviour and subsequent peace of mind, then life becomes a repetition of days and experiences more or less always the same. Ricardo was not aware whether it was true for all men, but it was for him and that was enough.

He had lived as it was required he live, now his life ran like a train always on the same track towards an unknown destination. What need was there to reach the station?

Getting off beforehand seemed like a good idea. Perhaps the one idea entirely his own in his whole life.

He closed the window. He sipped the glass of sherry the doctor had advised to encourage sleep after the pill and went to bed.

First day

He didn't have a great plan, he simply would have had to speak to his boss, his son and his ex-wife, out of courtesy. He didn't want to leave them with the memory of a man who had suddenly killed himself without warning; anything could be said of him but not that he was inconsiderate.

Then he would have taken the entire month of holidays, to do a few things he wanted to do before dying. He decided that to his first girlfriend, his great love, he would not say anything. He had lost touch with her some time ago and to contact her again just to give her this news seemed absurd.

It would have passed like many other things, unnoticed.

He dressed carefully and was deliberately late arriving

at the office. It was the first time in twenty years.

At precisely nine o'clock he called his boss. "Good morning Dr. Franco! How are you?"

"Ricardo? We were all worried it's the first time you've been late without callingwhat happened? Are you alright?"

"Yes, of course, thank you Dr. Franco. Forgive me if I didn't call, but I wanted to make an appointment to speak to you in person... Is that possible, today? It's quite urgent."

"But of course, Ricardo, what's up? Are you alright, is there a problem? You wouldn't be thinking of leaving us? Maybe of going over to the competition! Maybe the Surmonte people! Tell me something briefly, please!"

Ricardo was surprised by his boss's reaction, firstly by that rather familiar attitude and then even more so by the excessive concern, as if his presence in the office was important... he felt pleasantly gratified by those words even though he put his boss's suspicions down to the recent resignation of two other employees who had left to go and work for the sadly famous Surmonte company.

"No, no! Don't worry, Dr. Franco, it's something quite different, I'm not ill and I don't want to work for the competition, but I cannot say more, not over the phone at least! Can you receive me? Please..."

"But of course, of course Ricardo... we can meet at 12.00 in my office, take your time, we could even have lunch together..."

Ricardo accepted in deep amazement. He had never received an invitation to lunch from his boss and in all those years he had been given just five minor pay increases other than those foreseen by the standard union agreement.

He put on his best suit. The one he wore for ceremonies and which would have been his last suit. He had decided. He would let himself fall into emptiness dressed in his best black suit and a white shirt, and in addition with a bottle of sparkling wine under his arm. The touch of class. What style. He had always admired elegant men, who knew how to move lightly and with grace, who knew how to live in the world, who knew all the quality labels of every accessory, from champagne to hats. Shame the bottle would have shattered in a thousand pieces on impact.

It was raining. A grey day, almost dark. He waited for the underground train which would have catapulted him underneath his office in just a few minutes. The rush hour crowds had thinned. The dark steel ceilings lit by powerful neon lights had enveloped him from the entrance in a play of chiaroscuro. He was safe there. No worries. The body of a single being of flesh would have moved him into the pneumatic carriage and then out again. Ricardo had always loved to feel part of something big, like a gigantic instrument, half machine and half human, which functioned perfectly, automatically. That is what the metropolis was for him. It filled him with a sweet sense of abandonment. Close your eyes and forget everything.

The train took the wide bend at speed and as always Ricardo surrendered himself to the slight vertigo caused by the movement of the articulated carriage as it leaned sideways to then right itself again under ac-

celeration. Disappear there. He had read it somewhere. Then the train started to slow down. He entered the office as if into heaven.

Olga greeted him a little doubtfully. "The doctor is waiting for you in his office" she said. "Thank you, Olga", he replied. He crossed the hall with a brilliant smile. He could feel it on him.

Like a star of the big screen, he thought. The boss's office was the one at the end. Before that of the Managing Director. He didn't pass by his desk. There was no need. He had nothing to pick up, he would only have found the computer and sheets of data. A few pens. A few notes. He didn't even want to look at that square metre he had occupied in the open space all those years. What for? Ricardo was too sure of the decision taken to leave room for any emotional moments. Nostalgia is for those who haven't lived as they would have liked or who are too full of themselves, of their own past, thought Ricardo. He was sure of not belonging to either category, in fact he rarely experienced nostalgia and when he did it was connected mostly to certain celebrations where he thought wringing out some emotion would have been socially appropriate. He knocked on the door and after the usual, imperative "Come in!" he entered. This time with an empty feeling in his stomach that made him feel lighter.

On the way home, in the dull sound produced in the air by the speeding train, thinking over his conversation with Dr. Franco, Ricardo had to admit that it hadn't gone too well for him. In the end, he had been almost tempted to run out of the office to avoid the continuous, pointed and circumstantiated questions his boss kept asking him.

He didn't know all those answers! Like in a frozen file, Ricardo kept going over and over the main point of the whole discussion, "But why would you want to do something like that!" his boss had exclaimed.

He had turned pale and his already deeply lined face took on an expression of ill-concealed terror. Ricardo had replied that it seemed fitting to finish his life like this and that he had no more to give and nothing more to ask for and that to continue his time indefinitely would only have made the end more painful and socially complicated.

"But these days, should it be necessary, in case of illness, there's euthanasia!" his boss had replied.

