

Before dying (Part 2)

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)

Fifth day

"Hi, it's me, Ricardo... how are you?"

"What is it Ricardo? I'm busy and I'm in a hurry. Tell me in three words, if you really must..."

"Linda, I wanted to say goodbye.... Let's say I'm leaving, at the end of the month, leaving for ever..."

"What is this? What do you mean 'forever'? What about your job? And Adelante? Ricardo, if this is a joke, it's not funny... I'm busy, bye!"

"Hey, hey, wait, don't hang up!"

"I'm not coming back to you, Ricardo, I wouldn't dream of it... Antonio is strong and generous and handsome and affectionate and rich, the exact opposite to you... I'm hanging up, I'm in a hurry, bye!"

"Wait! I don't want to get back with you! I'd like to, but I understand your reasons... it's just that I'm going to die!" There were a few seconds of silence. Then Linda asked him what he was talking about.

Ricardo explained in more than three words that he had decided to kill himself.

"You're mad! You're sick, have you got money problems?" his wife demanded.

He said he didn't. That he just wanted to go. Not be around. Switch everything off. Like that.

"And your son?"

Ricardo would have liked to answer that Adelante was grown up and she had no cause to worry, but to avoid any fuss he just told her he would be leaving two thirds of the value of the house to her and their son.

"And the other part?" asked Linda. She seemed more interested in the conversation, now.

She had always been a practical woman, it was one of the things he had loved her for.

"Can you love a woman because she's practical?" Ricardo asked himself. But he couldn't find an answer, even though it had happened to him.

Then Linda repeated her question with an irritated vibration in her voice.

Ricardo remembered not answering.

He was in a phone booth. One of the few not equipped with video: this way he wouldn't be forced to look at his wife while he spoke. He feared he would feel too embarrassed to tell her about his plan.

The port wasn't far away. From where he was he could see the tops of the ships, the turrets, the radio apparatus and the mammoth machinery for lifting and moving the containers, which emerged like mechanical monsters between the rows of skyscrapers, on the horizon.

"Well, so who are you leaving that damned other third to?"

He felt the screeching voice bring him back into the booth, like the hand of an angry mother grabbing her child by the hair with the intention of giving him a painful lesson.

"To the families of lost sailors..." replied Ricardo. Then he hung up and resumed his walk towards the port.

"Ricardo! My brother! At last!"

Manlio ran to meet him on his little legs and leapt forward in a prawn-like fashion, falling on him like a tangle of wet ropes. He was wearing a sopping wet apron covered in stains. Behind him Ricardo saw Sebastian leaning round the kitchen door. A bearded smile appeared on the man's face and shifting his massive body behind the curly head, started to move towards them.

Ricardo felt at home. Whatever the word 'home' could mean.

"Here you are at last! I was expecting you yesterday evening! All our friends were expecting you... you're a celebrity now dear Ricardo... you can't abandon us! We want to know all about you, what you think, what you do, what you've done and what you're going to do, the 25th December... I shouldn't say it but there are already others thinking of following your example. They think that dying in war you go straight to the Viking paradise, Valhalla or whatever the devil they call it, and that these days dying by suicide is like dying in battle... they want to end it, like you, each for a different reason but they want to be with you on 25th December, there are already about ten of them and increasing by the day... it's incredible Ricardo, believe me... if it wasn't for the *Tavern* and our father's memory, we'd join you, too!"

Manlio spoke in a frenetic and laughing stream of words, and for some reason which Ricardo failed to understand, seemed genuinely pleased to see him. Sebastian in turn nodded, his eyes red with emotion.

"Come, I'll get you something to eat, then we can talk. And you, brother, give our friend some breathing space. We can continue afterwards," said Sebastian.

They sat at a small table near the cooker. Sebastian put a plate of steaming boiled vegetables and meat in front of him, with a large portion of mustard. The two brothers didn't eat anything, but sat watching him as a mother watches her child eat its first mouthfuls of solid food.

Three days passed light as snow and then three days of driving rain, heavy and violent. Huge globules of water pelted the metropolis, everything seemed to have gone mad.

