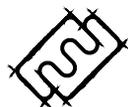


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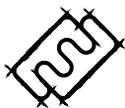
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“Nobody ever thinks about oxygen atoms and the extreme ease with which they bind to other molecules. Without them, our universe wouldn’t exist...”

TREVISO JULY 12, 2008

I watch the clouds of pale blue cigarette smoke, mesmerized, scrutinizing the designs forming in the air as they clash against the profile of my face. I try to find something, without knowing exactly what...

The smoke carried my mind to the memory of when, two years earlier, I had taken refuge in a former army barracks that had been converted into a dormitory in the countryside of Treviso. I made my living by gathering bunches of grapes that would later become a mediocre and unpretentious wine. Depending on the season, I lent my hand to harvesting tomatoes and vegetables. For my toils, I was rewarded with a measly salary.

In that desperate shelter, I annexed through a somewhat Machiavellian endeavor a bed and locker for storage of my few belongings. Each morning, after coffee, I slowly smoked two Marlboro lights. So began my days, which were spent between endless rows of vineyards and farmland.

It was now quite some time from when the company had ousted all the society rejects to make room for even more grossly underpaid immigrants. The entire community of hippies, punks and outcasts, suddenly found itself out of work. All that arrived from the gang in ties and suits was a letter that stated, without too many scruples; the inhabitants of the former barracks were to leave within a week.

After an initial period of confusion, I started dating a married woman. She was frustrated, I was unhappy. It lasted a few months and eventually without any remorse, I left with a clean cut. It seemed that she had been hurt, but I later learnt that another man immediately replaced me.

That was a fitting end to a squalid affair.

From that point, I resided for some time in a dormitory for the poor run by friars. There we could but sleep, leaving at eight in the morning and returning at seven in the evening, all the time still there was never the certainty of finding an available bed.

I would spend days wandering around Treviso, up and down the main street. I eventually gave into the temptation to light the cigarette

butts that I would find on the ground. One day, hunched beneath the arcades, I decided to quit smoking.

After almost two years spent around Treviso trying to find the money to eat, I got used to, despite my nature, eating very little.

I had a series of occasional jobs always rewarded with makeshift accommodation and or cash in hand. I shoveled snow during winters, deliver the overnight bread to bakers, I was in charge of cleaning a kennel, washing the windows of downtown Treviso... It became time for me to return to my place of birth.

It happened by way of one of a number of trains I had taken without knowing where they were bound, the same process that had led me in Treviso. It had been just by chance I'd found myself in that city.

In my past I had survived a premature birth, peritonitis, hepatitis C, an automobile accident, and the absence of my parents, the ensuing poverty and unawareness. Now it was time to start a new chapter...

The train was late.

My ticket to Milan was a gift from a woman with whom I had had a fling over a weekend who had developed a soft spot for me.

The next day would be my 34th birthday. It would be the anniversary of someone who had nothing to his name.

During the short trip, I scanned my face reflected in the mirror down to the smallest detail, illuminated by a ruthless neon light. Wrinkles, more pronounced than normal for a man of my age, though not pronounced too dramatically. My eyes seemed to have changed colour, the bright green, once so full with illusions of the past had been replaced by a pale, opalescent colour. Surely, in the sadness of my eyes there was a reflection of the misery that I had witnessed. Advantageously I am rather tall and lean even if working in the fields had helped to fortify me a little. Brown hair, long on the neck and slightly brittle, was tied with a string at the nape.

For years I did not watch myself closely in the mirror. To look into my own eyes irritated me ever since I could remember and I disliked the image staring back at me. Alessandro, Sandro to anyone else. Not even my name was I happy with, I had never liked it, and I always found it disagreeable.

Ever since I was young I've understood that I was handsome, maybe this was the reason I used to neglect my appearance, the beauty that is in me would certainly have to be elsewhere, not in the reflected appearance in that dirty pane of glass covered with fingerprints.

I sat alone in the compartment, that train was half-deserted. I watched the countryside that flowed fast outside the window, images that overlapped too quickly to be able to focus on one thought alone. It was hot, the air conditioning wasn't working and to pass the time I imagined the people who had alternated through those empty seats, I wanted to know the stories that lurked behind every face, their thoughts, the reasons that had pushed them to take that train and if anyone would be expecting their arrival. I have always been curious and frequently encouraged this aspect of my consciousness.