From there the discussion had turned to technical details, timing and methods that according to Ricardo had nothing to do with the heart of the matter. So at a certain point, in a resolute and perhaps rather insolent way which he would never have dared before, and refusing the lunch, he had announced his whole month of holidays. They could have paid him his due from that very same day, it made little difference to him.

Now, he could imagine Dr. Franco's dismayed expression when telling the Managing Director what had happened.

But it was no longer his concern.

Second day

The next day the good weather finally arrived. A day as cold and clear as spring water.

The telephone rang a couple of times, at length. Ricardo thought it was probably his boss, who perhaps didn't want to believe his intentions and wanted to dissuade him, so he didn't answer. He put on a pair of heavy cotton trousers, a T-shirt, a thick fleece under a Navy issue dark blue waterproof coat and a pair of dark leather American boots, famously indestructible, on his feet. He felt fine in that armour.

He intended taking a long walk around the metropolis; he would have gone as far as the port, he would have mingled with the workers there, and then he would have eaten in a small restaurant where he had already been a couple of times and enjoyed tasty and plentiful food as well as some deceptively light wine.

After which, in the afternoon, he would have called his son.

He walked slowly alongside the long line of vehicles. Exhaust rose lightly into the air and hung suspended in a limp pall a hundred or so metres from the ground. During his campaign, the last elected mayor had fervently promised the installation of certain gigantic smoke extractors. Purified oil was not enough any more, there were simply too many cars and the move over to public transport in the big cities caused the car industry to rebel and fuel prices to rise. There were no two ways about it. Cars had to circulate. "Why shouldn't a free and wealthy man enjoy his armoured turbo car when smoke extractors exist?" – the future mayor had shouted from the maxi-screens during the election campaign – "Why shouldn't pedestrians, too, aspire to a super-climbing-turbo with reinforced wheels for rocky and muddy tracks?"

The future mayor concluded his harangue in a burst of applause, forgetting to specify that the majority of voters lived 300 days a year in the metropolis and probably had no use for super-climbing-turbo reinforced vehicles.

"But what good are civilisation and progress if a man cannot fulfil a dream?" This was the question that left everyone present aghast, along with Ricardo, on that fateful April afternoon during the rally in Plaza Central which represented, at least climate-wise, the ideal Spring of hope and beauty.

Anyway, after the elections, some sort of problem arose with the suppliers of the smoke extractors. The contracts had 'gone up in smoke' (ironically) and the law was resorted to. Moral of the story: the smog was still there, hanging a hundred metres above the ground, and there was even more of it now because several thousand pedestrians, won over by the mayor's passionate words, had invested their meagre savings in brightly coloured super-turbo vehicles of inferior quality.

But all this barely interested Ricardo; he had never had his own car nor had he wanted one; he liked to be taken around on public transport and one of his favourite pastimes was to watch what was going on. During that last month of his life he would have some time to do that.

Regarding health and safety problems, Ricardo was sure that political sensitivity for public wellbeing would have prevailed over the so far unsolved problems. Ricardo believed in social order, religiously.

A good hour went by before he could distinguish the outlines of the ships. Since childhood he had been fascinated by the big city port, even more than by the railway station or the airport. Before enrolling at university, he had tried to enter the naval academy but even though he passed the technical exams quite successfully, the colonel at the final interview told him his score would not have been brilliant because the commission had not found sufficient 'military aptitude' in him. That's what he said.

When Ricardo asked what he meant by 'military aptitude' and in what way had he shown not to possess enough, the somewhat irritated colonel replied that *Military Aptitude*, in as much as it is aptitude, would have been difficult to explain and that there were no scientific tests to quantify it because aptitude was rather a question of quality.

When, for the sake of clarity, Ricardo asked the colonel how he could be so sure that Ricardo did not possess sufficient military aptitude or that he would not be able to develop some over time, the expression of this man so proud of his uniform changed as if he had had one of his medals stolen and he cut Ricardo short with these exact words: "Young man, your insistence in asking questions in itself shows a lack of the aptitude we are talking about! A good military man does not ask questions but follows orders! So please do not insist further. Goodbye!"

Every time Ricardo went down to the port for his walks, usually on Sundays, he would remember his surprised disappointment on leaving the Special Selections Office.

He repeated every word of the interview over to himself and he thought of many other things to ask or considerations to make which may have convinced the colonel to believe that he could have developed a sufficient degree of this famous missing aptitude, or that, worst case scenario, he could replace it or compensate with some other ability or inclination.

For example, even if that day he had been a little insistent or seemed even irritating, Ricardo did consider himself to be precise, punctual, and one who also 'loved', in the true sense of the word, to abide by rules and regulations which he habitually carried out to the letter and with enthusiasm. In truth, Ricardo was convinced he possessed a good share of that famous 'military aptitude' that perhaps he had not known how to express to the full.

There! Perhaps, in the end, the mistake had been his. He could have done more and better.

In actual fact, he remembered his entire life as a series of unaccomplished deeds. Or only partially accomplished.

The thought that the root of his failure was to be found within himself and his behaviour at the time calmed him. If he had been at fault it meant that his present state was right.

That society functioned as it should. On with the best, the most apt.

The rest on manual labour.

And at that point Ricardo couldn't not spare a fond thought for his son, Adelante.