Ricardo watched the spectacle through the sitting room picture window, sitting in his armchair, and he felt safe and protected. With pleasure and disenchantment he thought of the past week. He was pleased it was raining, he could avoid *The Bear's Tavern* for a few days. Not that he minded how he spent his evenings there, quite the contrary, he felt part of a big family, closed in the embrace of those ancient mariners. But now he wanted to be alone. Rest. Love is tiring. Even between friends. He hadn't done much. He talked about himself. They wanted him to tell them about his life. He smiled thinking of it. The smoky room at the *Tavern*. Manlio running like a ferret between the tables on his strong little legs, while Sebastian's massive bulk emerged from the kitchen to check on things.

Later on, when they were all full and drunk, Manlio would stand on the table and shout "Now Ricardo's going to tell us something!" Applause.

And he never knew what to say. At times, he had even invented that 'something'.

Or he would recall his boring childhood or Adelante's exciting childhood; in the latter case he would also tell about the things he had done wrong, according to his wife, regarding his son's upbringing... Then all the tired and lolling heads of the seamen would shake faster to underline their disdain at the unfair criticism.

Footsteps on the stairs. Head beating hard. Thoughts like wooden splinters penetrating the flesh.

The door thrusts open and hits the wall with a crash. Haste.

"Hasty" they called him, "Emotional and hasty." That was why they had demoted him to duties barely above directing traffic. At his age and with his experience.

That day Aldo felt resurrected. He didn't know why, but that day his boss had sent him a categorical and clear message. Present yourself at eight o'clock, we need you. It had made him feel important. Truly. He had swallowed two aspirins and an undefined number of vitamin pills, early morning.

Then he had got under the cold shower, shaved and put on his best suit, that is, the only suit he could call that. His head still ached.

The doors had banged too hard. Screw me for so little. He thought.

The details of things had always fascinated him and at work, before what had happened had happened, he had distinguished himself for paying attention to details. And to think that chaos reigned happily in his life. From every aspect. Starting with the house and ending with his love affairs, friendships and all the rest... He had at least a couple of children he didn't know anything about around in the world and whose mothers took care to keep away from him.

"But that's life," he told himself, "Just live it, for good or for bad. It's all heart and blood and flesh and bone. It's all the same, in the end." Aldo was no philosopher. He knew that well. So he took things as they came without thinking about it. Except that day.

That day was an important matter. He told himself.

Why call him in the middle of last night? And why his old boss? The one who had demoted him to that shit desk job? Evidently something had happened he didn't know about or couldn't understand.

He stood in the large white marble space he saw in front of him. He couldn't count the columns, there were so many. Someone observant would do it, he thought.

Then he saw the long dark table at the opposite end of the hall. He walked the necessary steps, stood to attention, said who he was and waited.

He couldn't believe it, but there on his right, sitting right at the end after the old men in uniform, was no less than the President!

"Special Inspector Aldo Trevimik?" shouted his old boss as if he didn't know him.

It was the practice.

"At your orders, Sir!" He drew himself to the best attention since Academy days.

"We have called you for a difficult and delicate task. Do you want to redeem yourself from your shameful past?"

"Absolutely yes, Sir!" Aldo shouted back, with the headache still throbbing against his temples and that constant thought which kept asking questions in his brain: Why had they called him? Why him?

When someone like Aldo was summoned before the President for a mission there was only one reason: the mission was extremely dangerous and he was probably not going to come back alive.

Aldo put all his faith in the second of what he considered his good qualities, that is, knowing how to fall on his feet like cats, and prepared himself to pay attention to the details of the mission.

The men in uniform looked at him in silence for a few seconds then turned to look at the President who, at the far corner of the table, was enjoying a black cigarette. His narrow, piercing gaze was not hidden by the smoke.

"What do you suppose our beloved society is founded on, inspector?" the President asked, with a tone which wanted to be ironical but sounded scornful.

"Order, Sir!" The first thing that had come into his head... Hasty, he thought.

"You're wrong, my dear inspector! Men live of illusions, dreams. For the most part unattainable! Sport. Politics. Religion. Success. Wealth. All dreams. Men live of dreams! My dear inspector.

Aldo nodded.

"Our society is founded on dreams. Not on work, remember. But on dreams. Work can even not exist but if you continue to dream you will be happy and will die almost cheerfully!"

The word 'cheerfully' must have stuck somewhere in the President's throat because he coughed four short, strangled breaths and for a few seconds turned red. Then he started breathing again and with breath came words once more. "If a man, any man, undermines our ability to dream, get drunk and forget, that man will become a danger for social order, that very same order that you, dear inspector, believe is at the base of our community... Do you agree?"