Milan station had not changed since the last time I stood there. The speaker's voice was the same, the dominant colour was still grey, the pigeons were still disoriented, still the rows of bored taxi drivers and the rush of travelers dragging their luggage out of there.

One of the few memories I had of my father was when he took me to the station and left me alone to watch the trains depart... I spent whole days there. He confessed that the first word I had learned to pronounce was neither mum nor dad, but train.

What had changed in that place were the people. On the other hand, maybe it was just me that had changed.

I decided to celebrate the return in my hometown by begging for enough coins for two coffees, and drank one after the other.

MILAN JULY 15, 2008

I had to dispute the bench on which I chose to sleep with a group of heroin addicts.

The girl, who was their leader, had been taken aback by the way I had spoken to her in a low voice without ever lifting my eyes and she then convinced her companions, with a steely glare, to leave.

It was six in the evening and hunger began to take hold.

I had never succeeded too well in begging. I had far less going for me than those who routinely asks for alms, the way in which I held myself and clothes that were still in good condition made it questionable for passers-by to show me too much compassion. I resolved the problem by stealing some Mars bars from a kiosk in Piazza Duca D'Aosta.

Towards the evening, I started walking in the direction of the street of the house where my parents lived, Father Sergio and Mother Silvia. Surprisingly I found it hard to locate their home and I was surprised even further when I found it full of Chinese immigrants who explained that they had purchased the modest apartment from an Arab family three years earlier. Nobody there knew anything about my parents.

In fact, I had not thought that much about my mother or father in the past few years. During my time in college I had not received any visits nor letters from either them.

Upon reaching adulthood I decided to skip military service by leaving the country.

I landed in Paris and studied French and English, I was also invited to, and attended without much conviction, a course for actors. I took parts as an extra in a couple of commercials but was never even paid for them. In a short time I'd came to realize that I hated actors, they passed their lives in performance and spoke with voices filled with gravitas even when not required, speaking more for the pleasure of listening to themselves than a desire to communicate.

The only money that allowed me to stay in France for three years I obtained by pandering to a couple of women much older than myself, two women terrified by the sands of time and loneliness. They just

wanted companionship, no sexual affair or romantic hassle, the hearts of both women had been eroded as if they were pebbles subject to continuous waves upon the shore, eroded by the passage of time. First one and then the other became close to me as they would have to an affectionate dog. I was happy with that situation, the happiest period of my life was back then.

I realized the change in me that the passage of time had brought, the recklessness and anger of my twenties had been replaced by some sort of chronic uneasiness and appeasement in the face of what would present itself.

I bid my farewells with sincere smiles for the Chinese people, bestowing to them parting gifts of Mars bars.

No longer would I seek my parents, they'd had enough time and resources to search for their only son. They had not looked for me, why should I continue?

I was brought into the world and released. Why did my parents no longer wanted to meet me? Probably to be left adrift is written in my genetic code, my parents should bear no responsibility.

It was already late into the night but was still warm, the typical heat of Milan, though not annoying if I think of the cold and rainy nights of winter. I lay on my bench after I'd refreshed at a fountain and lost myself in the thoughts meander.

MILAN AUGUST 2, 2008

The encounter with Irma came about, as with everything during that period, by chance. It was noon and, sitting on my bench, I couldn't help but notice her.

The thing that most struck me at first was the strangeness of the saunter of that girl. Walking with an exaggerated oscillation of the hips, self-confident and slouching, which gave her the look of a seasoned prostitute.

When I decided to confess my observations to her she took offence, but was not flushed.

Irma worked full-time in a fast food restaurant in the Central Station area frequented by wealthy Milanese boys.

She spent her short lunch breaks off the premises. By then she'd become so predisposed to fast food odours, she tried to oxygenate her lungs with some fresh air... However much fresh air could be found in a city like Milan on 2nd of August.

Near the station our gazes crossed and, with a strange naturalness on both our parts, we began exchanging the first timid questions: "What's your name?", "Where are you from?", "How old are you?", "Why here?"

MILAN AUGUST 8, 2008

A few days passed and our encounters had become a routine fixture of our days.