On that particular day, as he sat on the usual bench from where he could see many ships at the same time, he was able to observe with interest the various loading and unloading operations, contrary to Sundays when, except for the ferries coming and going the port, seemed quite sleepy.

The cranes loading or lowering the containers. The men busy with hooking up or unhooking cables, stockage, counting, stowage and transport on small articulated vehicles capable of lifting huge loads. Men on the ground and on the boats, at the stern and at the prow, all involved in a dance which Ricardo, even if not in detail, knew was the result of experience and self-assurance, a dance which those men could have done with their eyes shut, if necessary.

In spite of the distance, he could hear the sound of their boisterous voices.

How he would have liked to be one of them! Be a part of those crews, serving those huge ships that sailed the oceans... be part of something that produced tangible results, like moving a ship from one side of the world to the other, touch real things, where true force and experience are needed... other than putting data into a stupid computer! Data you did not really know the meaning or use of and of which you never saw the end result.

He looked at the time. At this point it was lunchtime. He stood up and headed for the tavern, where he knew that many of the people he had seen working down on the wharves like orderly industrious ants would have gone for refreshment. He had dressed purposely the way he had so as to blend in.

Second day again

The *Bear's Tavern*, it was called, an odd name for a place overlooking the port, but perhaps the name recalled the appearance of the owner, a real bear, enormous, over two metres tall with curly grey hair and a regularly unshaven bristly beard; the swollen stomach bulged like a promontory from the black cloth trousers which reached his ankles and out of the short sleeves of the white shirt arms as thick and strong as someone else's thighs were covered with as many tattoos as the shirt was with stains.

His name was Sebastiano. Customers who knew him put the accent at the end so the name became Sebastianò. Then they would laugh. And Sebastiano laughed with them. Ricardo thought that this shared confidence recalled some past events to the innkeeper and the customers, events that had united those same people in a common destiny, in a past which had become history. Or perhaps not.

That day the *Tavern* was full. It comprised two not very big rooms, each with several long tables which alternated in parallel from wall to wall. There were simple benches along the sides of the tables.

Whereas a similar layout allowed a good use of the available space, it also forced diners to eat at close



"Look in the mirror" by Marco Ceruti.

quarters. However, contrary to what he had feared, nobody bothered him. Those dock workers were so taken with talking amongst themselves that they took no notice of him, or perhaps they just thought him some solitary sailor.

The bear has just dropped a huge bowl of bean and sausage soup in front of Ricardo and he had barely had time to sink his spoon into the thick concentration of flavours when a loud voice shouted just a few centimetres from his ear "And you, where are you embarked for my friend?" It was a hot and stinking whiff of alcohol.

The man was small and twitchy and sported a smile full of black teeth with the odd gold one. He had one eye more open than the other and he was chewing something big.

"Unfortunately, no...I'm not embarking," replied Ricardo, 'I come from the centre, but I like the port so I come here to eat...."

The little man stood still as if he'd suddenly been hit by an icy wave, stopped his chewing and stared at Ricardo: only with the right, actually, because the left stayed almost shut like before. There was a moment's silence while they looked at each other across the few centimetres that separated them.

Ricardo wasn't sure what to do. He hoped the little man would turn his attention elsewhere and forget about him. But things went differently. "Boys! Did you hear who we've got here?" shouted the little man to-

wards the other side of the table. Everyone turned to look. Even people from the other tables. "This one's come from the centre! He's from the metropolis! He comes here because he says he likes the port!"

At these words Ricardo saw the expressions of those near him at the table grow exaggeratedly contorted and troubled. There was general hearty laughter. It started with a low, syncopated tone, like a cough or a hiccup, then those various noises joined together all of a sudden into one big explosion of mirth. Some beat their heavy hands on the tables, others bounced up and down on their seats and others stamped their feet hard on the floor. Now Ricardo was the speechless one. He would never have imagined such a resounding reaction.

"But what's so funny?" Ricardo tried to ask the little man responsible for all that merriment and who now, in turn, was receiving great slaps on the back as if he had won some kind of prize. "Why?" asked Ricardo again. In reply, at this point addressing the whole company, the little fellow shouted at the top of his voice "And he wants to know why we're laughing!"

It was like triggering an explosion. The laughter became screams, the banging on the tables became falls from seats, choking, belching and feeling sick, people pushing each other as if trying to get to the front to see some unique performance. Ricardo felt his cheeks flush and the heat take his breath away, he was sweating and he didn't know what to do, whether to laugh or cry, he was immersed in terrifying embarrassment.

"Silence, everyone!" shouted the strange little man

even louder and looking at him with a wicked light in his eye that Ricardo had not noticed before, lingering on his words and in the faint whisper of a moribund, he asked "So tell me, my friend, what is it about the port you like so much?"

Instantly the silence was even heavier with anticipation than before. It seemed as if the odd little sailorman had for the first time taken on the long-awaited conduction of an orchestra, as if he had suddenly become the commander-in-chief of an infinite petrol tanker. Then something curious happened.

Ricardo, who until then had had the precise impression of being caught in a game he didn't understand and which upset him deeply, felt his body become strong and solid, as though pervaded from all sides and penetrated from every extremity by a new source of energy. The warmth descended from his face to his chest, then to his legs and to every single muscle. He felt he could have moved a mountain with one finger. He looked around and saw all those faces turned towards him, faces worn by the sun and the fatigue, by bad food and too much alcohol.