"Absolutely, yes, Mr. President," replied Aldo out loud.

"Right, think of a man like that, dear inspector.... An apparently harmless man, placid, even likeable, but capable of weakening our entire system by shirking his social duties and the dreams these duties are linked to... think about it, inspector... It may seem strange to you but such a person exists... and within our own community! Seemingly in silence, he is encouraging other wretches like himself, willing to do anything to be able



"Bear Tavern" by Marco Ceruti.

to live a real life, without dreams, just plain reality... he is a man willing to die just to stop dreaming! A madman! This is your man, inspector! Neutralise him, make him disappear!"

At that precise moment and in unison with the President's excited cue, the wall behind the seated officers suddenly lit up in a fluorescent picture of greenish light where the grey figure of a slightly hunched man appeared in the centre, in profile, while with his head bent in the pouring rain he climbed the steps to the front door, probably the house where he lived. "An apparently harmless man," thought Aldo, "It won't be difficult to eliminate him."

Days in between and a hunter

1

He is sitting at the table in his little room assigned to security officers, even though he no longer held that rank. They had given him the accommodation when they had relieved him of his role, as a kind of compensation. Like saying stay here and be good, don't make trouble.

When people like Aldo became as he had become, they usually made them disappear. But in his heyday Aldo had been a model hunter. Efficient and sure. And he knew a lot...

So someone had thought that he could still be useful, if he could recover. Because the problem was within him. Like woodworm in his brain. That gnawed away and burned. Destroying him. And making him drink. He had a continuous thirst for dying. Maybe a little like the man he had to eliminate, he thought, sitting at the little round table in his little room, in front of the window looking on to the enormous grey wall of the tower opposite.

The dark windows. He shifted his eyes from the windows to the bottle on the table. Half full. Alcohol: *Tequila*, with a worm in it. Nearby, a one and a half litre bottle of sparkling water. Together with aspirin it was the best way to set his head straight, sparkling water and vitamins. And a couple of eggs to fill his stomach.

His boss had said: "We've thought it over. It's the last chance you'll get. Get back into circulation, Aldo. You're still young and you can do it. It's up to you. Stop drinking. Or only do it when you're not working. As you wish. But don't go around in slow motion, ill-tempered and smelling... This isn't a difficult job, just delicate. The difficulty lies in the delicacy itself, you see. This Ricardo has to disappear without being noticed. We don't want other problems, most of all we don't want him to become a legend. If the dock workers start killing themselves, who's going to man the ships? Who will do the loading? And the unloading? And if everybody started to follow suit? Have you thought of that? Who will keep everything going? You and me?"

No! Certainly not Aldo! He couldn't do anything except drink, punch and kill people.

He wasn't much of a man, but that's how he was. Since he was a boy. He was the strongest and the meanest. They were afraid of him, at nursery school. His parents couldn't understand this. They were two decent people. Nurses in the big Hospital in the metropolis. Sweet and patient. When Aldo thought about them he would start to cry, every time. In the bathroom. He would stare at himself in the mirror crying. He would watch the tears run down from his eyes as if they weren't his.

He didn't know why he was like that, either. Since he could remember he had always been tough, bad. As soon as something went wrong, he had to solve it his way. End it. When all was quiet again, in and around him, then he would be fine, he would feel right, at peace. It was as if something exploded inside him and he had to somehow find relief. As if he had an internal cataclysm or a poisonous germ. Everyone told him so. At school and the nannies at home. He was bad. Only his parents were good to him. Patient. Pity they were gone. He studied the worm in the bottle and that was how he felt. While his boss's words continued to go round in his head like mad flies. "People who kill themselves are a danger to society, to social order! You know that, right? You studied it at the Academy, there's nothing more danger-

ous than someone with nothing to lose... That's why we build ideals, for the people... games, hopes... That's why we've put maxi-screens and maxi-greenhouses on every corner and in every park in the metropolis... That's why we stuff them with *Lennox*... to keep them calm, unheeding, numb! But there's no need to remind you of these things, you know all too well... So, will you do the job, will you clean yourself up?"

"Of course, boss!" he had replied.

But he looked at the bottle and wondered if he could make it.

He couldn't bear thinking of how acute the need to forget about himself was. Be really down and then rise again the next day. Like a survivor. One who had outlived the battle. With him, trying to calm him down hadn't worked. It must have been for the germ he had inside.