The bizarre friendship lasted a week, enough time for me gain two pounds in weight and twice upset my stomach with all sandwiches and various junk that she brought for me from her work place.

I kept sleeping on my bench and, oftentimes, I'd keep my leftovers to give to other homeless people.

Often I couldn't sleep so instead I auscultated the clatter of the tram tracks. I imagined the faces and the fates of those on board passengers.

It didn't take long before Irma invited me to her twenty square meters studio near the canals. That night we had sex.

When we entered the House, she was drunk, she stumbled into a chair and threw off her shoes which followed two different trajectories.

With a total absence of femininity she stripped her clothes off, remaining in her bra and panties and threw herself on the bed. She then stared into my eyes and, without uttering a word and still unsteady on her feet, she leaped up launching herself to kiss me on the lips. She pushed her tongue violently into my mouth regardless of my initial reluctance, she pulled at my hair with one hand and with the other started undoing my shirt and belt directing her hand without hesitation towards my member.

Her behaviour brought back to my mind the initial impression I had of her. I wouldn't have been surprised if she'd have confessed to the former "job".

Without leaving time for my thoughts to elaborate to fantasies, she pushed me towards the bed, buckling me backwards. The tangle of our two bodies was enlivened exclusively by animalistic instincts. We sweated, clinging to each other without looking to one another. Our hips, osseous and whetted, moved mechanically driven by a force beyond our awareness. There was an abstract underlying discordance in everything. After reaching orgasm, Irma fell asleep.

By candle light I watched this woman's erroneously lean and jagged

body, trying to burn it into my memory.

I have always had a special attraction for people who are asleep, from my former dorm mates to girls that I had dated. Even when I had, briefly, looked after the numerous stray dogs in kennels in Treviso, I would stop often to watch them in their sleep. Sleeping creatures are helpless, they appear so defenseless and powerless.

MILAN AUGUST 10, 2008

The city was deserted.

From Irma's window you could see old people walking uncertainly and a large number of dogs with their tongues protruding from their mouths excessively, all brought together by a kind of abandonment and a resignation that they couldn't hide.

I had been invited to stay for a while and I had willingly accepted, giving up my bench which returned to the toxic group's proprietary.

I was sweating, undressed bar my underwear on the bed and I was sweating profusely. It was a nice feeling to have a bed on which to sweat, I still had in mind the cold winters I had endured and I couldn't ask for more, at that time, than a bed in which to bask. I got up to drink a glass of water and turned on the television. The television... years had passed since the last time I lit one.

I thought regarding the strangeness of some people's lives whose existence revolves, almost entirely around that appliance. I wondered if those people used it for solitude, for distraction or was it for actual pleasure.

I raised the volume and began to flick through the channels, like a teenager, without dwelling on anything. I saw pass in front of me strangers who sold paintings, protagonists of Italian television with empty eyes, the talking heads of the news with faces transfigured by too many cosmetic surgeries, groups of people who laughed and flapped their hands on command in popular shows, and a men's diving competition in the Olympics in China. Forcibly I crushed the off button on the remote control and I stayed to watch the red dot that signaled the standby mode on the TV.

That morning, thanks to Irma's recommendation, I started a cleaning and dishwashing job in the fast food joint.

The walls of the kitchen of my new workplace had tonalities created by a mixture of fat and condensation, whilst the air was made heavy from the smell of fried oil and authoritative orders. Along with myself,

there were two other Arabs who were dishwashers subjected as victims in a dictatorship to the wishes and demands of the chef. Tony, as he was called, was a boy of twenty-eight, Sardinian, and as conceited and frustrated as the rest of us. He had been working in the fast food for eight years and, when out during the rest of his day, wasn't hesitant jumping from one bed to another of cheap transsexuals whores. Alternatively, he spent his time in the gym to pull weights up and down with the unwavering will of a bovine.

More than once we had crossed in the toilet of our company, and I noticed him staring in the mirror gratified by himself.

I'm always amazed in feeling compassion for someone. Tony was a nice guy, he wasn't very tall, but had a body built with the sweat and the incessant determination of a bodybuilder, but he was also extremely ignorant and unable to formulate a sentence of any real sense. Abstract concepts, especially those of an ethical or moral nature, caused him quite a few problems. His only talent was expressed in the creation of original delicacies served to kids of Milan.