"On December 25th I'm going to die. You are among my last wishes", he said.

Before dying.

Second day again and again (a long day)

The way back hadn't been easy. Ricardo's confession had caused an unforeseen reaction among the dock workers in *The Bear's Tavern*. After another minute or so of silence, a sailor from one of the far tables had shouted "This here is a real man!"

Straight away there was a general uproar with nervous comments, laughter and above all applause.

Then someone else had stood up at the opposite end of Ricardo's table and had shouted even louder "Let's make a toast! It'll be on me, but only the toast!"

It was no less than Bear himself, the innkeeper, talking. He must have seen what had been happening and now, arm raised, he was joining in by inciting the company.

Ricardo was astounded.

The little sailorman who had started all the fuss elbowed him in the ribs and yelled in his ear "You see? The innkeeper's offering the drinks! You're great! Stand up and thank him! And be quick, or he'll change his mind and goodbye drinks!"

So it was that with unsteady legs (because the wine he had drunk after his bold declaration had already made him somewhat dizzy and because the cigarette and cigar smoke had filled the room with such a thick and irritating cloud that the old whaling prints hanging on the mouldy *Tavern* walls were barely visible) that Ricardo had struggled onto the table and standing up with super-human effort, leaning slightly to the right, proclaimed "Thank you, Mr. Bear! Thank you all you honest workers! But I don't deserve as much, I just want to take my leave a little early and enjoy myself first for a few days... after all, I have always done my duty, I studied and worked, I got married and had a son, I'm tired now, I'd just like to sleep... for ever!"

These words brought about a veritable cataclysm. An ovation. There were shameless acclamations, the ap-

plause soon turned to tears which were almost comical seen on those faces worn by time and pain, as if they were the first tears they had ever been able to shed.

The innkeeper swelled his mighty chest and with a deeper voice than usual, said "Little man, I don't know who you are, but from now until Christmas, for the days to come, you can come and eat in this *Tavern*, whatever and whenever you like, and it'll be on me... as sure as my name is Sebastiano!"

At that, one last long applause broke out, like at a great theatre show when it brings the house down, and two big shiny tears appeared in Ricardo's eyes as they widened and clouded over not letting him see even one centimetre from his nose.

He went out between pats on the back and kisses, gasping and laughing, as if he were a prince, a benefactor, a statesman.

And now our Ricardo was thinking all this over, as he walked back up the long strip of asphalt that from the port led back home.

He called his son at seven o'clock on the dot that evening.

His son answered as precise as a rifle shot. "Dad, tell me!"

At once Ricardo hesitated. Every time he told his son something, he would get a "Tell me" after a certain number of words and this irritated Ricardo. So much so that on one occasion when he was feeling polemical – which was certainly not his usual manner – he replied "Adelante! Don't say 'tell me!' all the time! It irritates me!"

"You're right Dad... I'm sorry! So tell me!"

Ricardo renounced repeating himself.

He counted to seven, took a deep breath and said "Adelante, I called to talk to you about something important!"

"Tell me, Dad..."

Ricardo swallowed one of the tears that had remained in his throat from a few hours before. "Adelante, it's something difficult to explain over the phone, couldn't we meet for dinner tomorrow evening? I had a big lunch today..."

"Fine, Dad, no problem. Let's meet at half past seven at the New Church bar. We can have an aperitif and then something to eat at the *Macellaio*, that meat restaurant that's one of our best clients..."

"The time's alright, but can we meet somewhere else? I've discovered a good little place where you eat really well, it's called *The Bear's Tavern* and it's down at the port, the owner's a friend, we could meet directly there, even at eight if that's better for you.

Adelante was a bright young man. At times even too bright, but that day his father had caught him un-awares.

It had never happened before that Ricardo hadn't simply, even obsequiously, agreed to a suggestion by his son. But anyway, Adelante had no reason to refuse the invitation. The *Macellaio* would have in any case remained a good client, considering how much the neurotransmitters he had supplied him had reduced the desperate cries of the cattle at the slaughter. The system had stopped the complaints from the people who lived in the vicinity of the chain of slaughter houses of

which the owner of the restaurant chain with the same name was the main shareholder.

Darkness crept slowly down, like a cat.

Ricardo had replaced the receiver and he had collapsed, tired and stressed, into the sitting room armchair. It had been an incredible day for him. He couldn't remember ever having had a similar experience, not even on his wedding day. He tried not to think about it. He was contented. Shortly after, the coaxing voice of the nurse from the loudspeakers started offering her advice about *Lennox*. Until then, Ricardo hadn't noticed the loudspeakers and their publicity. It must have been the soporific effect of the lunch at the *Tavern*. He felt serene. His body sank into the recycled fabric of the armchair. Everything seemed so slow and soft.

Like a kiss, he thought. A day like a kiss.

He had forgotten to open the window, so he raised the shutters and along with the voice there also came, like a benediction, the image of the nurse on the maxi-screen in the square. It seemed to him she was wearing a sleeker outfit than usual, red, with the two top buttons undone leaving a glimpse of the curves of her breasts. Ricardo thought that for a nurse as lovely as that, anyone would have rushed to take not just one but the whole bottle of *Lennox* pills.

He felt a shiver of excitement and he didn't care to ignore it.

He returned to the chair, let the back down, stretched out his legs and hoped to dream of that sweet nurse passing the dark, deep hours of the night with him.