Someone had written that a warrior in peace time kills himself. It must have been that. And whoever had written it couldn't have been all that bad. Really. He smiled. He opened the bottle of water and downed a large mouthful. Then he lifted the receiver and called Ainda. "Hi, are you free this evening?" he said, before being swamped with words.

"Well, look who it is! Had you forgotten I existed? It must be ten days since you disappeared... How are you? How come you only call when you get a stiffy? Fine one, you are! Listen, if it wasn't for the fact that officially it's only a question of work I'd get really mad... Alright, forget it... I'm in a good mood today, even if I'm in a right mess... the girls are all booked and I'm supposed to be partying two senators... but I can be quick... it'll have to be later on and this time you're going to pay, my dear! That'll teach you to disappear! I thought we were friends!"

"But we are, Ainda! You know... and you know how I am... I've been at home for days... come on, don't fuss, you know me... Anyway, this evening we can celebrate, if you're not too late, I'll take you out to eat... they've taken me back, a real job, not pushing papers... Come, and I'll kiss you all over!" He smiled. Somehow, hearing her made him smile.

Ainda is almost the same age as he is, they've always known each other, she's round and soft with milky skin, serious breasts and buttocks and flowing chestnut hair. She had been young once, too, like him... they had met as teenagers and had lost touch by chance, and they had met again by chance about twenty years later... and they barely recognised each other... time had been at work, they were both fatter although more than anything she seemed softer... and that was something Aldo liked, feel himself sink into her arms, feel her over and around him, warm, flare up and redden in her lunar body like a web of flaming blooms.

In spite of life's disappointments, she was still a good-humoured woman and had a way of laughing that did Aldo good, did him good inside, he felt it, like nectar, as if she were licking his wounds...

Ainda ran a provincial brothel now, far from the echoes of the metropolis. With a good name. Important people who could enjoy themselves in a place like that, near the mountains, without being disturbed, protected by the public order guards, by the woods and by the mountainside. There, anyone snooping was in contrast with the rare other people like a crocodile in a pond full of frogs.

Days in between and a hunter

2

It's called *Line of Command Cleansing: LCC*. If the prominent person had a chain of other people behind him, it was necessary to go back as far as the last link and then cleanse everything. Break up the entire system. Destroy it. Pulverize it.

It was a delicate task and the chiefs of Security did not want to use too many heads to do it.

The victims were important figures, often wealthy and with contacts in the world that counts, some soldiers in turn might have been bribed, could double-cross, betray the traitors. It required few trusted elements. Aldo was one of them and he worked alone. He preferred that. It would have taken him longer but every step he took, intentionally, would have been on solid ground, with no-one digging a hole behind him. Therefore, he saw to all the observation and listening work himself, as well as the installation of the recording equipment. Above all he stalked the prey. He tried to infiltrate the network of acquaintances, the complex system of relationships, and from there the intimate, personal life.

In some cases he had even arrived at becoming a 'friend' of the target. He called it the 'Trojan Horse' method. Ultimately, success was practically guaranteed.

Usually he would first try to understand the kind of person he was dealing with and what type of people his man preferred to associate with; then he would create a suitable identity accordingly, a sort of Trojan horse in fact, with which to establish contact. If the choice was right the rest would follow. Like a good side shot in billiards. By calculating the exact trajectory, after bouncing various times the ball goes into the hole. It slides in gently, like a sharp knife into meat.

Ainda arrived out of breath just before ten. Aldo was starving. He had tried to fill himself with beer and not something stronger, but hunger was now gripping his stomach. He wanted something solid and because his plan included dinner he tried in every way to convince Ainda to go out, even if all she wanted was to hold him, feel his warmth, kiss him, smile close up, under the blankets, and in the meantime, between kisses, crunch nuts, olives and the like. Ainda wanted to feed off him, above all. She had a carnal passion for Aldo that she couldn't explain. She had told him, "I like you the way I like food, greedily. I could eat you." It had always been like that, since they were kids, in fact she would bite him then, too. Hard. When she still didn't know what the word 'kiss' meant. She did now. It was different.

Anyway, Aldo managed to convince her.

"And where is it you want to go?" his sulky lover asked "I know an unusual little place, you'll like it, it's full of cheerful, noisy people, dock workers... the sort of people you don't find any more... we'll have a good time, and then we can come back and roll in the blankets all night!"