Despite my docile and accommodating personality I was nonetheless targeted by Tony. I needed that job, so I swallowed with a dignified acquiesce the various harassment and provocations that were inflicted upon me and, with apparent complacency, performed my duties. The other two dishwashers, meanwhile, were planning a revenge for all who had suffered at the hands Tony, as, for example, purposely burned pots, or ironically, strewn foods on the floor.

The restaurant owner was completely subjugated by the somewhat rough beauty of his chef and rumors suggested that in the past there had been something between them.

MILAN SEPTEMBER 23, 2008

After a month and a half of living together with Irma and working fast food, the situation was as follows: Tony, the restaurant owner and Irma, became concupiscent about me each in a different ways.

In Tony had triggered a kind of competition convinced he could rule the roost and managed to humiliate me at every opportunity. The Manager sensed that I had some influence on the object of his desires, while Irma, who possessed a somewhat naive quality that elevated her above the other two, had acquired a healthy crush on myself.

As for me, with determination and a good dose of resignation, I seemed to not be swayed by the constant teasing and harassments. I had understood the intricate plot, but I preferred to feign naiveté not to complicate things further. After all I felt pity for the three of them for having lost their head for someone like me.

With the first money earned I had bought a pair of tight black jeans and a black t-shirt, too. That would become my uniform for quite some time.

MILAN SEPTEMBER 25, 2008

One evening in the restaurant we “celebrated” Tony’s birthday. The Sardinian chef with all his exhibitionism and narcissism, would never miss an opportunity like that to show off. After the closure of the premises began the party and Tony, in the blink of an eye, already stood bare-chested on the tables holding a bottle of Mezcal. He sang and danced for himself, but he ensured that his paltry audience were focused exclusively on him. He was pleased to be admired.

The music came from a precarious stereo system provided by the owner. I had never heard that kind of music, it felt more like a hypnotic repetitive clatter, the decibels deafened me. Irma was slumped over a Chair drunk and barefoot, her ankles were swollen and marked by shoes that at the end of the day had become too tight.

The manager, red in the face, applauded the performance continuously and the two Arabs dishwashers in their own language, continued to conspire with anathemas against all. Sure not to be understood by anyone, they spoke loudly. It was enough to hear the tone of their voices to understand their sinister intentions.

There was a bunch of regulars as well, rich kids, all too well pruned and overly perfumed. Two of them asked me who the Dancing Satyr was, doped by too many steroids. I told them that was a famous French actor that came in town to shoot a movie and to search for drugs. The two boys were fascinated by the story and gave me two grams of cocaine and some pills, I in return offered them two shot of rum and walked away just after noticing their psychedelic gazes.

The party ended in the best way for me. I resold the two grams of coke to Tony and pills to the dishwashing Arabs. I kept only one confection for myself.

Making sure that Irma was still inebriated by the alcohol I left whilst the owner enacted a Caribbean dance with the Cook.

Without allowing the guilt to bother me, typical of any ex-smoker, I bought a pack of cigarettes and I lit one, savoring a Marlboro light.

With a slow stroll and hands in my pocket I started to walk into the Milanese night. There was a loud silence, the clear sky kept a watchful

gaze over those able to slumber, as dark clouds accumulated in the thoughts of those who, like me, couldn't sleep. For us the night was just a moment in which the mind worries and squirms in a vain attempt to attain some answers.

Since childhood I always loved watching the windows of houses, I studied them scrutinizing the details. That evening too I halted briefly to analyze a small balcony on the third floor of a fine building of Piazza Della Repubblica. From a window came a light blue glow, I let fly my imagination ...Yes, Yes that was to be the bedroom window of a little girl. She was surely blonde and cute, holding her favourite teddy. At that moment she was delighted turning in to the warmth of her bed, unaware of the precariousness of those fragments of serenity. The small girl liked to sit between her parents on the couch when they watched television. The blue glow came from a globe that remained perpetually lit. She attended an English school and was the smartest in the class, her dear friends would always admire her for the beauty of her hair and her numerous outfits. In the kitchen, her father, a successful young lawyer, was working at his computer and meanwhile thinking of how it was nice and sordid to making love with his wife's best friend. The child's mother was a beautiful woman, she too blonde and with impeccably styled her hair at every occasion, proud to belong to a certain bourgeois Milanese. She was already in bed. Although not yet sleeping. She was unaware of her husband's affair. Each time she went shopping with her best friend she'd be asked how she could put her life in the hands of that man who maintained, but did not love her. At that time she was staring at the precise point on the ceiling where the headlights of passing cars on the road, drew geometric figures in motion. The same headlights lit up my face for a brief moment and I returned to reality. I was happy not to be one of the three members of that family who lived on the third floor of that house in Piazza Della Repubblica.