Third day

Ricardo woke up with a warm feeling inside him. A strange sensation. In the comfort of his bed he tried to remember if he had ever woken up with this feeling before. It seemed he really hadn't. He turned over a couple of times. He put his head under the pillow. Then he started laughing and decided to get up. It was at that point that he looked at the time and realised it was almost eleven.

He couldn't believe it. He had slept all that time!

He went unsteadily to the kitchen and made a double coffee. Then he went to the bathroom for a shower. He dressed, looked out of the window and saw the sun. It shone like a gigantic ball of flames. Enormous. And the sky was a pale blue without a single cloud.

What a way to wake up, he said to himself.

That day he would have spoken to his son and before that he would have done one of those things that were part of his special programme for the last month of his life.

He had to get on, he couldn't waste time lounging in bed.

Yet Ricardo had always thought that the best time was wasted time. Why wasn't this simple truth known to the whole human world? And why was everyone always so busy if they were only going to end up in ashes? Wasn't it better to do the minimum possible to survive and enjoy the sun and the sea and the fields and the woods and journeys and dreams and loves?

He had never confessed this certainly banal little

thought to anybody, but it had stayed in a corner of his mind every day of his life. Ever so often it would appear as if to say "Hey, I'm here! And I'm still thinking the same thing! So why?"

But until then he had never found an answer.

The sun was warm on his face now. In the park, dogs and children played with other dogs and children in their respective enclosed play areas. The mothers and, above all, the nannies, as well as the public safety officers kept check that all went well. The adults were confined in larger spaces, they could walk in the equatorial woods in the Eco-greenhouses or simply rest on the benches next to the play areas for the dogs and the children.

Most of all, Ricardo liked to watch. And let the sun warm his face as he held it upturned but slightly to one side so he could spy on the different breeds of young. He hadn't done it for years.

Perhaps the last time he had sat in a park the special areas for babies and Eco-greenhouses hadn't existed yet.

In those days it still happened every so often that a child or a dog would get lost and the adults would organise search parties and at the same time everyone would talk to each other. Ricardo recalled when he learnt to get acquainted with other people like that. Merely by sitting on a park bench.

Thinking about it now, it seemed absurd.

That day he would have attentively observed the races, the joy, the songs, the arguments, the jumping, the biting, the barking.

It would have been a magnificent day of time wasting. Watching how things happen.

When the enormous ball of light started its descent towards the horizon, Ricardo decided to move. He crossed a short portion of the equatorial Eco-greenhouse headed towards the port.

He had never been in an equatorial Eco-greenhouse before. As soon as he entered he found he could not breathe.

The guard saw him turning pale and explained to him that this was a normal reaction caused by the temperature and high humidity. With a sceptical and dubious look he asked him if it was perhaps the first time he had visited an equatorial Eco-greenhouse. Ricardo had to admit it was. The guard's expression changed from sceptical to euphoric in a second. He said "Really? Don't tell me you're one of the Last?"

"Who are the Last?" Ricardo asked, perplexed.

"But there's a prize! Don't you know? My God, sir! Don't you follow the bulletins on the maxi-screens?"

In actual fact, apart from the *Lennox* nurse, he paid very little attention to the maxi-screens. He was forced to shake his head timidly.

The guard gave an euphoric squeal. He grabbed the transmitter with a shaking hand and barely holding back his excitement, stuttered "Position 3 here... position 3 to base! Are you there?"

"What is it, position 3?"

"I've got a Last One here, sir!" said the guard and in so saying looked Ricardo firmly in the eye as if he feared he would disappear.

"Ok boy, keep calm, we'll be there in a few minutes."

Third day again

Unbelievable. As he crossed the metropolis, briskly walking alongside the long tail-back of Super-climbers, Ricardo thought about what had happened.

He was late for the appointment with Adelante.

The guard at the Eco-greenhouse, as punctilious as he was enthusiastic, had made him wait for the managers to come: there was a prize for that discovery, and not only for him! Whoever he meant by 'him'!

A quarter of an hour went by before the managers arrived in a roaring Super-climber, mouse grey.

Four people jumped out. Two did the filming and two did the talking. Of the two doing the talking, one was a tall man with grey hair and a cigar, wearing the grey Confederation uniform. His black boots shone in the afternoon to the envy of the porous trunks of the equatorial plants.

They told Ricardo that possibly he was the last of those who still hadn't visited the Eco-greenhouses and that they were happy he had finally decided to do so. But how come he had never thought of taking a walk before then? Perhaps his work kept him too busy? Perhaps he suffered from some dangerous allergy to the equatorial plants? In which case, had he taken precautions? And what were his feelings now he was in there? Did he appreciate the colours and fragrances of that splendid Eco-greenhouse? And how had he felt when the guard had told him he was a Last One? And had he noticed the maxi-screen installed between those two weeping willows where the history of the development and degradation of the climate on the planet was being narrated? These last three questions were put to him, and with not little concern, by the lady accompanying the grey-haired man with the cigar: a small woman with very black hair except for one white lock which fell too often in front of her face.

In the meantime, Ricardo had lost track of the questions and the answers, he had suddenly broken into a sweat, his head was spinning, he felt himself redden with embarrassment like a lover on a first date, and he had fallen into the arms of the military man in the grey uniform.