"Don't make me laugh! I wish! You'll be rolling around in the bed all night for what you've eaten, I'm telling you! Anyway, alright, come on, let's see this place, but if I don't like it I'll leave bite marks all over you!"

On the way out Aldo thought to himself that he was exhuming his 'Trojan Horse' with his favourite whore.

Twelfth day

It was raining. An immense carpet of dark clouds weighed the sky down to a few hundred metres from the ground. It seemed that by reaching up it was almost possible to touch it, that mattress of air. From the living room window Ricardo watched the water hit the tarmac and the tops of the cars.

For some strange reason the Maxi-screen in the square had stopped transmitting advertisements and appeared to be unbelievably inactive. Ricardo couldn't remember it ever having happened before and seeing it like that, dark and mute, it looked like a huge window open on to outer space, similar to one of those doors leading to a parallel universe. Looking into that darkness, Ricardo thought of his own destiny. Two weeks from then he would be dead. "Two weeks is not very long," he thought, and yet he felt little emotion at the idea that the short amount of time would have gone quickly and then nothing would be left of him but that same darkness he could see on the screen. Only darkness. No memories. No feelings. Nothing. How can you think about death? Ricardo smiled, he found it comical. The whole situation.

Some time before, when he had decided that he would end his existence on the 25th December, he had anticipated that in the few days closer to the time he might have grown afraid, so to help himself he had taken a sheet of paper and in large letters had written phrases like "Remember you want to do it!", "You want it even if you're afraid!", "Let yourself fall into darkness!", "Don't fight it!", "Darkness is immense peace and immense tranquillity!", "It will take a moment!", "Like diving into a frozen lake! Then nothing! Darkness forever!". He had written these phrases in the event of desperate moments which so far hadn't materialised. He felt calm and unemotional as if he was not the one about to die.

He had often thought about his own life in the third person. Perhaps it meant something. It had only occurred to him now. As if that body had never been his, nor the

soul and not even the memories or the other things he felt, it was as if the sensations, emotions and thoughts were not his.

So who was he, then? Where had the real him gone? Ricardo was beginning to feel confused and had that same vague sense of nausea he had as a child when he thought he was a brain in the wrong body or when he woke up and didn't recognise himself. Perhaps the time had come to go out and get distracted. He would go to *The Bear's Tavern*.

Sebastian and Manlio had looked for him after just one day's absence, begging him to come for a meal because the dock workers were asking for him. They loved him as their guide, someone to look to, and they awaited his tales like the words of a preacher. He couldn't fathom why these dock workers would want to carry on hearing his stories when their own, the lives of the dock workers, were a hundred times more interesting; he had even shouted it out loud one evening, standing on the table, and his words were followed by the usual endless, resounding ovation.

There wasn't a single thing he could say, however stupid it seemed, that didn't raise enthusiastic applause. And the applause and the pleasure on those happy drunken faces would have distracted him and would have made him forget the insinuating question that had come from outer space through the switched-off Maxi-screen, giving him that uncomfortable sense of nausea.

Who was he and where had the real him gone?

That evening it took Ricardo twice as long as usual to reach *The Bear's Tavern*. The teeming rain forced him to walk under the eaves of the buildings or under the colonnades of the towers in search of shelter and because there were several thousand people seeking cover in the same way, long queues and human traffic jams had formed, what's more drenched from below by the splashes from the roaring 4x4 super-climbers, with their heavy weather reinforcements (*End of Part 2*).



Marco Sette (born at Rome) 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". 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. Among other Marco Sette's books, we can remember "My love, I'm killing you" (Progetto cultura 2009); "A world without objects" (Edimond 2010); and "History of an obsession" (Robin 2013). This latter book tells a illegitimate and scandalous story. Something that you should not do. Something that is better left unsaid. Reminiscent of a secret past. Something that comes at you like a runaway train. And you're standing there that you cannot move. You do not want to move. Something that takes you right in and leaves you exhausted at the bottom of life, with all the good days in a row like soldiers marching toward a war with no hope. Defeated at the start. But go ahead. That thing that empties the soul and you do not know who you are, where you come from, how you got there. Tap with your finger paradise, a paradise untouchable. Because the most terrible thing in the world is to make a unspeakable desire. The most terrible thing in the world is a sweet curse. Unvarnished.