I freshened my face in a fountain, it was very hot, and I still felt the odor of fast food clinging to my body and clothes.

There were vagabonds seemingly sleeping in the recesses of the buildings. They were dressed as if they were in January, with heavy blankets and woolen hats acquired from who knows where.

For a moment I felt guilty about my silly desire of wanting to know the thoughts of those poor people. The secrecy of the thoughts was the only intimacy that they still owned.

I hoped that Irma had not returned to the apartment yet, I took out the tablet that I had kept, put it in my mouth without looking at it, and swallowed it quickly. The effects arrived soon. I blamed the heat, I was sweating and my heart throbbed with audible palpitations. I watched the black sky imagining I would be able to penetrate it up into infinity. I felt pervaded by an energy that shook me. I heard music coming from a distant kiosk, the rhythm magnified in my body. Even the glow of the street lamps stimulated me, I was observing them, and they were motionless for everyone except me. A part of my mind fought against those hallucinations, the subjugated part. The sensory distortion continued undisturbed, sweating, I felt my body fluids spilling outside. For an indefinite amount of time I thought of dying from dehydration. I looked at my hands, without recognizing them, I watched my legs, and I was sure they were still but could see them moving.

I don't know how long I lay succumbing to the effect of the drug, I was sitting on a pavement as the entire world revolved around me. A creeping sense of panic took over me and the heat was replaced by a deep coldness.

It was the first shivers that forced me to make my way home. The lights of the night in Milan continued to provoke me and encompass me. I compelled myself to keep my eyes down on the ground. I needed to go home.

MILAN SEPTEMBER 27, 2008

The amount of work at the fast food joint increased significantly after the summer holidays, although few other things had changed.

I came to the conclusion that I had become a prisoner of my circumstances.

I wasn't in love with Irma. I was grateful, fond, but not in love. Every day she got anaesthetized with alcohol to prevent her unconsciousness encountering her consciousness. Who knows what that woman had lived through that was so terrible! Who knows why she tergiversated about her past and who knows what she wanted from me. Our arrangement seemed like a marriage coming to an end, we weren't speaking, we weren't communicating neither at work nor at home, we ignored each other, and we weren't even having sex. As with such a changeable character, quickly her interest towards me had diminished, mine towards her had been inexistent. Tony seducing and enmeshing the restaurant owner, had achieved a promotion to "chief of staff". The cook's role was given to the most senior of the dishwasher.

After the "advancement of rank" the Sardinian ex-chef felt even more entitled to rage maliciously towards his subordinates and, after all, he was allowed to do anything. I found myself with a double quantity of dishes to wash and cleaning anything else several times a day, my hands were continually in the water and my fingertips were constantly shriveled. My hands became in worse conditions than when I was working in the fields in Veneto. It was Irma that pointed this out.

Irma ...What was I going to do with her? Had she sensed that there was something wrong?

In her madness she didn't seem the kind of woman that would settle for being teased by a man, least of all a man like me!

I could leave now! I thought to myself. *I could leave, actually escape!*
Let's use the right words.

Escaping not always leads to harm. Indeed, often you do more damage by remaining.

BIOGRAPHY

Christiano Cerasola is an author that's careful to the fragility, strength and vigorous human weakness. He traveled all over the world, whether for business or pleasure, absorbing the stories and legends of passers in the city. After careful analysis of the social world in which we live, three books were born: O2 - Oxygen (2010); Beaten eggs (2012 - Winner of the first prize in a literary competition of Ostana); The lighthouse keeper of Izu (2013, a pill of human behavior). This is the first version in English.