But there was no need for assistance. He explained he was worried about missing an appointment he had if he didn't hurry (and it wasn't with a lover but with his son) and then he invented what seemed to him the best excuse for being Last and that is that he had wanted to visit the Eco-greenhouses for a long time but had always had to postpone it because of urgent problems at work, when he heard that there was a prize for the Last One he had decided to make haste... The satisfaction for the beauty of such a blatant lie gave him a sense of pride.

The interviewers appreciated his dedication to his work and his strategic sense aimed at obtaining the prize even more, and they asked him if by any chance he worked for the Ministry of the Economy.

With a hint of mystery that he couldn't remember ever having felt before, Ricardo replied that he could say no more, that he would have collected the prize the very next day from the guard, who was clearly a trustworthy person, and took his leave as the cameras dedicated a long shot to him, fit for a heart-rending cinematographic finale.

He arrived half an hour late.

He recognised his son walking nervously up and down in front of *The Bear's Tavern*, hampering the other clients going in and out, and felt dispirited. Who knows what other business or pleasure engagements he was making him late for! If he hadn't been so late he would have stayed put and watched him a while, unseen. He like observing his son at a distance! Seeing him living and moving without actually being present, hindering his gaze. But today he couldn't wait around.

"Good evening, Adelante!"

"Hi Dad! I mean to say, have you seen what time it is?"

"Yes, you're right, I'm sorry... but you don't know what happened to me! If we have time, I'll tell you, but first I want to tell you why I invited you..."

"Dad, time is always precious! I hope you made me come this far for something important, seeing as you're even late!"

"Adelante, I don't know if it's important but I think you ought to know... let's go inside! We can't stay out here!"

Third day again and again (*another long day*)

Ricardo felt himself crushed in a deadly vice. He was seized and kissed by Sebastiano as if they were old friends seeing each other after twenty years: but they were not old friends and they were not meeting after twenty years, but from the previous day.

Adelante looked at his father in astonishment. He could not understand what was going on at all. Ricardo couldn't look at Sebastiano or speak or free himself. He remained still, waiting to die there and then. Perhaps the overwhelming kiss was anticipating his intentions.

"It's my son!" he shouted at last, taking a deep breath, as if to call on some unlikely succour.

"Your father's an exceptional man! You're lucky! Men of this fibre and courage don't exist any more!" shouted Sebastiano, louder still. His eyes were full of tears, and Ricardo was surprised he was still alive to see them, those eyes dark as tar and deep as the stroke of a hatchet.

Adelante was confused. He looked back and forth from his father to Sebastiano continuously as if they were two irreconcilable entities which nevertheless revealed themselves at the same moment. Like water and fire going arm in arm, for example.

His father, whom he had seen grow, or rather, the man he had seen grow older while he was growing, that man was there before him but he was also another man, in a way similar to the one who was embracing him... how was that possible?

Then Sebastiano accompanied them to the head of a long table of happily drunk and noisy dock workers and Adelante thought it was time he asked his father for an explanation.

With a huge effort he stretched his head beyond the edge of the table like a tortoise out of its shell, he who was used to living in a sterile and silent laboratories, he who hardly ever spoke but elaborated data and communicated with his colleagues by gestures, heard his own voice stammer in a storm of other raised voices.

es, "Dad! What are we doing here? What's going on? And who on earth are these people?" Ricardo looked around and realised that perhaps it hadn't been a good idea to meet amidst all that chaos. But at this point they were there and he didn't feel like going somewhere else.

Apart from anything else, Ricardo's perception of the *Tavern* – however different from a hypothetical suitable place for a quiet discussion – was that of a cosy den; just as a man who loves the sea in winter can feel warm sitting watching a storm at sundown in the cold and cutting wind.

"They're dock workers!" said Ricardo. "We're here because I thought it only right to let you know I'm going to die at the end of the month. Or rather, on 25th December I'm going to die!"

"What did you say?" returned Adelante... he'd lost the last few words, he had understood something like "dock workers", "right in September" and "I'll love you". When his father repeated what he had said so loudly as to finally overcome the drunken noise, two other things happened simultaneously. Adelante was violently sick and the whole room went quiet.

A few hours later while he was lying in bed, still feeling very emotional, Ricardo relived the scene of his son receiving first aid, Bear lifting him and carrying him outside for fresh air, the dock workers drinking a toast in his (Ricardo's) honour and in honour of his proposal to kill himself which once again was deemed absolutely dignified and worthy of great respect (it was a brief, fanciful speech by one of them...), but above all he saw his son's lost expression when their eyes met and his incredulous, continuous asking "Why?", alternating with the odd "You must be mad!"

Ricardo explained everything calmly, softly, stroking Adelante's clammy and trembling neck the way he had done when he was little more than two years old and suffering from terrible influenza which had nearly killed him. He stroked him tenderly for a whole hour, while his son's tele-transmitters continued to send signals of calls and stock Exchange updates; he stroked gently through his hair, across his forehead, his face, on his cheeks streaked with tears and which he discovered now, after so many years, still rosy and soft... What a handsome son he had! And so intelligent! Ricardo was so proud of him and he told him so. He was proud of his success at work, of how independent he was and of how he was so popular with women. Why was he suffering?

"You have your life," he said, "You will remember me for what I have been up to now... otherwise I would just get old, stupid, forgetful and troublesome and you would start to hate me, you would want to see less of me and to tell the truth, if you think about it, you already get annoyed when I talk a lot, when I ask you to explain things you can't see why they should interest me... you're right, you have things to do, your time is precious!"

Then he continued with the same things he had said to his boss, about the monotony of life and the useless repetition day in day out.

Staring into the distance, Adelante had listened in disbelief to his father's words.

"I'll leave you a space that you'll be able to fill with something better," said Ricardo.

Then he smiled.

He kissed his son on his forehead and left.

Behind him he heard one more unrestrained applause. The dock workers had been watching the scene from the door and the windows of the *Tavern*.

Fourth day

Ricardo felt a sudden wave of happiness... he couldn't believe it! It was as if a great brilliance was shining from inside him and lighting up, through his eyes, wherever he looked at. Everything was so clear and warm. What was happening?

He couldn't understand it. He looked at himself in the bathroom mirror and they were still the same (him and the mirror) even if he could see the new light in his eyes... but perhaps it was his whole expression that had that effect? His face appeared relaxed, open and, looking closer, it didn't even look like his own face!

He was dizzy. He turned slowly towards the room, looked around and things seemed different, or rather, things looked like themselves! That spindly old wooden table, for example, in the middle of the tiny living room, where he ate and dealt with the work he couldn't finish in the office, really was a Table! And his bed, so shabby and even creaking, was a Bed!

He looked out of the window and was amazed and elated at that yellow sun, at the white clouds, light as puffs of soft cream, and at the maxi-screen installed in the square that now looked happy to be a maxi-screen, with all its rusty metal tubular scaffolding.

But what was he thinking? Was he going mad?

He decided to stand under a cold shower for a few minutes.

Perhaps this confusion was the result of some incomprehensible alchemy between the missed dinner of the previous evening, Adelante's dramatic reaction, his own escape and the double sherry he had had with the *Lennox* tablet. All this put together with the clamour and the applause at *The Bear's Tavern*.

The shower brought him round. That is, it didn't change the light on his face which still warmed him inside, it didn't change his perception of things, as if he were seeing everything for the first time, but unlike a few minutes before, he was no longer bewildered by these sensations. He was growing accustomed to what was happening and was beginning to find it pleasurable, a source of wellbeing. He was content that each thing was the way it was, himself first of all.

In sum, a strange folly.

After washing, he went out. Without further delay.

That day he would have informed Adelante's mother of his plan.

He crossed the road, observed with satisfaction the long line of roaring super-climbers at the traffic lights and had walked a few hundred metres or so when suddenly out of nowhere someone tugged him violently from behind.

It was a dwarfish man, with a short bristly beard, a bald

head, an enormous nose almost as big as his hands and feet, a thin smirk and four sharp teeth which extended like fangs from the top and bottom of his mouth. He looked like a monster. But he was smiling.

A monstrous grin.

"What do you want?" shouted Ricardo.

"Your voice, that's all!"

And the man showed him a large rectangular sheet of paper with written in big letters:

*The Support Ricardo Committee
Invitation*

Dinner at "The Bear's Tavern". Low prices.

Ricardo will tell the story of his life before he dies!

Afterwards it will be too late!

Everybody come!

"What does this mean? And who would You be?" asked Ricardo immediately, worried about being involved in the activities at the *Tavern*... he had no wish to tell the story of his life! What could he ever have said?"

"You're right" the man said politely, his grim becoming a miserable expression of exaggerated emotion. "Please excuse me for not saying straight away who I am. You may not remember, but I was at the *Tavern* the times you came to visit and I was there to applaud you yesterday evening! You're a man who deserves to be known, believe me. As for me, I am Manlio and I'm Sebastiano's brother, his big brother, let's say...."

"How is that possible? I'm sorry, but how old are you?"

"Thirty nine, why?"

"I don't know, you're so different..."

"I see.... perhaps you mean the height?" - the hyena's grin reappeared on the runtish man's stubbly face -

"You know what sailors are like, a woman in every port? Our father kept to it to the point that Christmas came twice in the metropolis port!"

The story evidently amused Manlio a lot because he broke into resounding laughter, slapping his big hands on his little legs and choking on his saliva, causing a fit of coughing lasting at least five minutes, bright red in the face.

When he regained his vertical stance, which differed only slightly from horizontal when taking his nose into account, Manlio tried desperately but without success to remove the grin from his face and change it into a decent expression of respect and esteem. Then he said "I beg of you, do come and visit us. You won't have to say very much, just tell us about your reasons and perhaps an anecdote of your past life. If it comes to it, and you really don't feel like speaking in public, I can say something, something very generic, maybe something you can suggest... you know, it's not important what really happened but what we tell, it's the rule for men of the sea! Come along, please! Down at the port it's all they talk about!"

"But why?" he burst out in exasperation.

"What do you mean why? Don't you see it for yourself? Look around you... don't you think that a lot of those who live like us, if they had the courage, would rather not be here or never to have been here?"

Instinctively Ricardo cast a glance around and saw the column of roaring, smoking Super-climbers still moving slowly like before, saw the grey faces of the drivers, saw the rigid, dark sequence of the towers of steel, glass and cement, saw the Maxi-screen in the square rotating taught and smiling expressions and then he

saw the sky on the horizon, so vast and blue that he felt he could fall into it and he thought that, after all, things had always been that way, and always would be, to tell the truth.

"I don't think living is all that bad. I'm not complaining about it. I don't want to hold an assembly, I just think I'm superfluous. I've done what I had to do, you see, and for me not wanting to be here can be considered an excess of pure laziness!"

"Excess of laziness?" For a few seconds, the look of the grub that can't turn into a butterfly appeared on Manlio's face.

"Yes....," Ricardo confirmed.

At that Manlio couldn't stop himself, and as if pulled back by an elastic band, his face battled with trying to keep straight. He failed. He broke into more peals of laughter accompanied by choking. Not being able to stop, he decided to escape. He took his leave, mumbling "You're a genius! We'll be expecting you! You must come! You'll get a free meal!" And he disappeared round the first bend.

Ricardo saw the already small figure grow smaller, almost to the dimensions of a tomato, and roll sideways beyond a wall as black as fresh tarmac.

Fourth day again

He spent the rest of his time lazing and dreaming the night away. He couldn't find the courage to go to his ex-wife's office to tell her the date of his death. Not because he worried about her grieving but out of modesty. Shame.

Ricardo had never learnt to talk about himself. When he looked inside himself he saw nothing and when someone asked "How are you?" he didn't know how to answer.

Then there was another reason.

In spite of it being several years since the divorce, his wife Linda was still very angry with him. She maintained she had been swindled. Morally.

Ricardo had seduced her by presenting himself with a character and certain features which in actual fact he didn't possess. They were not his. That's what Linda said.

But it didn't seem right to Ricardo. He had always spoken openly.

He spoke his mind and would never have been able to behave otherwise. Ricardo felt so predictable and normal that at times he even forgot about himself. It happened when he woke up, in the mornings. He would open his eyes with a strange humming in his head and not remember where he was, what day it was, but above all who that man in his bed was! Except for finding out soon after, in the bathroom mirror, where he would run to look at himself, that the man was really him, that is, Ricardo!

On occasions it took a little time to remember.

That's how normal he considered himself!

Problems had started when his wife decided to take Ricardo's incredible normality as a sign of incredible particularity.

Linda is the kind of person who will judge an event, an

object or even a person as eccentric, solely for having thought them so. What's more, she is inclined to enthuse over a lot of things, only to tire of them a few days, hours or minutes later and then blame the event, object or person for having bored her.

In fact, in the case of Ricardo, she was convinced events had changed. She excluded, as convinced as she was enthusiastic, that the cause of her boredom could possibly derive from her own attitude.

Why would she have become bored if only a short while earlier she was as happy as could be?

To her, this self-serving reasoning seemed unexceptionable.

It always went the same way.

And each time Linda would find the cause of her own failures in the rest of the world.

It was never her that changed, things did.

On a couple of occasions while they were still married, Ricardo had cautiously tried to point out the curious frequency with which the same things happened to her, but Linda, regretful as well as convinced, replied that chaos and evil intentions ruled the world and that with her openness and good heart she would always fall into the traps set by fate. Yes, the word she would keep repeating was "Trap".

And Ricardo had turned out to be another Trap.

However, as Ricardo had learnt to love his wife because fascinated by that sincerity and self-assurance, when he found himself amongst her disappointments he could find neither the strength nor the courage to contradict her. So he apologised for having changed and left her.

In actual fact, she left him, by moving out after starting an affair with the instructor from the gym she went to at least three afternoons a week.

But the official version was that it was Ricardo's fault she had gone, because he had hidden his true unimaginative character from her.

"I'm sorry, my love," he said.

"Bugger off," she said.

They didn't speak to each other for years. Except for

when Ricardo rang the video entryphone to call young Adelante. Or when Linda had some complaint about his supposed shortcomings regarding their son's education. "If it hadn't been for me, your son would have been a failure like you! Instead, look at him now!" Something she often repeated, even now.

During this last year, Adelante had, in fact, won a famous research prize thanks to his transistors which clouded the brain of animals for slaughter, so avoiding the terrified bellowing. Linda was proud.

Ricardo was proud, too. He thought that, after all, his son was benefitting the community. He had become an important man.

So, lacking the courage to face Linda, Ricardo spent the whole day passing the time away at the big Eco-greenhouse where the young guard had discovered his status as Last One. He watched the children playing and the dogs running.

The young guard, dressed in a shiny new grey uniform, studied Ricardo with satisfaction. A light, metal-scented breeze ruffled his hair.

Ricardo felt the soft joy of the morning beating in his heart like a firm embrace.

He was truly contented. The sun seemed like a diamond in flames balanced on the edge of the world.

That night he dreamed he was flying. A beautiful dream. He climbed to the top of the highest tower in the metropolis and let himself fall. With open arms. Deciding to die that way. But then, during the incredible and ever faster fall, Ricardo discovered that by opening his arms and exploiting the air currents he could slow down and glide, slowly ... he could even fly!

He passed the hours of darkness flying in the sky over the metropolis, skimming the tops of the skyscrapers, grazing airplanes and helicopters which never even noticed him, descending far enough to brush past trees and lampposts, to then soar again on a rising current, towards the moon and the stars.

The next morning he finally decided he would speak to Linda (*End of Part 1*).



Marco Sette is a young Italian writer, 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 theatrical group *GNut* during the theatrical competition called "Unlikely stable".

In 2009 he classified first in the Poetry Section of the Literary Prize of Città di Castello with his book "A world without objects", a poetry collection on love relationship.

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 from the bitter life of every day.